

Little Egret Roosts

Title

Little Egret roosts 1999/2000

Description and Summary of Results

Until the latter half of the 20th Century the Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* was a rare vagrant to the British Isles. Since then it has increased enormously and become widespread over much of England and Wales.

The number of accepted records in each year shows that there was a clear influx in 1970 and a more general increase through the 1980s. During the latter period, 403 individuals were seen in Britain (although some duplication cannot be ruled out). Predictably, there was a strong southerly bias, with about half of all records coming from Devon, Cornwall, Dorset, Kent, Sussex and Hampshire (descending order of recorded numbers). The monthly distribution from 1958-1988 revealed a peak in May similar to that observed for many other Mediterranean species, such as Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* and Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*, and although small numbers occurred in autumn, Little Egrets were notably scarce in Britain in winter.

There was another large influx into Britain in 1989, continued high numbers during 1990, and the species continued to be recorded in increasing numbers in Britain throughout the 1990s. By the autumn of 1995, counts in excess of 100 had been registered at individual sites, and in autumn 1998 the first single-site count of more than 200 was made. Breeding was confirmed in 1996, and by the summer of 1999 it was nesting at nine different sites, with an estimated total of at least 30 pairs.

The increase in Britain has been mirrored in Ireland, in the Channel Islands and on the near Continent.

The species was being recorded regularly on Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) Core Counts, from the early 1990s in particular, and was increasingly also seen on WeBS Low Tide Counts. The species was also still sufficiently uncommon in many areas to warrant detailed information being obtained for county bird reports. At many British sites, as elsewhere in the world, Little Egrets have favourite roost sites to which they fly in the late afternoon, and from which they leave at dawn. Egrets can be difficult to count when in the roost (which is usually in trees or dense scrub), but their movements to and from provide an excellent opportunity for accurate counts. Hence it was decided to try to count birds at these roosts to get a better idea of the total numbers present.

The survey, carried out over the course of a year from April 1999 estimated that more than 1650 Little Egrets were present in Britain in September 1999 (the peak month), with over 40% of these between Swanage Bay in Dorset, and Pagham Harbour in West Sussex.

Methods of Data Capture

Following a pilot survey to compare WeBS Core Counts with counts at some roosts, information on roosting egrets, covering a whole year if possible, was sought from many more sites. Observers were asked to carry out a dusk roost count of Little Egrets once a

month from April 1999 to March 2000, on dates as close as possible to those of the WeBS core counts. Then in order to get a more accurate assessment of the true numbers of Little Egrets in Britain, these were combined with WeBS core counts, low-tide counts, as well as incidental information from county bird reports. The peak WeBS core count of Little Egrets during the study period was in September 1999, so a particular subsequent effort was made to establish as accurately as possible the number of Little Egrets present in Britain during that month.

Purpose of Data Capture

To obtain as accurate an assessment as possible of the total numbers of Little Egrets in the UK during the non-breeding season.

Geographic Coverage

All of the UK although in practice it was primarily restricted to the coastal areas of England and Wales.

Temporal Coverage

Counts were requested as close as possible to the standard WeBS Core Count dates in each month from April 1999 to March 2000. (The Pilot had taken place from September 1997 to January 1998.)

Other Interested parties

The survey was run as part of the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS). This is run as a partnership of the BTO, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (the last on behalf of English Nature (now Natural England), Scottish Natural Heritage, the Countryside Council for Wales (now Natural Resources Wales), and the Environment and Heritage Service in Northern Ireland) and in association with the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust although the last were more fully involved at the time of the survey.

Organiser(s)

Andy Musgrove

Current Staff Contact

webs@bto.org

Publications

The main report of the survey and which serves as a statement of the overall non-breeding status of the Little Egret in Britain at the time is:

Musgrove, A.J. 2002. The non-breeding status of the Little Egret in Britain. *British Birds* 95: 62-80.

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

Most of the counts are incorporated into the Wetland Bird Survey database. The extra roost count details are on the BTO Windows network.

Computer data -- outline contents

Computer data -- description of contents

Information held in BTO Archives

Some sheets specifically recording numbers at roosts are stored with the main Wetland Bird Survey forms.

Notes on Access and Use

Other information needed

Notes on Survey Design

Specific Issues for Analysis