MARK CAUNT

Great Egret was considered a national rarity into the 2000s. Now, more than 100 pairs breed in Britain, following the first successful nests in Somerset in 2012.

Rise of the egrets

Egrets have staged some of the most dramatic range expansions in living memory. Today, three charismatic former rarities are a regular sight and even breed across much of Britain. *David Campbell* explores the forces behind their rapid rise.

As you arrive at your favourite local wetland, a small group of white birds passes behind the trees. You hadn't quite got your gear out, but the frustration is short-lived: not far down the path, you have logged three egret species, as you usually do these days. Although this has been the case for years now, the excitement of seeing these bright white herons still hasn't faded.

When I started birding in the early 2000s, Great Egret and Western Cattle Egret were both national rarities and their occurrence anywhere in Britain was eye-catching news. Little Egret was firmly established, but birders remained acutely aware of their novelty, whether they had grown up with them – as I had – or were around to see this species gain its foothold.

The rapid march of egrets across Europe and their colonisation of Britain is a fast-paced story rooted in exploitation, protection, climate change and behavioural shifts in the birds themselves. This makes their fascinating rise perhaps the most conspicuous reminder of the dramatic impact that humans can have on bird distributions.

Plume and bust

Modern ornithology has largely known these white herons as rare and exotic visitors to Britain. Western Cattle Egret was the first to be recorded, with a bird shot in Devon in 1805. Great Egret made its entrance in East Yorkshire in 1821, then the same county added Little Egret to the British list five years later. But all three species remained coveted finds for at least a century and a half.

For much of this period, egret populations across Europe were under severe pressure. The Victorians' infatuation with plumes as fashion accessories made Little Egret – with its exquisite ornamental breeding feathers – a favourite in the millinery trade. If you had a bigger hat, a larger plume was in order, so Great Egret suffered similarly. Widescale slaughter of these and other birds took place to meet demand; more than a tonne of feathers were sold in London showrooms in 1906 alone. Meanwhile, the long-term and extensive drainage of wetlands continued unabated across much of Europe.

Little Egret's range faltered fast. In the late 1800s, it vanished from France and Hungary, while significant dents were made in Romania and Russia's Volga Delta. Great Egret was held back too, breeding no closer to Britain than Hungary and Austria. Archaeological records from two medieval Dutch sites suggest a formerly much broader range for this species.

Thankfully, early conservationists ensured that the destructive plume trend did not last. In 1889, a group of women led by Emily Williamson formed the Society for the Protection of Birds to campaign against the unnecessary killing of egrets and other birds. The organisation received its royal charter in 1904, becoming the RSPB, and a full ban on the trade came into effect in 1920.

ROBIN CHITTENDEN

The fine, airy plumes of Little (pictured) and Great Egrets made them prime targets during the Victorian fixation with ornamental feathers. This slaughter held back any chance of range expansion.

Out of Africa

Before the 1950s, the bulk of the European Little Egret breeding population wintered in Africa. The second half of the 20th century saw a shift towards shorter migrations, with many wintering on the European side of the Mediterranean. As a species that is drawn to shallow and brackish wetlands, major river catchments such as the Danube, Ebro and Rhône soon supported large concentrations. Winter numbers began to expand along the Atlantic coasts of France and Spain, setting a mid-century stage for pivotal breeding events, such as the establishment of first colony in Brittany in 1960.

Meanwhile, Western Cattle Egret was making strides on a global scale. Still a largely African bird when it crossed the Atlantic to the Guianas in 1877, this incredible leap founded a New World population that would explode in the mid-20th century. As well as expanding across South America, the species started breeding in the USA by 1953 and extended into Canada by the early 1960s. Today, it is one of the most abundant herons in parts of North America.

In the Old World, Western Cattle Egret's expansion was more fitful. However, in the first half of the 20th century, it was thriving and expanding within Africa and southern Iberia. Breeding colonies became established in Israel for the first time in 1950, and a foothold was gained in France when birds attempted to breed in the Camargue in 1957. It may not have been clear at the time, but these were signs of wider change to come.

Seventies swing

The 1970s marked a turning point for Great Egret. This stately white heron started breeding in northern parts of Ukraine, signalling a push into new areas. The Netherlands gained its first breeding pair in 1978 – seeding a game-changing population on the near-Continent.

In 1979, the European Commission enacted the Birds Directive, placing both Great and Little Egrets on Annex I, which provided special conservation measures to ensure their survival and reproduction. This legal protection, combined with changing cultural attitudes and habitat restoration, helped open the doors for these species to recover and expand their populations.

JAMES HANLON

Its association with grazing animals has enabled Western Cattle Egret to expand its range. The birds are entertaining to watch as they methodically search for arthropods on and around livestock.

Western Cattle Egret, though not afforded measures in the Birds Directive, continued its European spread. After earlier attempts, the species finally fledged young in the Camargue in 1969; this firmed up its presence in France and led to further range expansion in the country.

A Little leap

By 1993, 600 km of French coast had been colonised by Little Egret. This swelling population was already shifting the species' status on the other side of the English Channel. Everything changed for British birders with an autumn influx of some 40 Little Egrets in 1989. Previously only a handful reached us annually, mostly in spring, but this novel event repeated and ramped up each year.

By the time the BBRC dropped Little Egret from the official list of rarities at the start of 1991, it had logged 725 records. Birders on the south coast had found most of these, including almost 300 in the last two years that the BBRC kept track.

Post-breeding arrivals from the Continent continued apace, regularly exceeding 1,000 birds per annum during the next few years. A proportion of these arrivals wintered, primarily at south-coast estuaries such as the Tamar and Chichester Harbour. Counts of dozens became routine, but the thrill of seeing them didn't wear off easily.

As this dispersal brought an overspill of egrets to Britain each year, our relatively mild climate offered high winter survival rates. Breeding behaviour was first noted in 1993, four years after the initial influx. Three years later, in 1996, Little Egrets fledged young for the first time, at two south-coast sites. One was Brownsea Island, Dorset, which is situated in Poole Harbour – another area that had supported many wintering egrets. Breeding was repeated

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at both sites in 1997, with five pairs on Brownsea producing 12 young between them. That year also saw the first successful breeding in Ireland, with 12 pairs at a single site.

It was estimated that 1,650 Little Egrets were in Britain in September 1999. The species was set to enter the new millennium on a whole new level.

Great Egret was following a parallel path on the Continent. By the 1990s, the population in Ukraine had swelled to as many as 2,000 pairs and Belarus welcomed a colony. In 1994, France gained its first breeding pair – another crucial seed for future British colonisation. In 1997, Poland and Spain saw their first modern breeding records.

Great arrivals and a false start

Few would have suspected other species to follow in the yellow-dipped footsteps of Little Egret so soon. Indeed, Great Egret and Western Cattle Egret both remained valuable birds for any British or Irish year list some way into the 2000s.

During its time as a BBRC rarity (which ended in 2006), Great Egret had 301 records on file, largely from the south coast and East Anglia. As with Little Egret, spring overshoots had accounted for most sightings, but by the 1990s – with breeding established on the near-Continent – autumn arrivals dominated. During the 2000s, October to March became the best time to see Great Egret as the species established itself as a post-breeding and winter visitor. A flock of eight in Norfolk in October 2009 showcased this spectacularly. Among the large wetlands in southern England, the Avalon Marshes, Somerset, became a key area early on.

JAMES HANLON

Although Western Cattle Egret first bred in Britain in 2008, the species only started nested annually from 2017. These nestlings were photographed in Cambridgeshire.

Western Cattle Egret's story seemed to fast-forward with little warning. Following a huge, well-documented influx at the end of 2007, the first British breeding occurred in Somerset in 2008, when at least two pairs fledged young. It would have been reasonable to assume the species was here to stay, but this was followed by a nine-year gap with no confirmed breeding – a reminder of the tendency for on-and-off colonisation in wetland birds during the early stages.

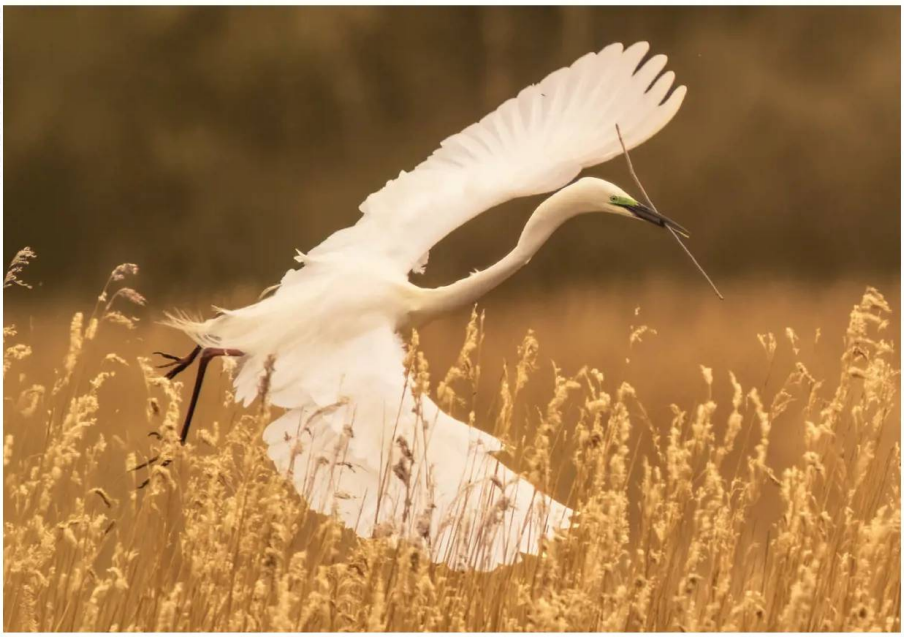
No going back

After several years of presence in the Avalon Marshes, Great Egret bred at Shapwick Heath NNR in 2012. Two pairs successfully fledged the first four young in Britain. The Avalon Marshes offered everything a Great Egret needs, with its expansive reedbeds, shallow water and patches of woodland and scrub.

The pioneering Somerset birds included an individual ringed in northern France in 2009; all early colour-ringed birds originated from that country. Many of the unmarked birds are considered likely to have arrived from the thriving colonies in the Netherlands, where there was no ringing scheme.

In less than 10 years, much new ground was being broken. Great Egrets started breeding at Holkham NNR, Norfolk, in 2017 and Burton Mere Wetlands RSPB, Cheshire, two years later. Western Cattle Egret's colonisation kicked off once more after another influx, with 10-15 pairs breeding across several counties in 2017. Numbers have increased annually since, with new sites occupied each year.

ANDREW FUSEK PETERS



Great Egret nests are usually built in wet reedbeds, in areas that are safe from predators and away from human disturbance. This nest-building individual shows the dark bill seen in breeding birds.

Egret isles

Little Egret now breeds across much of Britain and Ireland. It may come as a surprise to learn that the first confirmed Scottish breeding took place as recently as 2020. A conservative minimum of 1,600 pairs were spread across at least 200 sites in the UK in 2023, according to the Rare Breeding Birds Panel – a new record, with numbers almost doubling in 10 years. New BTO research published in 2026 suggests the population is considerably higher than this – likely exceeding 2,000 pairs, with annual population estimates still considered to be cautious.

By 2023, Great Egret had nested in six English counties, and shown promising signs in five more, as well as north-east Scotland. That year, the British breeding

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population made a sudden leap into three figures: 101-110 pairs spread across 18 sites, a record total for the eighth successive year. Somerset remains a core area, with 72 pairs logged there in 2023.

Colour ringing by the Avalon Marshes New Colonists Monitoring Group (AMNCMG) has shown that young Great Egrets wander widely before settling. Between 2016 and 2024, their egrets were seen in all but six English counties. In recent years, AMNCMG-ringed birds have seeded new colonies in Gloucestershire, Nottinghamshire and even Anglesey, where egret 'ABM' was one of two pairs to nest in Wales for the first time in 2025.

Western Cattle Egret has continued to consolidate its foothold in Britain. In 2023, an estimated 66-71 pairs bred across 18 sites in 13 recording areas, with a stronghold in southern England but an expanding range that now includes counties such as Cambridgeshire, Warwickshire and Norfolk. Notably, breeding reached as far north as Cheshire and, for the first time, Yorkshire, where three pairs marked the species' northernmost breeding in Britain – and possibly Europe.

Although numbers may have dipped slightly since a peak of up to 77 pairs in 2021 (with some birds likely going unrecorded), the species remains highly visible, particularly outside the breeding season. In Somerset, for instance, winter gatherings can swell to a spectacular 200-300 birds.

Drivers of expansion

Several factors have transformed the presence of egrets across Europe. Habitat restoration and creation have played a major role. At the same time, legal protection has ensured these beautiful herons are largely left in peace. Climate change has also contributed, with milder winters allowing birds to survive closer to their breeding grounds on the northern fringe of the range and return in better physical condition.

In addition, ecological flexibility has been crucial. Western Cattle Egret is able to exploit a wide range of environments, from farmland and wetlands to urban parks, road verges and even airport runways. The rise of livestock grazing in the Southern Hemisphere seems to have given it an on-ramp into new areas. Dietary changes have further supported expansion, with Great Egrets increasingly adopting more terrestrial feeding habits as they take advantage of small mammals in winter. Finally, volunteer efforts and robust monitoring – particularly through citizen science and ringing schemes – have been instrumental in tracking and supporting this ongoing spread.

A bright future

Great Egret has become the most successful colonising wetland species in Britain since Little Egret. With high productivity and rapid expansion, the future looks bright, though its more specific habitat requirements may mean less explosive growth than its smaller relative. East Anglia, where the Great Fen project is increasing wetland connectivity, and Kent, with its network of large wetlands within easy reach of the Continent, are obvious areas to watch.

Western Cattle Egret remains something of a enigma: highly visible and widespread in winter, but still elusive and localised as a breeding bird. Nevertheless, the scale and pace of its expansion strongly suggest it is now well on the way to becoming a more numerous component of the British avifauna. It probably won't be long before this species – and Great Egret – are confirmed as breeding in Ireland. Little Egret also has unfinished business; its population in Scotland is growing but only reached double figures in 2023.

The rise of the egrets is a stark reminder of the effects of climate change and historical persecution. On the other hand, their obvious and ongoing success also reflects the positive changes that are possible when we shift attitudes, enact adequate protection and create a healthier landscape. ■

ROBIN CHITTENDEN

As Western Cattle Egret breeds later than other herons and often constructs a nest deep within foliage, some pairs may go unrecorded.

STEVE YOUNG

Seeing Great (left) and Little Egrets together is now routine at many wetlands around Britain and Ireland. However, areas such as Scotland still offer scope for the further expansion of both species.

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