

LETTER.

COLORATION OF SOFT PARTS IN THE HERODIONES
DURING THE BREEDING SEASON.

To the Editors of *British Birds*.

SIRS,—Mr. B. W. Tucker's difficulty in reconciling his own observations on *Ardeola ibis ibis* at the nest with the published authorities (*antea*, pp. 70-73) is more or less paralleled by my own recent experience with the Large Egret (*Egretta alba*) and the Smaller Egret (*Egretta intermedia*). In both species the *Fauna of British India* describes the bill in breeding plumage as black, and the orbital skin lores and edge of gape as bright green. Oates, a very careful observer, supports this, but *Practical Handbook* (II. i. 205) describes the bill of *alba* as "black, base orange (ad. summer), yellow (ad. winter and juv.)."

I visited one or two very large breeding colonies in August, 1935, in Upper Burma and watched scores of Egrets for a fortnight or more in an excellent light, both at the nest and when feeding on the ground. As these colonies nested in trees, my observations were not at such point-blank range as those of Mr. Tucker but were with $\times 12$ Zeiss glasses at ranges from 15 to 100 yards. I was greatly puzzled by the fact that nearly all these Egrets, which, from their dorsal plumes were clearly adult, had yellow or yellowish beaks, usually, though not invariably, with a dark tip. I only saw three in which the green facial skin was prominent and of these two had black beaks and one dark brown. Dr. C. B. Ticehurst, to whom I mentioned this, suggested that by August, when most of these birds were feeding young ones, extensive colour changes might well have started to take place in the soft parts. This is certainly possible and in late May, 1936, during a very hurried visit to this colony, most of the birds, which were then building their nests, had black or blackish beaks, though at the same time there were undoubted adults about with yellow beaks and fully developed dorsal plumes. I had not time to go into it as fully as I wished.

These colour changes clearly need more study in the Herodiones, as one very marked change, which I have been unable to find mentioned in any book, occurs in the feet of *Butorides striatus* (the Little Green Heron) in the breeding season. They become what appears in the field to be almost orange-pink and are most conspicuous in flight, though not noticeable at other times of the year.

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BINSTED, HANTS. August 8th, 1936.

[In the case of nestling *Egretta alba*, nearly old enough to leave the nest, examined by me the bills were gamboge, upper mandible black at the tip, with orbital region and round gape bright green. In nestling Spoonbills (*Platalea leucorodia*) some had the feet entirely pale yellowish, while others, just able to fly, showed traces of slate colouring, but none had the legs and feet black.—F.C.R.J.]