

# Little Egret Expansion in Ireland: Cork – A Case Study

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**The expansion of the little egret *Egretta garzetta* into Britain and Ireland as a breeding bird has been well publicised in both the scientific literature and the general press. What is probably less well understood, however, is the speed and scale of the subsequent expansion of breeding numbers and locations.**

In Ireland, breeding was first proven in 1997 (Smiddy and Duffy 1997). This followed a pattern of increased levels of vagrancy from roughly 1989 onward with birds largely resident in Ireland from 1990 onward. Most birds were recorded from coastal areas in the south and southeast. A large influx of birds occurred in the autumns of 1995 and 1996; this led to a wintering population of about 60 birds (Smiddy 2002) and may have provided the final impetus for breeding on the south coast. As noted, breeding was first proven in 1997, when 12 pairs were recorded at a site on the River Blackwater on the border between counties Cork and Waterford (on the south coast). By 2001 egrets had been recorded breeding at four separate sites in counties Cork and Waterford (Smiddy 2002), and the number of nesting pairs increased from 12 in 1997; 22 in 1998; 32 in 1999; 45 in 2000 to 55 in 2001 (Smiddy 2002).

By 2000 egrets had established a breeding colony in Cork Harbour (Ballyannan Wood; northeastern harbour) confirming a suspected westward expansion. When a further colony was discovered in the harbour in 2004 (Little Island; mid-harbour), the authors were prompted to undertake a systematic survey for egret breeding sites. Cork Harbour is a large complex system of basins, channels, estuarine areas and river channels, which offers a multitude of sites for foraging and breeding egrets. Further breeding sites were proven in 2005 (Fota Island; mid-harbour and Rostellan; eastern harbour) and 2007 (Atlantic Pond; public park within city bounds), bringing the known number of sites to five and the number of breeding pairs in Cork Harbour alone to over 70. Furthermore, two young

birds were observed with two adults in late summer 2005 near Carrigaline on the upper Owenaboy Estuary (western harbour), indicating the possible occurrence of a sixth site. The number of egrets in this area of the harbour is also suggestive of another breeding site, which could support in the region of 5-10 nests (location unknown). Survey work in 2007 has also highlighted a possible seventh site within the eastern harbour, while there is anecdotal evidence of a pair from an eighth site (Minane Bridge). To date all sites also support breeding grey herons *Ardea cinerea*. Close human activity has not been a deterrent in site selection.

In 2007 egrets were breeding at up to four sites in West Cork, with Rosscarbery the furthest west known to the authors (c. seven nests in 2006). The expansion in range and breeding numbers/sites in Cork is mirrored elsewhere along the south, southeast and east coasts. Coincident with this increase in numbers has been an increased incidence of field feeding. Little egrets are also now being recorded from small streams and large inland rivers such as the River Bandon upstream of Innishannon and the River Blackwater upstream of Fermoy. The observed use of new habitats and feeding strategies raises the possibility of breeding away from traditional coastal sites at large river and wetland sites, and in fact the first inland colony was recorded near Fermoy in 2007 (on the Blackwater). The Bird Atlas 2007-2011 provides a perfect opportunity to examine this trend further and we would encourage surveyors to keep a lookout for breeding little egrets.

This winter has also seen the influx of large

numbers of cattle egrets *Bubulcus ibis* to both Britain and Ireland prior to Christmas. Up to 20 birds have been recorded in West Cork with up to 10 roosting at a known grey heron/little egret breeding site; up to three birds were recorded in the same area last year. It will be interesting to see in coming years whether cattle egret may be the next addition to our breeding avifauna.

## References

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Little egret  
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