Imported Egrets Friend of State Cattlemen

By D.J. YOUNG

Cattlemen have a friend that arrived in the United States approximately two decades ago, almost unnoticed by biologists and ornithologists—probably completely unnoticed by cattlemen. With the many undesirable species of wildlife and plants imported under the guise of exotics, such as the water hyacinth and the "walking" catfish, it is a pleasure to welcome the unannounced arrival of a friend.

White egrets have been observed for many years feeding in shallow streams on frogs, fish and crustaceans. They are a common sight on any Louisiana wetland. However, during later years, what appeared to be the same egret was seen mingled with cattle on grazing ranges. This is a totally different species identified as the African Cattle Egret. One distinctive difference with our Common Egret is its diet, which consists of insects that normally visit or infest cattle, thus the reason for its companionship with cattle on the range, and its common name.

Mingle With Cattle

Travelers along main highways and back roads will observe these white birds mingled with grazing cattle, sometimes as much as a dozen birds mingled with just a few heads of cattle, some perched on their back or head, pecking at invading insects. They seem to add a certain beauty to the grazing range; and the cattle's unconcerned attitude leaves no doubt that they are accepted as friends, keeping pesty insects away.

The African Cattle Egret is known to be a native of Africa. Its migration into South America was observed less than a century ago; but how it got to our shores is a mystery, especially since it was first observed in Florida, an unlikely hop from South America.

Its presence in Florida was first noted in 1940. The first large scale nestings were observed around Lake Okeechobee in 1933. Since then, this bird has been reported in appreciable numbers along the northern Gulf seaboard as far west as California and Washington State, and along the Atlantic seaboard, in Newfoundland, New Brunswick and Ontario. Ornithologists expect this bird to eventually cover the entire United States wherever cattle are raised.

Best Evidence

Probably the best evidence of this bird's symbiotic value to date, and dispelling fears of some that it might upset the ecosystem by competing with other egrets, is the result of a study made by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. Analysis of stomachs of 1,000 cattle egrets has shown none of the fish that make up the normal diet of the native egret, with over 80 per cent of the contents consisting of spiders, flies, beetles, crickets and grasshoppers, all known to be undesirable in some way.

The African Cattle Egret is extremely prolific and successful in its reproductive effort. Ornithologists report that three chicks out of the normal four egg clutch will survive; and that their nesting period extends from early spring into July. Such a long nesting period is considered a reproduction advantage.

One practice that is feared could prove detrimental to this egret is that of some farmers spraying their cattle with insecticides to cut down insect infestation. A egret feeding on an insect that came into contact with these insecticides may be affected by it. We may some day find him going the way of many other birds suffering from the chain reaction of insecticides.

The African Cattle Egret appears to have few natural enemies; only man could turn against him before realizing the benefit of his presence.