

Short communications - *Brevi note*

New colony of Little Egrets *Egretta garzetta* at Trapani salt pans

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The Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* has become a regular visitor to some wetlands of Sicily, particularly along the eastern board, and has been breeding since the 1990s. Until now it has never been recorded in the western part of Sicily (Fasola *et al.* 2002, AA.VV. 2008).

Since 2010 breeding has been confirmed at the Saline di Trapani where it breeds on two inaccessible islets (about 100m² each) at Salina Morana (A. Di Lucia, A. Volpe, *pers. comm.*). Nests are built on the branches of the Tree Mallow *Malva cf. arborea* where it shares the islets with Yellow-legged Gulls *Larus michahellis*; the egrets are concentrated in the middle of the islets while the Yellow-legged Gulls nest along the shores, it appears that there is little confrontation between the two species.

In 2014, following the obliteration of vegetation due to the egret's droppings, the number of breeding pairs declined and subsequently, nests were constructed on bare ground. The number of breeding pairs between 2013 and 2016 fluctuated from 30 to 50. As of 2013, we have regularly observed at least three pairs of Little Egrets nesting inside a windmill located on one of the inaccessible islands (Fig. 1); the nest of one of them is located inside a cavity with a front opening. In the summer of 2016, another windmill was occupied but this time the nest was constructed along the wooden beams at the upper part of the structure which is missing the top cover.

One to two pairs of Little Egrets are also known to breed on the solitary tree present along the edge of the salt-



Figure 1. Nest of Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* on windmill.

pans. Breeding site is concentrated in a very restricted area (35ha) in respect to the whole reserve which is 707 hectares. It appears that the species is expanding its range inside the reserve (RNO Saline di Trapani and Paceco) and is occupying all the available nesting sites, mainly sites that are inaccessible to humans and other mammals, especially feral dogs.

Breeding on man-made structures has never been cited in literature, and what is more astounding is the fact that these birds nested inside a cavity (Mezzavilla & Scarton 2002, Fasola *et al.* 2007, Puglisi *et al.* 2012, Kazantzidis *et al.* 2013). In northern Italy, Little Egret colonies are always found mixed with Night Herons *Nycticorax nycticorax* except for one site (Valle Bertuzzi, Ferrara) where a monospecific colony of Little Egrets is located and another site close to Campagna Lupia (Venice) where Little Egrets breed alongside Purple Herons *Ardea purpurea* (Brichetti & Fasola 1985).

In north Italy, all the heronries are located in wetlands with patches of woodland consisting mainly of Alder *Alnus* sp., Willow *Salix* sp., Poplars *Populus* sp., Black Locust *Robinia pseudoacacia*, Pines *Pinus* sp., and reedbeds (Fasola *et al.* 2007).

As a result of the species expanding breeding range, particularly in the last decade (Marion *et al.* 2000) the list of breeding habitats has increased; in Sardinia, the Little Egret breeds on small islands covered with *Salicornia* bushes or else directly on bare ground (12 out of 22 colonies) and these colonies are primarily monospecific (Grussu *et al.* 2005).

It should be concluded this note by underlying the fact that the planting of trees within the confines of the reserve at the Saline di Trapani may contribute to the increase of

the breeding numbers of Little Egrets and possibly the colonization by other species of herons and ibises.

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