First record of the association of Cattle EgretBubulcus ibis with Shoebill Balaeniceps rex

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Abstract

Association of Cattle Egrets Bubulcus ibis with large herbivores is well documented, but there are few records of their association with large birds. Here we describe the first-known records of foraging interactions between Shoebill Balaeniceps rex and Cattle Egrets. The observations were made at the Malagarasi-Muyovozi Ramsar Site in western Tanzania. Small flocks of egrets approached and foraged within 5 m of a Shoebill, which was sometimes forced to move from its hunting pool and by doing so it likely flushed more prey for egrets. Interactions occurred almost exclusively in the driest months, which suggested that prey were more difficult to locate by egrets during this period. The Shoebill inhabits inaccessible swamps and is a rare species with low density throughout its range. It is therefore possible that egret–Shoebill associations, in addition to being infrequent and highly seasonal, may have gone unnoticed.