

## *A rare Snowy Egret visiting the Black River in Cape Town.*



*photograph by Otto Schmidt.*

*This is the bird causing consternation in Cape Town this week 08/06/2015.*

***This is an article about it by Trevor Hardaker from his website.***

This is the Southern African Rare Bird News Report issued at 20h00 on Thursday, 11 June 2015. Information has been gleaned from various websites, email groups as well as from individual observers who have passed on their sightings. This report cannot be taken as being totally comprehensive as it is based only on information made available at the time of writing. All bird sightings reported here are reported in good faith based on information as provided by the observers. Any inaccuracies are totally unintentional and the writer cannot be held liable for these. For those who may have only joined the group recently and are interested in finding out what has been seen in the past, previous reports can be viewed at <http://groups.google.co.za/group/sa-rarebirdnews>

This week has been all about one bird... and one bird only!

So, slipping very comfortably into the "Bird of the Year" position and knocking some of the earlier megas this year like Red-throated Pipit and Citrine Wagtail off of the pedestal, all the talk this week has been about Southern Africa's 2nd ever SNOWY EGRET. Located on Monday evening along the Black River close to the Raapenberg bird hide, it wasn't until later on Monday evening that photos of the bird were first circulated and interest was created. A very early morning vigil at the site on Tuesday yielded nothing... it was only at around 09h15 that the bird was eventually relocated. It took a little while before really good views could be obtained and all the salient features could be confirmed in order to clinch the ID and, eventually, at just before 10h30, the MEGA ALERT was sent out... and that set the suitable twitching chaos into motion!

Naturally, the web forums and Facebook newsfeeds were all ablaze with news of the find. Many people starting posting photos or at least posting news that they had seen the bird and, naturally, it started developing a serious case of FOMO amongst many other birders. Some people were even seen to make some tongue-in-cheek (hopefully!) comments along the lines of "Why is this not a Little Egret? Is it just because it is in Cape Town?". But, hopefully, my earlier post a few days ago on SARBN explained all the features as to why this is not a Little Egret and I'm also hopeful that observers made the effort to actually look for and at these features when viewing the bird.

This species has been a long time blocker for many of the older birders with the only other record going back to May 2002 where one spent a few days at Zandvlei in the Western Cape. So, with the finding of this latest bird, this species has now been unblocked for many of the newer birding generation. And, boy, have many of them jumped at the opportunity?! The first upcountry twitchers were in Cape Town and back in Gauteng on Tuesday already, the first day that it had been available to twitch! Given the fact that this is a mid-week bird, the numbers of twitchers are perhaps slightly lower than one might expect for a bird of this caliber but, based on the number of names I had received so far by this evening (when the bird was still showing well), at least 310 people had already been to see it with no fewer than 28 of those from outside of the Western Cape! Twitcher numbers also has a lot to do with the location of the particular bird - the Red-throated Pipit at Avis Dam in Windhoek earlier this year spent 40 days on site but, given the low numbers of local birders and the distance for others to travel to get to see this bird, that total stay only drew around 170 people to see the bird. This Snowy Egret surpassed that mark after just 36 hours of being broadcast. If it stays until the weekend, we may well see this turn into one of the biggest twitches that this country has ever seen! This is a New World species occurring in North and South America (I've also included an overall distribution map below showing their normal range as well as a big red star showing the latest record all courtesy of eBird - thanks to Ethan Kistler for providing this). The South American birds are largely sedentary whilst the North American birds are partial migrants moving south into Central America to winter there. Any suggestions as to how it got here are purely theories but the most likely scenario is perhaps that it crossed the Atlantic Ocean in the Northern Hemisphere somewhere and made landfall somewhere in Europe and then moved south from there. This could be supported by a number of previous vagrant records in the Northern Hemisphere where this species has turned up in Iceland, the Azores, Cape Verde, Scotland and Germany in the past. However, the spanner in the works is that it has also turned up on Tristan da Cunha in the southern Atlantic Ocean which might suggest that displacement from South America is, in fact, also a possibility.

Whatever the case, it is a seriously exciting find and all credit must go to Dominic and Patrick Rollinson who were sharp enough to look carefully and pick it out of the myriads of other egrets in the area as the differences are really quite subtle and takes some close scrutiny to see. For those of you that have not yet made the effort to go and see this bird, I can only strongly encourage you to get there as quickly as you can because who knows when we might get another chance to see this mega locally ever again...!

Just as an added little bit of interest, while we are all getting very excited about this Snowy Egret, our birding colleagues in Canada are currently also going crazy over a LITTLE EGRET that has turned up in Ottawa... we've just swapped birds...

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