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Egret and Glossy Ibis Rookeries

By F. C. MORSE, R.A.O.U., Coocalla, Garah, N.S.W.

For many years I have been firmly convinced that the Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) bred somewhere along the 70 miles of Watercourse in this district, and, in company with Mr. H. A. Mawhiney, I have spent many days in search of their nests.



Glossy Ibis, nest and eggs.

Photo. by F. C. Morse, R.A.O.U.

On almost every trip we made to various points in this vast expanse of swamps the birds were seen, but no sign of a nest was found. To help us in the quest, we questioned every person we met living anywhere near the wet area. Most of them did not even know the bird. We were fortunate in at last meeting Mr. S. A. Freeman, who has a block of land in the Ibis country, and a telephone message on December 2nd from him to the effect that "Glossy Ibises were going to and fro past his camp daily, and apparently their headquarters was at a large Straw-necked Ibis rookery," had Mr. F. McCallum, R.A.O.U. (who happened to be with me at the time), quickly preparing for a trip. We reached Mr. Freeman's camp next day about 2 p.m., and started a mile walk through shallow water towards the polygonum swamp, in which the Straw-necks (*Threskiornis spinicollis*) were breeding. This swamp covers a large area, through which we hunted for the remainder of the afternoon, but could not even see a bird of the Glossy species. We returned to camp very disappointed, but decided next day to work the northern portion of the swamp on which we had not yet touched. Carrying out these intentions, we had no sooner reached the polygonum bushes than a flock of Glossies rose just in front of us. Hurrying over to the spot, we could see several nests, mostly containing recently hatched young or eggs just chipping. One nest contained four eggs and one young just out of the shell. In all we counted seventeen nests in close proximity, but could find no more further out. The nests were all very low down from two feet to six inches above the water, well back in the bushes, an outer ring of Straw-neck and White Ibis nests almost obscuring them from view. They were all built of the green, wiry ends of the polygonum bushes. After taking a few photos, all of which I lost through dropping the camera in the water, we made back to the camp, and that afternoon walked a couple of miles in another direction, hoping to locate some more Glossies in that quarter, but without success.

Next day, when six miles on the homeward track, we pulled up, leaving the car by the roadside, walked about two miles through fallen bejar to another portion and quite a different type of swamp lands. In this place the channel was not more than a quarter of a mile wide, but a dense growth of eumung (*Acacia varians*) trees, with their spreading branches, almost covered up the water way. These trees do not grow more than 30 feet in height.

We were no sooner in this area than we were in the midst of hordes of birds—Egrets, Herons, Spoonbills, Cormorants and White and Glossy Ibis. The last were in great numbers, and nests were in evidence on all sides. Some contained large young, which on our approach, scrambled away up the branches. Other nests were in process of construction, and there were eggs and young in all intermediate stages. Having satisfied ourselves

that we had at last found the long-sought spot, we made our way homewards with the intention of returning at an early date.

The following week-end, December 9th, saw us again on the same spot, this time accompanied by Mr. Mawhiney. We worked the swamp both east and west for about half a mile, but did not reach the end of the nesting area. For this reason, it would be impossible even to guess at the number of Glossies breeding here, but we concluded that we had seen three or four hundred nests.

The Glossies' nests, viewed from below, are indistinguishable from those of the Plumed Egrets. They are certainly built by the occupants, as we saw many birds carrying material. They are all constructed of the leafy ends of the eumung trees, some placed on old nests, others built in forks or branches of the trees from seven to twenty feet above the water level. They measure from 11 to 15 inches in width, with an egg cavity of two inches in depth. Clutches, usually three or four; two nests contained five, and one six eggs.

White, Plumed, and Little Egrets (*Egretta alba*, *intermedia*, and *garzetta*) were also breeding here, the former two in great numbers. Of the Little Egret we could find only one small colony of perhaps thirty to fifty birds. These also were in all stages. In some nests the young were fledged, while other birds were only now building.

Clutches of the White and Plumed were usually three, often four, while those of the Little were usually four or five.

On December 17th heavy rain fell, and the country was once more flooded, and we were unable to get to the place again till February 17th of this year. Birds were still apparently as numerous as ever. A few nests still contained eggs, but there was evidence on all sides that breeding had practically ceased. The water was drying off, and many of the occupied trees were now on dry land.

We were rather alarmed at hearing what we took to be pea rifle shots every now and then, and thought some marauders or murderers had got among our birds, but we were much relieved to find it was only eggs popping in the drying mud.

This most interesting spot is probably the largest heronry in New South Wales. There are hundreds of thousands of birds breeding here. It is on the extreme portion of four different holdings. The land itself is of very little value for grazing purposes, and probably very little or no objection would be raised to its being proclaimed a sanctuary. The total length is not more than three miles, of an average width of about a quarter of a mile.

In conclusion, I would like to mention that this is the only place where I have seen the White Ibis nesting among the trees, many nests being fully 20 feet from the ground. They usually occupy quite a lowly position.



Plumed Egret (*Egretta intermedia*), nest and young.

Photo. by F. C. Morse, R.A.O.U.



Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) at nest; see page 38.

Photo. by F. C. Morse, R.A.O.U.