

## QUEENSLAND WHITE EGRETS

Text and images by Ian and Jill Brown

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There are five species of white Egret in Queensland. They are each quite distinct, but are not always easy to differentiate. They can occur in similar habitats, and have several behaviours in common.

Each has a few unique characteristics, which help in identification.



The **Eastern Great Egret** (*Ardea modesta*) is the largest, with a height of 0.95-1.05m. Much of its height is in its very long neck – usually about 1.5 times the length of its body. When standing, its neck can be outstretched, showing its length.



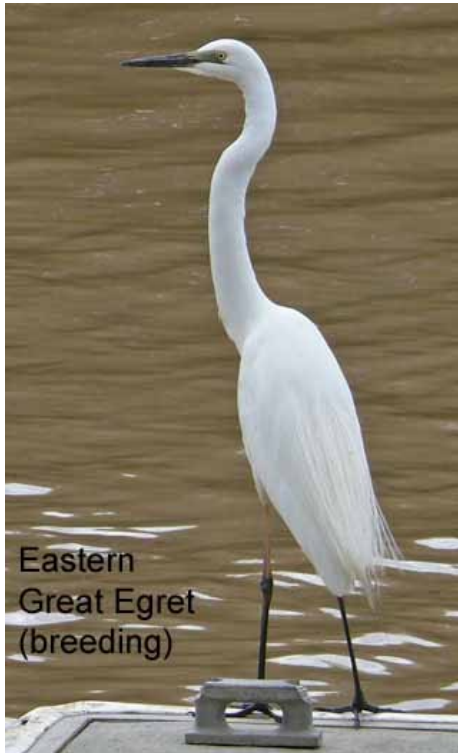
More commonly, its neck will be folded, so its great length is disguised. As it folds, the neck makes a very distinct kink.



In flight, the Eastern Great Egret folds its neck, and its legs trail well behind the end of its tail, as this image of a bird skimming the water in low flight shows.

Generally, its bill is yellow, and its legs a dull yellow or dark grey.

During courtship and breeding, Eastern Great Egrets develop long plumes on their back only. These extend below the tail. Its lower legs become black, and upper legs reddish. Its bill changes to black, and the bare facial skin to bluish green – a dramatic difference!



Eastern Great Egret (breeding)



Intermediate Egret (br)

Their legs also become black below and red above. For a brief period, their bills become a startling red, and their facial skin bright green.

One method of differentiating these two similar species is the distance the gape extends behind the eye.



Intermediate Egret

**Intermediate Egrets** (*Ardea intermedia*) are similar, though smaller, at a maximum of about 70cm. During the breeding season, they develop plumes on both their back and front, unlike Eastern Great Egrets.



Eastern Great Egret

In the Eastern Great Egret, it extends well behind the eye,



Intermediate Egret

while in the Intermediate Egret it stops below the eye.

While this may sound like a difficult field marking, it is often quite easy to see on such large birds.



Intermediate Egret

The lighting of this image of an Intermediate Egret in flight allows the bone structure of its wings to be clearly seen beneath its feathers. Its long trailing legs are also clear.



Little Egret (br)

In breeding plumage, Little Egrets develop fine plumes on both back and front, as well as two fine plumes trailing back from the crown of their heads – the only white Egret to do this.

Although they do not differ significantly from Intermediate Egrets in length, they are lightly built, and give the impression of being much finer.

All three Egrets spend time standing in ambush in or near water, or stalking through shallows.



Little Egret

**Little Egrets** (*Egretta garzetta*) are slightly smaller, with a maximum length of about 65 cm. They always have black legs and a black bill.



Little Egret

Whereas the larger Egrets specialise in this stand-and-pounce hunting, Little Egrets seem to enjoy creating havoc in pursuit of their prey.



Great

Little

The size difference between Eastern Great and Little Egrets is evident here.



They are small stocky birds, about 50 cm in length. Outside the breeding season, they are white, with perhaps a little buff.



They often leap about, wings raised, splashing in the shallows, and pounce on anything that breaks cover in panic.



Although they have long necks, they are usually hunched, so this is not obvious. They have short, thickish bills.

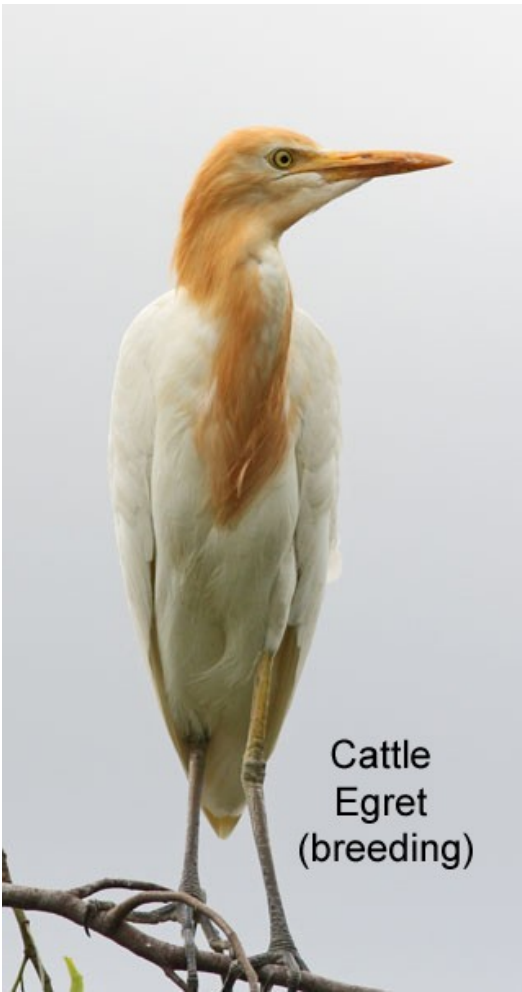
In flight, their legs trail well behind their tails, as with the other egrets.

**Cattle Egrets** (*Ardea ibis*) are generally accepted as self-introduced in about 1900. They have spread throughout Australia, following the spread of grazing animals.



They are most often seen close to livestock, even at times perched on their backs!

In the breeding season, however, they develop orange plumes on their fronts, backs and heads, and are totally unmistakable!



Cattle Egret (breeding)

They are often overlooked by bird watchers, since they are quite common, but they are truly spectacular when they are coloured.

Finally, **Eastern Reef Egrets** (*Egretta sacra*) can be seen right along the Queensland coast.



Eastern Reef Egret

The white morph is superficially similar to other white Egrets, about 60cm long, though the legs are noticeably shorter relative to size.



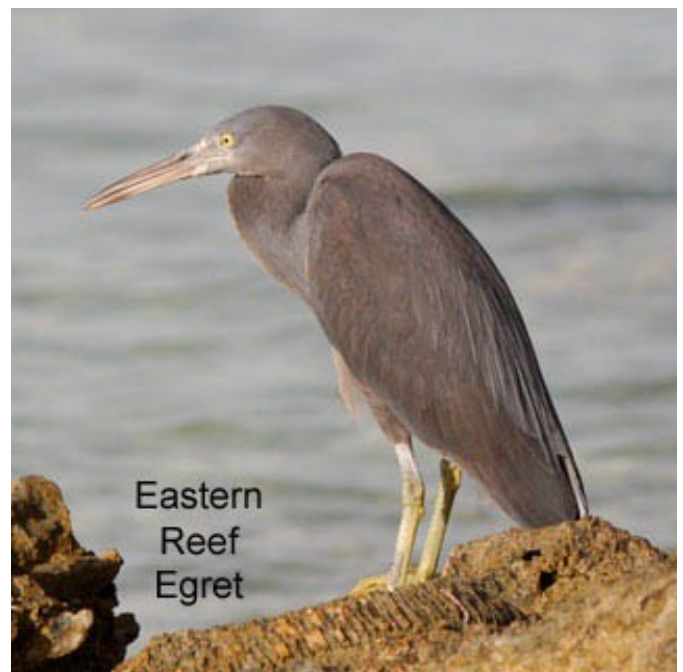
Eastern Reef Egret

They favour rocky shores, and can be seen stalking on reef flats or standing in wait beside rock pools.



Eastern Reef Egret

In flight, their legs trail behind them, but not as far as other Egrets.



Eastern Reef Egret

The dark morph is dark grey, varying to almost black, depending on the light.

Egrets are elegant and fascinating birds, thriving in a range of different environments. They reward attention with wonderful photo opportunities, as well as with unexpected behaviour!



Eastern Reef Egret

Eastern Reef Egrets sometimes hunt by shading the water with outstretched wings....



Eastern Great Egret

...oOo...



Eastern Reef Egret

...then pounce on their prey....



Eastern Reef Egret

...before carrying it up the beach, beyond the possibility of escape, to eat it in comfort.