

RECONSIDERATION OF A HUNGARIAN SPECIMEN OF A BLACK-COLOURED EGRET AS WESTERN REEF EGRET (*EGRETTA GULARIS*)

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Abstract

MAGYAR, G. & YÉSOU, P. (2000): Reconsideration of a Hungarian specimen of a black-coloured egret as Western Reef Egret (*Egretta gularis*). *Aquila* 105–106, p. 35–40.

A black egret, collected in Hungary on August 5, 1964, had been identified previously as a black morph Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) (Fábián & Sterbetz, 1966: *Aquila* 71–72, p. 99–112). The species of this specimen was later questioned by various authors based on the published measurements and photograph of the mounted specimen. After careful examination the authors re-identified the specimen as a nominate race Western Reef Egret (*Egretta gularis gularis*) based on colour, bill and body shape and tarsus-to-bill ratio. The specimen was accepted by the *MME NB* (Hungarian Checklist and Rarities Committee) as the first record of Western Reef Egret to Hungary.

Key words: *Egretta gularis*, first record, accidentals, Hungary.

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Introduction

A black egret collected on August 5, 1964 at Biharugra was sent to the Institute of Ornithology in Budapest. Based on the investigation of the specimen, the bird was identified a nominate race adult female Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta garzetta*) with a comment by the authors on a presumed African origin (Fábián & Sterbetz, 1966). It was not discussed, however, how Western Reef Egret (or other Egret species with dark plumage morphs) was excluded during identification.

Both the published photograph and the body measurements raised doubts as to the identity of the specimen in later literature. Payne (1979) expressed that the Hungarian specimen, along with other dark morph egrets in Europe, must be *gularis* rather than *garzetta*. Yésou & CHN (1986) came to the same conclusion based on the published measurements of Fábián & Sterbetz (1966). Voisin (1991) noted that the bird in the photograph looked like *Egretta gularis* and that the tarsus-to-bill ratio of 0.97, based on the given data, was also typical of Western Reef Egret. More recently Dubois & Yésou (1995) concluded that its measurements made it clear that it was a Western Reef Egret.

Since the Biharugra specimen is still available in the collection of the *Hungarian*

Institute of Ornithology, it offered us the opportunity to reinvestigate its identity. Our goal was to solve the contraversion about this specimen, which was especially intriguing since data on the existence of black morph Little Egrets is often controversial in the literature, and claimed specimens repeatedly turned out to be dark morph Western Reef Egrets. It also has to be noted that no other record of Western Reef Egret has been known in Hungary. Therefore, re-identification of the Biharugra specimen added Western Reef Egret to the list of birds of Hungary.

Description of the Biharugra specimen

The colour of the bird's plumage was dark slate grey (almost black) with the exception of a white area in the gular region. This white area occupied the region between the line of the lores and eyes slightly curving up behind the eyes and ending with a sharp demarcation at the border of the regions of the throat and the neck. No other white feathers were found throughout the whole plumage. At the time of the re-examination the bill was pale yellowish and the lores were off-white. While mounting could have modified the general impression and shape ('jizz') of the specimen, it still looked short-legged due to a relatively short tarsus and had a long bill compared to Little Egrets. The culmen of the bill was almost parallel in the first two third but was down-curving in the last third towards the tip. No artificial paint was found on the specimen as a possible attempt by the taxidermist to preserve the original colours of the bare parts.

The following measurements were taken by *G. Magyar* on the mounted specimen in 1996:

wing (left/right)	262/265 mm
tail	93 mm
bill (from the bare part)	89 mm
bill (from the base of skull)	95 mm
tarsus	92 mm
tarsus-to-bill ratio	1.03
bill-to-tarsus ratio	0.97

The measured data essentially corresponded to those previously published by *Fábián & Sterbetz (1966)* except for the bill size that had been measured previously by them from the skull rather than from the beginning of the bare parts.

Identification of the 'Biharugra' egret

The overall colour of the specimen was uniform dark grey with no white feathers except for the gular region. This sharply demarcated white region is typical for Western Reef Egret (even its scientific name '*gularis*' refers to this feature) but unlikely for a melanistic Little Egret: such an individual is expected to have an entirely dark plumage and even in

case of a partially melanistic bird it would be unlikely that white coloration would appear only on the throat. The colour of the lores was off-white at the time of re-examination. The colour of the bare parts had not been recorded at the time of collection and discolouration may have occurred also with time. *Egretta garzetta* in breeding plumage is expected to have greyish lores (that may turn orange to reddish, bluish rose or lilac rose during mating; Gutiérrez *et al.* – *in litt.* – has even seen yellowish lores on breeding *garzetta*) while *Egretta gularis* is expected to have yellow, greenish yellow or greenish to olive green lores (that turn pale yellow – or even more briefly red – during the mating season) (Hancock & Kushlan, 1984; Dubois & Yésou, 1995). The current off-white colour is less likely to originate from the grey lores of *garzetta*. Nevertheless, this feature is not completely reliable even in case of live birds (Dubois & Yésou, 1995), and is even less so on faded specimens.

The bill had a typical dagger shape, i.e. the bill was close to parallel for a large part, only the culmen was downcurved close to the tip of the bill as opposed to a straighter culmen and thus more pointed bill expected for *E. garzetta*. When compared the bill length to those given in literature, it fell within range for female *E. garzetta* (68–89 mm given in Cramp & Simmons, 1977) and *E. g. gularis* (80–94 mm given in Vaurie, 1965 or 79–89 mm given in Cramp & Simmons, 1977). It was too small, however, for *schistacea* (94–103 mm given in Vaurie, 1965).

While the measurement of the tarsus was within range for both species (although outside the range of race *schistacea*), it gave somewhat the impression of being disproportionately short when compared to the general shape of Little Egrets, especially when looking at the photo in Fábíán & Sterbetz (1966). The tarsus-to-bill ratio was 1.03 (calculated as 0.97 by Voisin, 1991; based on measurements given by Fábíán & Sterbetz, 1965; note that the bill was measured by them from the base of the skull rather than from the beginning of the bare part). Even the value of 1.03 falls outside the ranges given for *garzetta* (1.06–1.41 by Hiraldo Cano, 1971 and Bernis, 1971; or 1.05–1.42 by Cramp & Simmons, 1977), but well within range for *gularis* (0.97–1.16 by Hiraldo Cano, 1971; Bernis, 1971 or 0.97–1.17 by Cramp & Simmons, 1977). The value of 1.03 also falls within the range of 1.01–1.38 calculated by Ashkenazi (1993) for white Little Egrets in Israel. However, identification of Israeli birds were based on bare part coloration and behaviour that may have been “not as reliable as Ashkenazi thought” as Dubois & Yésou (1995) pointed it out.

Out of the two races of Western Reef Egret, *schistacea* can be excluded since *schistacea* is paler, more ashy blue and also slightly larger (Vaurie, 1965). The bill, wing and tarsus measurements fall outside the ranges found for *schistacea* by Vaurie (1965) or Ashkenazi (1993). Thus, based on its very dark grey colour, thinner bill and measurements, the Biharugra bird belongs to the nominate race, *Egretta gularis gularis*.

The distribution of Western Reef Egret and its vagrancy in Europe

The range of Western Reef Egret reaches from the coasts of West Africa from Mauritania to Gabon including a few off-shore islands (subspecies *gularis*), as well as the

coasts of the Red Sea from the gulfs of Suez and Aqaba south to the Gulf of Aden, the coasts of southern Arabia, the Persian Gulf from Fao to western India and Sri Lanka (subspecies *schistacea*) (Vaurie, 1959). The forms *gularis* and *schistacea* are still considered just to be different races of Little Egret by some authors (Hancock & Kushlan, 1984; del Hoyo et al., 1992) but recent literature treats them predominantly as separate species (Cramp & Simmons, 1977; Brown et al. 1982; Monroe & Sibley, 1990; Perrins & Snow, 1998; American Ornithologists' Union, 1998).

Western Reef Egret is a regular vagrant in Europe, especially in the south. In France a total of 28 records have been accepted up to 1997, relating to at least 20 individuals, (Dubois & CHN 1996; 1997; 1998) and from 1975 on it is almost annual there. In Spain 39 submitted reports are currently under re-assessment of which 14 records are already accepted as *E. gularis* while four other birds showed the characteristics of *garzetta* x *gularis* hybrids. The remaining reports are still under review (Gutiérrez in litt.).

Western Reef Egret has been reported in Italy (23), Malta (1) (Willis, 1994; Madge, 1996), Greece (4) (Handrinos & Akriotis, 1997) and Croatia (2) (J. Mikuska, in litt.).

Breeding of Western Reef Egret may have occurred for the first time in France in 1958 (probably in pair with Little Egret) and between 1990–96, again possibly in mixed pairs (Dubois & Yésou, 1995; Dubois & CHN, 1997). One bird has bred successfully with Little Egret in Valencia since 1988 and another has also paired with *E. garzetta* in the Doñana area at least for the last four years, both producing hybrid offspring (Gutiérrez in litt.).

Records of the species in Austria, Germany (Pfriem & Nickel 1982; Wüst, 1983) and Switzerland and some of the records in France (Cistac, 1984) and Italy (Grussu & Poddesu, 1989) are considered to be escapes. Repeated imports of *Egretta gularis schistacea* to Germany and Austria through an Austrian animal dealer in Mittelfranken had been reported (Wüst, 1983). Ca. 300 birds were imported in 1981 and another 200 in 1982, of which 8 were released (*sic!*). Import might have started even earlier, maybe in 1980 (Wüst, 1983). The report of Wüst raised questions even about the origin of a transatlantic vagrant showing up in Massachusetts in 1983 (Anon., 1983) although the individual in question was identified clearly as *Egretta gularis gularis* rather than *schistacea* (American Ornithologists' Union, 1998).

The Biharugra specimen showed no signs of previous captivity, and it had been reported more than a decade before the reported mass import started to Austria. We have no knowledge of any import of the species to Europe at earlier times, neither do we know of any bird that had escaped from zoos in or preceding 1965. Hypothetically, a captive origin may have been still possible, although neither behaviour, nor any signs (ring, worn or dirty feathers, etc.) supported this theory. The date of occurrence fits well with the summer occurrence of other vagrants in Hungary with a presumed southern origin, such as Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*), Slender-billed Gulls (*Larus genei*), Sandwich Terns (*Sterna sandvicensis*) or Gull-billed Terns (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) (vide: Magyar et al., 1998). Other European records of wild Western Reef Egrets also date from late Spring to mid Summer (from April-May to August). Considering all these circumstances the Biharugra specimen is considered to be of wild origin and the MME NB accepted the record in Category A (MME Nomenclator Bizottság, 1998).

Black egrets in Europe and Israel

Black Little Egrets were claimed a number of times in Europe but in many cases a dark phase Western Reef Egret could not be excluded. *Voisin (1991)* came even to the conclusion that the very existence of a dark morph Little Egret may have been doubtful. Out of three specimens collected earlier and claimed as black Little Egrets, one (collected in Spain) was a hybrid and another (the Biharugra bird) turned out to be *gularis*. Only a bird collected in the last century in Bulgaria seems to be a dark phase Little Egret according to *Voisin (1991)*. Thus, even if dark morph Little Egrets do exist they are indeed very rare as *Dubois & Yésou (1995)* also pointed it out. Recently, dark phase Little Egrets were repeatedly reported in Israel (*Ashkenazi, 1993*; for criticism of the Israeli specimens vide: *Dubois & Yésou, 1995*) and also in some other countries. Some of these individuals (vide: *van den Berg, 1999* e.g.) may have concerned *gularis* × *garzetta* hybrids resulting from the mixed pairs already mentioned earlier while others also proved to be *E. gularis*, like an individual in Spain (*Gutiérrez, in litt.*)

Summary

After re-examination of the specimen of a black egret shot in Biharugra in 1965 (and regarded previously a dark morph Little Egret), it was identified as a nominate race Western Reef Egret based on overall colour, extent of white on the throat, bill- and body shape and biometric data. The *Hungarian Checklist and Rarities Committee* accepted this individual as the first record of Western Reef Egret to Hungary (*MME Nomenclator Bizottság, 1998*). No sign indicated captive origin. The date of the Hungarian record fits within the seasonal distribution of other European records of Western Reef Egrets.

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