

Conservation Corner

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Fall migration is in the wind and over the farm. After morning chores one day last week, Ron noticed a white bird a little larger than a pigeon that had landed in the pasture, its head bobbing up and down as it foraged for insects stirred up by the grazing cows and calves. The cattle didn't quite know what to think about their new companion. Ron didn't, either, and so he returned to the house for the bird book. Here's what we learned about the newest member of our herd, a Cattle Egret.

Bubulcus ibis, commonly called a Cattle Egret or Cow Crane, is smaller and more compact than other herons. They have short, yellow legs; a short, thick neck; and medium-length, rounded wings. Their plumage is all white except during the breeding season when golden plumes appear on the head, chest, and back of adults. Cattle Egrets nest in trees in colonies established by native herons and egrets.

Cattle Egrets are recent immigrants from Africa, first arriving in South America in the 1870s. They entered Florida in the early 1940s, and within fifty years Cattle Egrets had become the most abundant heron across North America with sightings as far north as Alaska and Newfoundland.

There are several reasons why Cattle Egrets have enjoyed such success. For one, they are not picky eaters, consuming large insects such as grasshoppers, crickets, and flies but also frogs, spiders, moths, earthworms, crayfish, snakes, or mice. They are also opportune eaters, flying long distances to smoke to catch insects fleeing from a fire.

Another reason is that Cattle Egrets are strongly migratory. Young birds disperse long distances up to thousands of miles in random directions, a pattern that has aided their ability to colonize much of the world.

But perhaps most importantly, Cattle Egrets aren't picky about where they live, easily adapting to living on land converted to livestock and crop production. They also don't seem to be picky about who they live with. So while in Africa they graze alongside and astride camels, hippos, ostriches, rhinos, zebras, and tortoises, here in the New World they usually follow cattle and horses or tractors and lawnmowers. Another plus is that, as recent immigrants, they have few natural predators.

In other words, wildlife who are generalists are better able to adapt and change with the times than wildlife who are specialists. Natural history is filled with examples and their stories of success or struggle in a changing world. Which term best describes your lifestyle?

In closing, I'd like to invite everyone to save the date and join us for the Pocahontas Art Walk on Saturday, November 26. Conservation will be hosting a Make & Take Workshop at the ISU Extension Office on Main Street from 10:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. Hope you can join us in creating stained glass rock mosaics and wind chimes as we celebrate the many colors and seasons of art walking the streets and grazing the fields of Pocahontas County.

