A REVIEW OF THE WADING BIRDS IN SOUTH ALABAMA SINCE 1952

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During the summer of 1952, as I was just getting acquainted with Alabama, my Comparative Anatomy student, Tom Yancey, asked me if I was interested in seeing a Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*) nesting colony. Naturally I was, so he took me to the Hog Wallow Ponds, just south of Tuskegee, in Macon County. There, to my amazement, was a group of Little Blue Herons nesting in alders in the shallow upper end of one pond. My research with wading birds began at that moment (Dusi 1958).

Banding with U.S.F.W.S. bands was started and continued at the Hog Wallow Ponds colony until 1958 when a group of fishermen shot a number of returning Little Blue Herons and the colony was deserted. Banding data made it possible to track a number of post breeding dispersing birds and winter residents from this colony (Dusi 1958).

On 17 April 1959, a Little Blue Heron colony located just south of Marvyn, Lee County, was visited. It was located on an old millpond on the farm of F.B. Smith-T. The colony was mostly Little Blue Herons with one Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*) nest present.

The first record for Alabama of a nesting colony of White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*) was reported by James E. Keeler, 1956, at Southfield Lake, Baldwin County. He took banding parties there on 21 May and 14 June 1956 and they banded a total of 2,046 White Ibis, 15 Yellow-crowned Night Heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*), 8 Little Blue Heron, 3 Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*) and 3 Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) (Keeler 1956).

In 1959, Keeler took a group of banders to a new colony of Little Blue Herons, located just west of Faunsdale on Dr. Ennis farm. We banded 275 nestling Little Blue Herons and 2 Great Egrets (Keeler 1956). A number of similar colonies, mostly of Little Blue Herons, were found during the 1950's, at Tuskegee, Macon County and Montgomery, Montgomery County (Dusi and Dusi 1988), and in the1960's, Little Blue Herons at Mountain Creek, Chilton County, and Florala, Covington County.

Among other wading birds that formed nesting colonies was the Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*). Great Blue Herons formed many small colonies along creeks and swamps, and occasionally nested as single pairs. Several small colonies appeared on the Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge and at the

edge of Auburn and Opelika in Lee County. Sometimes they nested along the edge of a Little Blue Heron colony. One outstanding example was a colony in a single dead tree of a small pond in a pasture along Interstate Highway 65 south of Hooper Academy in Montgomery County. This tree had from one to nine nests in it for a number of years, ending about 1995. The swamp at Hardaway, Macon County, had the largest colony (up to 35 nests) and was active for many years.

Another colony located on Cat Island, by the Dauphin Island Causeway, had Reddish Egrets (*Egretta rufescens*) and Tricolor Herons (*Egretta tricolor*), both of which were restricted to coastal heronries.

Yellow-crowned Night Herons (*Nyctanassa violacea*) were found in colonies, like Southfield Lake, Baldwin County (Keeler 1956), but they often nested singly along small bodies of water. Black-crowned Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) nested in the northern part of the state like Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge in Decatur.

On 26 April 1958, the first record of the Cattle Egret was made at Dauphin Island, by Lovett E. Williams and Dan W. Speake. A specimen was secured for the Auburn University Ornithology Collection by Speake (Summerour 1964). Cattle Egrets started appearing in Little Blue Heron colonies at Opp, Covington County, Montgomery, Montgomery County, and north to the Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, Limestone County. The first nest was found 17 March 1963 in a colony near Opp by Bill Summerour (Dusi and Dusi 1963). Later that same year, nesting Cattle Egrets were found in colonies near Montgomery and Pansey, Houston County.

During the period from the 1960's to the 1980's, Cattle Egrets moved into Little Blue Heron colonies. Colonies gradually increased in size, with the Cattle Egret becoming the more abundant heron species in the colonies. The typical pattern of colony development was the establishment of a colony by nesting Little Blue Herons in March. In April, Cattle Egrets would migrate into the colony and often lay their eggs in pirated Little Blue Heron nests. If the Little Blue Heron nests were in the egg stage, the Cattle Egrets would often simply add their eggs to the clutch and incubate the eggs of both species. If young Little Blue Herons were already hatched, the Cattle Egrets would drive the Little Blue nestlings out of the nests and onto the ground where they would perish (Dusi and Dusi 1969, McKitrick, 1976).

Cattle Egrets did not usually have separate nesting colonies but nested in the colonies of Little Blue Heron or White Ibis. The stimulus of the other herons nesting induced them to breed. Nesting success was dependent on rain-

fall. A drought period of a week or longer caused Cattle Egrets to desert their nests and young. When wet weather resumed they may nest again and be successful. Apparently the drought conditions negatively affected their food abundance and resulted in the desertion (Dusi and Dusi 1988).

As the population numbers of the Cattle Egret increased in the 1970's and 1980's, problems presented themselves. One problem occurred when the colonies conflicted with human interests. As seen in the Hog Wallow Ponds Little Blue Heron colony, fishermen who used the ponds thought that the herons were interfering with their sport and simply shot many of the birds and caused them to leave. At that time bird protection was lax and the shooting was not prosecuted. Cattle Egret colony desertion was more complex. If a colony was disturbed before full clutches were laid, the birds simply left the area. However, after eggs were hatched the birds had to be harassed for several nights and most of the nests destroyed before they would leave. In the case of one colony that was located adjacent to a number of homes in the city of Tuskegee (Dusi 1994), police shot over 1,000 adults and killed many nestlings, but the egrets would not leave the remaining nests and young. At another Tuskegee colony several years later, when the colony was being formed near some homes, police disturbed the birds for several nights and destroyed many nests and the birds left the area.

The high nest density in Cattle Egret colonies, especially those located in upland pines, caused another problem. The bird's excrement killed the trees if the egrets nested there for several years. As a result, landowners were often unwilling to accept the loss, so the birds were forced to leave before the trees were killed (Dusi 1977).

In only one known instance did Little Blue Herons and Cattle Egrets return to an abandoned colony site. After the Little Blue Herons were driven from the Hog Wallow Ponds site in 1958, the colony site was checked annually but no birds returned until 1992, when a colony of mostly Cattle Egrets appeared in the pine trees surrounding one of the ponds. The colony flourished until 1994, when most of the pine trees were killed by the egret's excrement (Dusi and Dusi 1992).

By the 1990's a number of large Cattle Egret colonies appeared in southern Alabama. Colonies at the Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge, Tuskegee, Montgomery, Millbrook, Selma, Uniontown, Faunsdale, Andalusia, Mobile and Cat Island, were especially noteworthy, containing thousands of Cattle Egrets. Then in the 1990's colony sizes and the number of colonies declined, possibly caused by a number of droughts and hurricanes and a decrease in cat-

tle farming. The great increase in aquaculture of shrimp and catfish in western Alabama, has also affected waterbird abundance.

At the present time, although the writer is not able to spend a large number of hours in the field, or flying over southern Alabama, all of his sources of information indicate that there is a large colony on an island in the Chattahoochee River on the Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge and possibly one near Andalusia. No other large colonies are known to be present and that droughts like that of 2007 will limit the production of large numbers of Cattle Egrets. The other wading bird species are not affected to that extent by the droughts.

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