

# Species Fact Sheets

**Order:** Pelecaniformes  
**Scientific Name:** *Bubulcus ibis*

**Family:** Ardeidae  
**Common Name:** Cattle Egret

**AZA Management:**  Green  Yellow  Red  None



**NATURAL HISTORY:**

**Geographic Range:** Europe  Asia  North America  Neotropical   
 Africa  Australia  Other  [Click here to enter text.](#)

**Habitat:** Forest  Desert  Grassland  Coastal   
 Riverine  Montane  Other  [Click here to enter text.](#)

**Circadian Cycle:** Diurnal  Crepuscular  Nocturnal  Other  [Click here to enter text.](#)

**Cold Tolerance:** To 70° F  To 60° F  To 50° F  To 40° F   
 To 30° F  To 20° F  Other  Tolerant of wide range of temperatures, can be kept outside as long as basic shelter, heat lamps are provided

**Heat Tolerance:** To 30° F  To 50° F  To 70° F  To 90° F   
 To 110° F  Other  Tolerant of wide range of temperatures, can be kept outside as long as water and shade are provided

**Diet:** Frugivore  Carnivore  Piscivore  Insectivore   
 Nectivore  Omnivore  Folivore  Other (Add Below)

**Captive Dietary Needs:**  
 Commercial Bird-of-Prey Diet, Fish, Insects (Mealworms, Crickets), Hard-Boiled Egg

**Life Expectancy in the Wild:** Males: 20 Years Females: 20 Years

**Life Expectancy in Captivity:** Males: 20 Years Females: 20 Years

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## BREEDING INFORMATION:

**Age at Sexual Maturity:** Males: 2 Years Females: 2 Years

**Courtship Displays:** Seasonally monogamous. At the pairing stage, the male establishes a territory and proclaims it using calls and displays, such as bill clapping and erection of plumage. During the breeding season, buff coloration will form on the neck, mantle, and crown, while the legs and bill will turn bright red or yellow. Forced copulations have been observed.

**Nest Site Description:** Colonial nesters, often nesting alongside other species, generally near water. The nest is a shallow (7-12 centimeter) cup of reeds, twigs, and small branches, measuring 20-45 centimeters across. It is usually built in reedbeds or trees, sometimes very close to the ground, sometimes several meters high. It is constructed by both parents, usually with the male supplying the materials (sometimes stolen from neighboring nests) and the female doing most of the construction.

**Clutch Size, Egg Description:** Eggs are white with a pale blue or green tint, measuring 4-4.5 centimeters long by 3-3.5 centimeters wide. Clutch size is 2-5 eggs, depending on area. Replacement clutches will be laid if the first one is lost.

**Incubation Period:** 22-26 Days

**Fledgling Period:** 30 Days

**Parental Care:** Both parents build the nest, incubate the eggs, and care for the chicks.

**Chick Development:** Chicks are olive-green skin, turning grey within days of hatching. Partially covered with down at hatching, feathered by 2-3 weeks of age. They are vocal and aggressive, sometimes resulting in weaker siblings starving to death (direct siblicide is uncommon). Within three weeks they leave the nest and are fully independent at about 45 days of age. Fledglings disperse great distances, with distances of over 3500 kilometers being reported.

## CAPTIVE HABITAT INFORMATION:

**Social Structure in the Wild:** Large Colonies (especially when nesting)

**Social Structure in Captivity:** Large Colonies

**Minimum Group Size:** Pair

**Maximum Group Size:** Large Colonies

**Compatible in Mixed Species Exhibits:** Yes **Comments:** Can be housed with a variety of other birds (herons, ibises, storks, waterfowl), alligators

**Optimal Habitat Size:** 200 Square Feet per Pair

**Management Challenges:** Possible interference or predation on the nests of smaller bird species. Sometimes bullied or harassed by larger birds in aviaries, may benefit from multiple feeding stations, nesting areas to reduce competition.

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### ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

Cattle egrets are largely sexually monomorphic. The plumage is predominately white, with buff coloration appearing on the mantle, crown, nape, and foreneck during the breeding season; some egrets may retain this coloration year round. Also during the breeding season, the normally dark-green legs will turn red or yellow, and the normally yellow bill may turn dark red (a possible cue for pair bonding). Males typically have longer breeding plumes, but only during the mating season. The posture often seems hunched, with short legs and a thick neck. Body length is 46-56 centimeters, with a wingspan of 88-96 centimeters. Weight is 340-390 grams, with males often weighing more than females.

Cattle egrets get their common name from their association with cattle and other large herbivores (they are sometimes also called elephant egret, rhinoceros egret, etc). They will walk alongside grazers and feed on insects (especially grasshoppers) that are stirred up the large mammals. In the absence of ungulates, they will follow tractors or other farm machinery. Opportunistic feeders, they will also prey upon crustaceans, mollusks, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and small mammals. They have also been known to raid the nests of other birds. Cattle egrets are adaptable foragers, sometimes walking or running after prey, sometimes taking prey on the wing. They will also investigate fires, looking for small animals fleeing the flames. They are considered the most terrestrial of herons.

Until 1880, the distribution of the cattle egret was limited to the Old World. In that year, however, cattle egrets were sighted in South America for the first time. The species has since expanded its range, now being found over much of North and South America, becoming established in the United States by the 1950s. It has occupied the environmental niche created by the clearing of forests for livestock pastures, and follows domestic ungulates for the insects they stir up much as the cattle egrets of Eurasia and Africa have always done. Some populations of cattle egret are migratory, others are sedentary, but individuals are still prone to wander, sometimes in excess of 2000 kilometers.

There are three recognized subspecies: the nominate, *B. i. seychellarum*, and *B. i. coromanda*. Cattle egrets are classified as a species of Least Concern by the IUCN and are listed on Appendix III of CITES. It is sometimes considered a nuisance due to the smell and noise generated by the large nesting colonies. Their tendency to feed in agricultural areas leaves them vulnerable to pesticide poisoning.

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