



BOCAGIANA

Museu de História Natural do Funchal

First records of Great White Egret *Ardea alba* (Aves: Pelecaniformes: Ardeidae) from the island of Madeira, Portugal

With 2 figures

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ABSTRACT: In this paper the authors describe the first and second records of a Great White Egret *Ardea alba* in Madeira, both on the 10th of December 2014. A single bird was observed at Lugar de Baixo, Ponta do Sol on the Southwest coast of the island around 10:00 am and another individual at Ribeira de São Vicente, São Vicente, on the Northwest coast of Madeira, 30 minutes later.

Keywords: *Ardea alba*, Pelecaniformes, Ardeidae, new records, Madeira Island.

RESUMO: Neste trabalho os autores descrevem o primeiro e segundo registo de Garça Branca Grande *Ardea alba* para a Madeira, ambos a 10 de Dezembro de 2014. Um indivíduo desta espécie foi observado no Lugar de Baixo, na Ponta do Sol, costa Sudoeste da ilha, pelas 10 horas e um outro 30 minutos mais tarde na Ribeira de São Vicente, em São Vicente, na costa Noroeste da Madeira.

Palavras-chave: *Ardea alba*, Pelecaniformes, Ardeidae, novos assinalamentos, ilha da Madeira.

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Bocagiana (2014) 240: 1-4

ISSN 2183-3141 (online edition)

Available online at: <http://bocagiana.cm-funchal.pt>

Edição do Departamento de Ciência da Câmara Municipal do Funchal. MANUEL BISCOITO (Editor)

Received 27 December 2014; Published 31 December 2014

INTRODUCTION

There are no breeding species of Egrets and Herons in the archipelago of Madeira, with all the 11 species of the family Ardeidae recorded as vagrant birds (ROMANO *et al.*, 2010; CORREIA-FAGUNDES *et al.*, 2011). Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* and Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* are the most common vagrants from this family being regularly seen throughout the year.

The Great White Egret *Ardea alba* Linnaeus, 1758, is a large white bird similar in size and silhouette to *Ardea cinerea*, but with its plumage looking more like *Egretta garzetta* during breeding season or like *Bubulcus ibis* when immature or in winter plumage. Despite these similarities with other Ardeidae, *Ardea alba* is easily identifiable by its large size with long neck and white colour. Some authors recognize four subspecies, each related to a different continent and with minor distinctive characters. According to DEL HOYO *et al.* (2014) the subspecies are:

- *A. a. alba* in Central Europe and East to Central Asia;
- *A. a. modesta* in the Indian subcontinent and East to Southeast Asia;
- *A. a. melanorhynchos* in Africa, South of the Sahara and Madagascar;
- *A. a. egretta* in the American continent.

The nominate species is the largest one with a longer and stronger bill and often showing the tibia paler than the tarsus (DUIVENDIJK, 2010).

Field observations

On the morning of the 10th of December 2014 the authors, together with a Danish birdwatcher, Lars Nørgaard Andersen, observed and documented with photos and videos a Great White Egret *Ardea alba* sitting on a rock at seashore, opposite to Lugar de Baixo pond, on the South coast of Madeira (Fig. 1). At first glance and as this species was never recorded for Madeira, it looked like a Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, but its large size led the observers to a consensus identification as an immature/winter plumage *A. alba alba*. Its large size, similar to that of a Grey Heron, which was at the pond at the same time, its dull yellow legs and its long and relatively heavy yellow bill, were the key features to consider it as *A. a. alba* subspecies, although it did not have the tibia paler than tarsus.

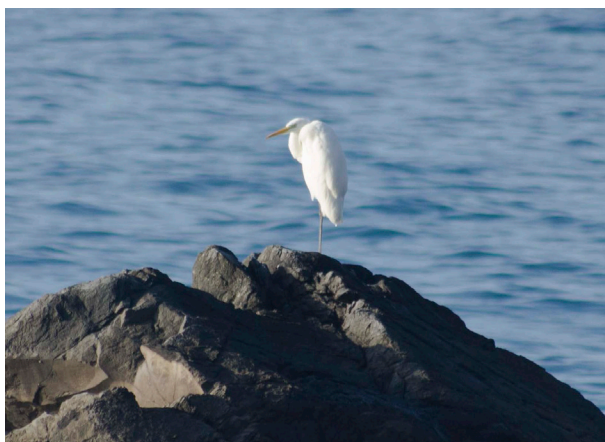


Fig. 1 – The Great White Egret at Lugar de Baixo, Madeira.

When the observers left Lugar de Baixo they head straight to São Vicente, on the North coast of the island. It takes about 20 minutes driving up Ribeira Brava valley, passing through a 3.1 km tunnel, which cross Encumeada, a 1000 meters of altitude mountain and then driving down São Vicente valley to get to the village with the same name. At São Vicente riverbed, close to the centre of the village, there was another Great White Egret (Fig. 2). The birdwatchers

were able to get closer to this bird and observed it hunting a frog, swinging its neck like a snake while concentrating on the prey just before picking it with its strong bill. The observation of this second bird with same characteristics as the previous one, plus a yellowish tibia, led again the authors to identify it as *A. a. alba*, making it the second record of this species for the island of Madeira.



Fig. 2 – The Great White Egret at São Vicente, Madeira, December 10th, 2014, showing yellowish tibia.

Distribution

Ardea alba breeding grounds in the Western Palearctic used to be mostly in Central Europe while its wintering areas were in North Africa and Eastern Mediterranean countries (ŁAWICKI, 2014). Since the 1970s it has expanded both its breeding and non-breeding grounds with nesting occurring now in countries such as The Netherlands and Poland, to the North (SNOW *et al.*, 1998; BEAMAN & MADGE, 2011) and France and Spain to the Southwest (ŁAWICKI, 2014). Wintering populations are now observed in Central Europe where before they were rare during this cold season. (ŁAWICKI, 2014).

Great White Egret has been recorded as an accidental vagrant from the Atlantic Archipelagos of the Azores, Canary Islands and Cape Verde (CLARKE, 2006).

The expansion of its wintering populations to Southwest Europe, with Portugal having annual records since 1988 (with exception of 1993) with increasing numbers (ŁAWICKI, 2014), combined with the strong winds from East-Northeast which were felt in Madeira at least 3 days before the 10th of December 2014, may be a logical explanation for these records. Previous records in the other three Macaronesian archipelagos, associated with the natural range expansion of the species, make the present records normal and expected.

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