

Cattle egret hitches ride to Valley

☐ Sightings of the African natives becoming regular on Vancouver Island

By Andrew Findlay
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They've been spotted hitchhiking around the Comox Valley on the backs of their bovine brethren, but the little white birds' place of origin is across the ocean in the old country.

Thought to have expanded from Africa north into Europe, the cattle egret's range is now growing rapidly into North America, and the bird has been visiting Vancouver Island since 1970 when the first Canadian sighting was recorded near Victoria.

"We usually see one or two pass through this area every fall," said Father Charles Brandt, who trained his camera lens on a lone cattle-riding egret at the UBC research farm in early November. "It's common for the egret to disperse after breeding in the northern U.S."

Birders believe the egret's potential for northern expansion is limited by its inability to survive cold winters. However, records indicate that it's common to see the occasional egret between the months of October and February on the island.

As for the egret's penchant for perching on cattle, Brandt believes it may be an animal kingdom version of, "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours."

"I think they associate with cows because it stirs up insects for the birds to eat," said Brandt. "They probably pick at the insects on the cow's back as well. I'm sure the cows appreciate it."

The cattle egret isn't shy. It's also been known to hop aboard horses, sheep and even chickens and ducks as a mode of transportation through pastures and for nibbling on insects.

Although studies have found the birds' breeding grounds as far north as Oregon, the egret is normally a solitary traveler on its trips to Vancouver Island.



The cattle egret, always looking for a ride, has been an infrequent but regular visitor to Vancouver Island since 1970.

Father Charles Brandt photo