

LITTLE EGRET.

Ardea garzetta, *Linn.*

Le Héron garzette.

THE Little Egret can scarcely be considered as having a decided claim to a place in the British Fauna ; for, although one or two instances are upon record of its having been captured within the boundaries of our Island during the last half-century, still we do not know what degree of credit is to be attached to these accounts, as it is one of those birds respecting which much confusion has hitherto prevailed. The statements of its having been served up in such abundance at various feasts in the fifteenth century, recorded by the writers of that period, must be received with some degree of caution, for it is more than probable that the name was then given to another bird :—however this may be, the Little Egret is now found only in the southern portion of Europe, especially the countries adjacent to Asia and the Mediterranean ; a few, however, migrate periodically into France, and occasionally also into Germany ; but Sicily, Sardinia, Turkey in Europe, and the Islands of the Grecian Archipelago constitute its true habitat. Hence passing southwards and eastwards, it is abundantly spread through the temperate and warmer regions of Asia, and throughout the whole of Africa, but never occurs in the continent of America, where its place is supplied by a species closely allied, indeed, but possessing characters which sufficiently distinguish it. The young have been described by many authors as a distinct species, under the name of the “Little White Heron,” because being destitute until the third year of the slender graceful plumes from the back and the occiput, it was supposed that the birds could not be identical ; this is now disproved. There is, however, a “Little White Heron” noticed by Montagu which is truly a distinct species, and the specimen he described from, the only one known to have been taken in England, is now in the British Museum.

But it is not the plumage of the young birds only that has led to confusion, for the adult birds lose their ornamental plumes after the autumn moult. Hence Buffon, who calls this bird in full feather “L'Aigrette,” gives to it when unadorned the name of “La Garzette blanche.”

The food of the Little Egret, like that of its congeners, consists of the reptiles and insects peculiar to the morasses among which it dwells, to which fishes and molluscos animals are also added.

Latham states, that in Egypt it is called the “Ox-keeper,” from its frequenting plains where the herds of cattle are pasturing, and that it is seen “often perching on the backs of these animals to feast on the larvæ of *Œstrus* which infest them.”

It is said to make its nest among the herbage of morasses, and to lay five white eggs.

The colour of the plumage is a pure white. In the adult birds, at least during the breeding season, the occiput is ornamented with a pendent crest of two and sometimes three long narrow feathers, and a range of slender hair-like feathers is continued down the back of the neck ; from the top of the back arise three ranges of plume-like feathers six or eight inches long, with waving shafts fine and tapering and thinly set with silky slender barbs, forming a light flowing plume ; the beak is black ; the naked skin round the eyes olive green ; irides bright yellow ; tarsi greenish black except at their lower part, where as well as on the toes the colour is greenish yellow. Length one foot eight or ten inches.

We have figured an adult in full plumage, and about two thirds of its natural size.