

The Cattle Egret influx 2016/17

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Summary

Cattle Egrets are among the most rapidly expanding bird species and appear to be on the cusp of colonising Britain. Before 2007, they were a rare vagrant, but in 2007/08 almost 200 were recorded. The current influx is likely even greater. On the 19th of March 2017, a survey revealed at least 84 birds to be present in Cornwall alone, with the actual number quite possibly closer to 120. The periodic influxes appear to be linked to drought conditions across the Mediterranean region and mild winters in Britain.

The amazing spread of Cattle Egrets

The Cattle Egret has undergone one of the most phenomenal natural expansions of any bird species. Prior to 1930, the western form of Cattle Egrets were restricted to southern Spain, Portugal and Africa, but around that time they appeared in South America and have since spread over much of Central and North America. The species first arrived in North America in 1941, bred in Florida in 1953, and spread rapidly, breeding for the first time in Canada in 1962. The eastern form has undergone a similar expansion from its stronghold in India and China. In Australia, colonisation began in the 1940s and by the 1960s it was regularly visiting New Zealand, with numbers there peaking in the late 1980s at over 3,200 birds. The species has a well-documented recent history of successful colonization, arriving from afar in small numbers, and rapidly multiplying to play a significant role in agricultural grassland ecosystems. In consequence, its arrival in Britain is not only of interest to birders, but potentially important from an ecological perspective.

A history of Cattle Egret occurrence

In Britain, before 2007, Cattle Egrets would be best considered a rare vagrant. Between 1950 and 1980, the species occurred roughly once every four years, with occasional instance of multiple birds, such as in 1962 when four were recorded.

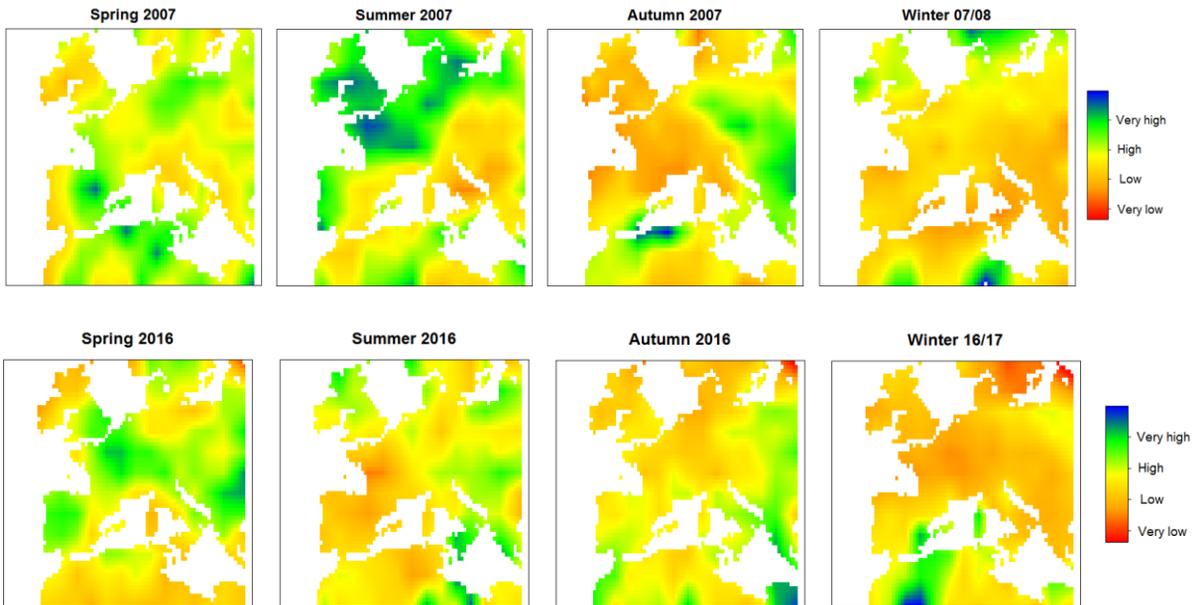


Cattle Egret at Tehidy Country Park in early March. *Alex Mckechnie*

Thereafter, numbers began to increase. They occurred in most years, and between 1981 and 2006, a total of 153 were recorded in comparison to just 19 birds in total prior to that. Records in Cornwall follow a broadly similar pattern, though first arrivals weren't until 1980, when one was found near-dead at Polgigga and another dead at Saltash. Thereafter there were occasional records, but by 2006 only 12 had been seen. Then in late 2007 and early 2008 something extraordinary occurred: there was a huge influx. In Britain as a whole close to 200 were recorded, with circa 60 birds in Cornwall alone. Numbers were also high in 2008/9. Many thought it would become a permanent resident and although birds bred for the first time in Britain in 2008, the species did not establish itself properly. In fact records thereafter were occasional, and it wasn't until eight years later, towards the end of last year, that a similar phenomenon occurred.

Why do influxes occur?

The short answer is that nobody knows, though the particularly warm winter of 2007/08 was given as a possible reason. However this winter, though warmer than usual, has not been exceptionally so and my own believe is that drought conditions in southern Europe are important.



Rainfall patterns in the period leading up to large Cattle Egret influxes. While the summer of 2007 was not unusually dry, the autumn and winter, when wetland water levels would normally replenish themselves, experienced exceptionally low rainfall. In 2016, there was very low summer rainfall, but drought conditions also continued into autumn and winter.

It is interesting to look at rainfall patterns in the run-up to both influxes. Conditions were exceptionally dry in the main Mediterranean breeding grounds (see figure above).

The 2017 Cattle Egret survey

On the evening of 19th March 2017, simultaneous roost counts were conducted at key sites across Cornwall. Volunteers were asked to visit known roost sites between 16:30 and dusk, and record the number of egrets seen. Though coverage of many areas was patchy or impeded by poor visibility, the survey revealed a few surprises.

On the evening of the roost survey, at least 75 were recorded: 35+ at Frenchman's Creek, 20+ at St Clement, 16 at Loe Pool, three at Devoran and one on the Tamar. During the day, three were also recorded at St Erth, and the next day six at the Gannel, which was not covered by the survey, giving a total of 84.

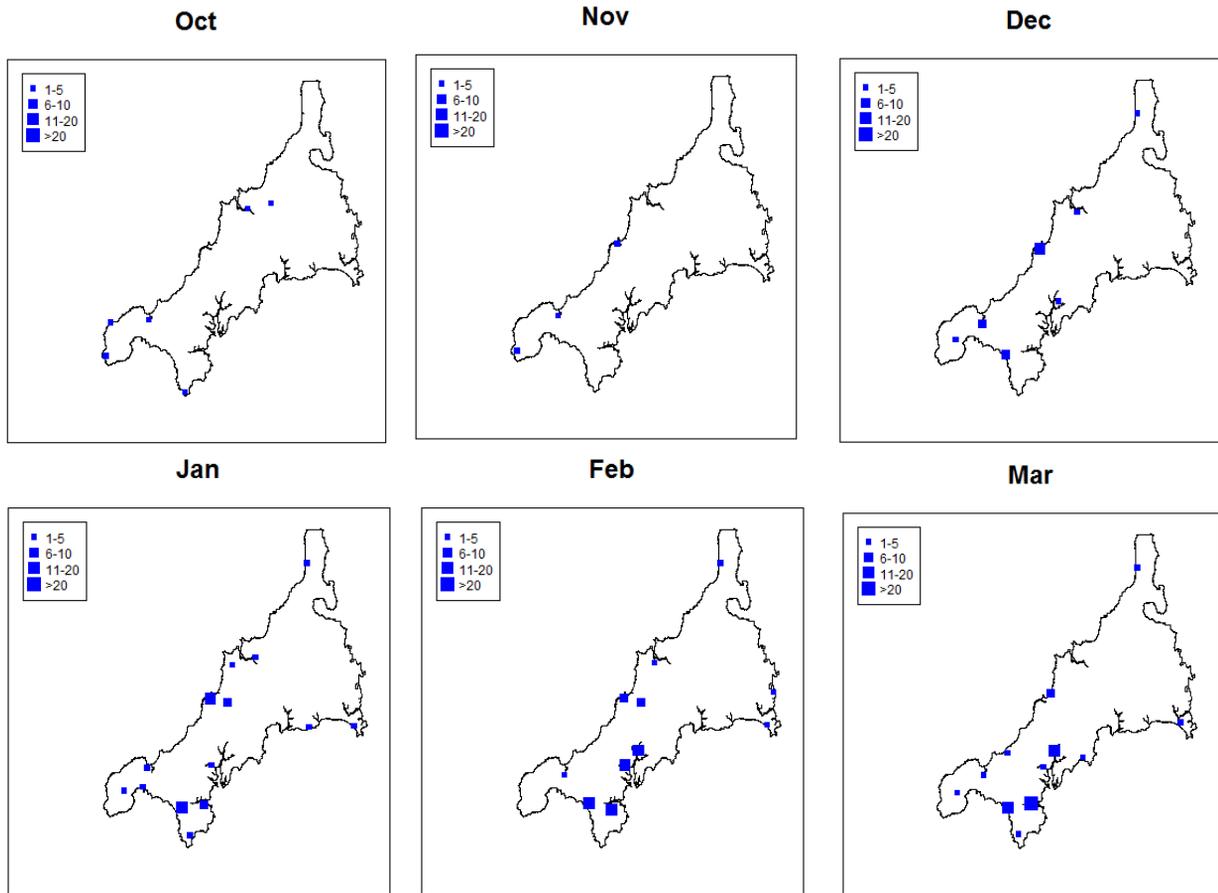
It is quite likely that a record of two on the Lizard a few days later are additional, that the Tehidy bird was not included in this total and those seen recently at Bude, the Camel Estuary and Sancreed were also present but missed.

It is also possible that more were at Devoran and that the Frenchman's Creek and St. Clements totals included five more birds than the numbers given. This would bring the total up to 109. It is also entirely plausible that there are a few more around the Tamar, along hidden stretches of the Upper Fal Estuary or elsewhere in deepest darkest Cornwall, and a figure of 150 isn't at all beyond the realms of possibility. A figure in the region of 120 is perhaps most probable however.

A detailed account of the influx

West Penwith (max. count: 2)

Only small numbers were recorded in West Penwith. The first of the Autumn was seen at Pendeen on 12th October, with one also seen there on 24th October. On 13-14th October, two were reported at both Porthgwarra and Sennen, but were probably the same birds. A single bird was then seen sporadically around Land's End, Sennen and Polgigga from 29th October to 15th November.



The distribution of Cattle Egrets across Cornwall, with square sizes indicating maximum counts. In the autumn, small numbers were recorded in widely scattered locations, but by December, most birds had settled in larger groups. There was an overall trend of birds moving to sheltered locations on the south coast as winter progressed. Numbers appear to increase, and while this is probably driven by the arrival of new birds, it is also possible that they became easier to find as they formed larger flocks.

Sancreed and Drift Reservoir (max. count: 6)

Small numbers were seen regularly between the 16th December, when two were present, and the 27th January, with birds often favouring cattle fields near Sellan Farm. Numbers increased to five on 18th December, when two at the reservoir were seen simultaneously to three at Sancreed and then peaked at six on 30th December. Two were also seen on 12th March.

Hayle and St. Erth (max. count: 3)

A single was seen at Hayle Estuary on 31st October and remained until 3rd November. Thereafter, at St. Erth, mainly in fields along Treloweth Lane, one was seen on 19th December and again on 28th January and was then seen sporadically until it was joined by a second on 6th February and a third on 16th March. These are likely still present (24th March). Three, very likely the same birds, were seen at Hayle Estuary on 6th February, with a single there on 22nd March.

Helston and Loe Pool (max. count: 17)

A single bird was found at the roundabout near Culdrose on 9th May 2016, preceding the main influx by several months. None were then seen until 30th December, when a flock of nine were found gathering in a pre-roost flock on a dead tree at Loe Pool just north of Carminowe Creek. The same flock steadily increasing in number and from time to time birds were also seen in surrounding fields. 12 were recorded on 27th January and 16 on 17th February, which was the maximum number seen with certainty at Loe Pool itself. These are still present at the time of writing (24th March). However, 17 were seen in a field to the north-east of Loe Pool on 25th January, and one flew over Porthleven on the same date. Was that the seventeenth disappearing, or an eighteenth bird?

Helford and North Lizard (max count: 35+)

The Helford has been one of the best places to see Cattle Egrets during previous influxes and the paucity of records previously is likely to be an indicator of poor coverage rather than a scarcity of birds. The first record was of six, possibly seven, reported from Lower Calamansack on 27th January, which were thought to have been present for at least a week. Also on the 27th, three were seen near Porthallow. On 17th February, seven were seen near Traboe. The large roost at Frenchman's Creek was first reported on 26th February, when 15+ were recorded. 12, with a possible 10+ in fields further away were reported on 3rd March. The possibility of higher numbers was confirmed on 12th March, when the monthly WeBS count recorded at least 25, but this was thought to be an underestimate as many were difficult to see in surrounding fields. A simply astonishing 35+ were recorded at Frenchman's Creek during the Cattle Egret roost survey on 19th March and is almost certainly the highest number ever recorded at a single location in Britain. Initially 33 were seen in the cattle field above the creek, but views were restricted. 35 then arrived at the Creek, but one or two egrets could still be seen in the fields above. 20 were also seen in the cattle field on 22nd March.

South Lizard (max. count: 2)

A single bird with cattle near Old Lizard Head on 13th October arrived the day after one in West Penwith and on the same date as a bird in the Camel Estuary and two at Porthgwarra, indicating the start of the main influx. Another was seen flying north from Kynance towards Poltesco Valley on 18th January and two were seen flying over Ruan Pool on 22nd March.

Upper Fal Estuary (max count: 23+)

Birds were sporadically reported from two main areas: from Restrouquet Creek and from either side of the Tresillian River, though rarely simultaneously. While some interchange is possible, the sites are some 5 miles apart, and it seems likely that different birds were involved. Furthermore, many stretches of the Upper Fal are difficult to see and received little coverage by the roost survey, and it is quite possible more Cattle Egrets are lurking, awaiting discovery.

At Restrouquet Creek three were seen roosting on 12th January, but 12 were recorded on 6th February, with varying numbers recorded at times in between, though only three were recorded during the roost survey. However, the birds are known to split into groups and roost at different locations and it is possible that some were missed. Near St. Michael Penkivel, at Treganna Farm, three were first recorded on 12th December, but numbers peaked at 14 on 17th February, when six were also seen on the other side of the river, near St. Clements. It is not clear whether these were different birds, but thereafter most reports from the same St. Clements area, with numbers rising to 10 on 19th February and 18 on 2nd of March. On the evening of the Cattle Egret roost survey, 20 were definitely seen, with probably as many as 23 present.

Gannel Estuary and Newquay (max count: 18)

On 16th November, one was seen roosting at Penpol Creek and was joined by a second on 7th December. By 14th December, numbers had increased to 10, and grew steadily, peaking at 18 on 27th December. Thereafter, numbers dropped off: 14 by 9th January, 11 by 15th January and down to six by 10th of March (likely still present at the time of writing). Birds were also occasionally seen during the day and further afield, including two that flew over Cubert Common on 26th December 2016, and one at the airfield between St. Mawgan and Trevarrian on 18th March.

Camel Estuary (max. count: 2)

One or two were recorded regularly. One was seen at Dinham Flats on the first day of multiple arrivals on 13th October. A single was then seen sporadically between 7th of December and 7th February, when two were present up until 19th February. Often they roosted at Pinkson Creek. These may have been the same birds as the two seen at St. Merryn on 28th of January.

Bude (max. count: 5)

Three were present on 26th December, increasing to four on 8th of February and five between 2nd and 8th March. Often they were seen on the Rugby Pitch or Bude Marshes.

Tamar Complex (max count: 5)

In the Millbrook and Freathy area, a single was seen on 28th January, and was joined by a 2nd on 29th January. Both were seen sporadically until 7th March, often frequented cattle fields near the Whitsand Bay Holiday Park. Three were also seen at Landulph & Kingsmill Lake on 2nd February at a time when those near Freathy were being regularly reported in more or less the same place. It therefore seems likely that different birds were involved, suggesting a maximum of five in the area. A single bird was recorded in the Anthony Passage/Forder Creek area on the evening of the roost count on the 19th March.

Other records

Two were seen at Tinton Manor Farm near St. Tudy on 31st October and a single bird was at Stithians Reservoir on 25th November. In the

St. Austell area, a single bird was seen near Polperro on 27th January and five were seen at Caerhays Castle on 7th March. Singles were also seen at Marazion on 21st January and at Tehidy Country Park on the 3rd, 9th and 15th March.

Acknowledgements

I thank the many volunteers around the county who took part in the Cattle Egret roost survey, particularly the members of the Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation Area, who so diligently covered the Helford. I also wish to thank those who spread the news of the roost survey on social media at short notice, and Dan Chaney for feedback and proofreading.

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Sixteen Cattle Egret in flight at Loe Pool. One of several flocks in Cornwall. *Alan James*