

## Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi

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### The Cattle Egret Chases Cows!

A recent Sunday lunch with friends in Vasant Vihar ended with the usual goodbyes at their gate. While we stood and chatted, their 9-year old daughter, Ishanvi, came out to bid us farewell. Standing at the gate of her house, Ishanvi exclaimed "Look at those white birds chasing the cows!". We looked up and indeed there was small flock of 6 birds which seemed to be chasing a few cows on the road. The white birds kept pace with the cows, running behind them, nimbly darting between the legs of the cows. With their shorter legs, the birds had to really hurry to keep up!

Ishanvi's father, a birdwatcher, too, told her that the bird was a Cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*). Aptly called the *gai bagula* in Hindi, the Cattle egret is a handsome white bird with a long neck, a yellow-orange beak and black legs. During the breeding season, which matches the onset of the monsoon in northern India, the bird's plumage changes. The bird adopts a rich reddish-brown colour on the head and neck, in an attempt to look TWH (tall, white and handsome)!



Ishanvi, though, was not far from the truth when she said that the birds were chasing cattle; Cattle egrets are often found near cattle. The egrets and cows depend on each other. When the cows graze, chewing on grass, they disturb insects. These insects are tasty morsels for the egrets. Given their larger size relative to the egret, the cattle disturb more insects than the birds would themselves, hence it suits the egrets to follow the cattle around. In turn, the egrets do the cattle a favour, too. Often, the bird will be seen perched on the back of cattle, eating ticks and mites, thereby helping cattle free themselves of these pesky parasites.

Cattle egrets are a common sight through out India, in cities and villages, near streams, in agricultural fields, almost anywhere that you are likely to find cattle. The egrets, however, are not only associated with cattle. They are seen frequently in plowed up fields during the sowing season, feeding on the insects that get churned up with the soil. Cattle egrets are a member of the heron family. They build their nests in colonies on trees, along with other herons, cormorants and egrets, mostly near water bodies. The nest is an untidy clump of sticks. Whenever you drive past a large water body in this season, look out for the tall trees. Its quite likely that there will be a heronry on some of these trees.

The Cattle Egret and the cows are a symbol how creatures live in harmony, and form relationships of mutual benefit. If only humans could do the same!

Making a difference: An easy way to form a mutually beneficial relationship with nature is to create a compost pit for your wet garbage in your house! While you help reduce the load on the garbage management system (if one exists at all!), and create some manure for yourself, the waste provides food to a variety of organisms.

Photograph caption: Cattle Egret

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