

EGRETRY COUNTS IN HONG KONG, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE MAI PO INNER DEEP BAY RAMSAR SITE

SUMMER 2001 REPORT

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Summary

In the 2001 breeding season, there were 830 nests of Great (*Egretta alba*, 82 nests), Little (*Egretta garzetta*, 268 nests) and Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*, 59 nests), Black-crowned Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*, 222 nests) and Chinese Pond Herons (*Ardeola bacchus*, 188 nests) and 11 undetermined nests in 18 egretries. Of these, the Small Traders New Village egretty near Yuen Long and the Shing Uk Tsuen egretty near Tsim Bei Tsui were first reported and the Stonecutters relocated from the previous location. Beside these 18 egretries, six nests of Little Egrets and three nests of Chinese Pond Herons were seen at Ho Chau Leng (Au Tau) in late March, but these were abandoned in late April, probably due to nearby pond-filling. In Hong Kong in 2001, the A Chau Egretty in Starling Inlet (257 nests) was the largest egretty, while the Ma On Kong egretty at Kam Tin was the smallest (five nests). Little Egret, Black-crowned Night Heron and Chinese Pond Heron were the three most abundant breeding species, while Cattle Egret was the least. Compared with the count in 2000, there was a 12% increase in nest numbers in Hong Kong. This increase is caused by the discovery of the Small Traders New Village and Shing Uk Tsuen egretries, although the Ho Chau Leng (Au Tau) egretty was abandoned. In the Deep Bay area, a total of 295 nests from seven egretries was recorded. Little Egret (145 nests) was the most abundant breeding species, while Great Egret was the least (12 nests). A higher number of Great and Little Egrets nested in the Deep Bay area, although fewer Black-crowned Night Herons nested. Egretties in Deep Bay and A Chau are threatened by suspected illegal collection of eggs and chicks. Nesting populations of egretries in Kam Tin valley and Shui Mei are threatened by reduction of feeding habitats due to infrastructure construction in this area. In view of the disturbance noted this breeding season, we recommend stronger protection of egretries in Deep Bay through regular patrol in coming breeding seasons.

1 INTRODUCTION

Breeding activity is an important aspect of population dynamics. Nesting populations of colonial waterbirds are counted as part of long-term monitoring studies in Mediterranean Europe (Hafner and Fasola 1997), Australia (Maddock and Baxter 1991) and the United States (Gawlik *et al.* 1998). Long-term records of breeding populations of colonial nesting ardeids only exist in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and Vietnam in East and Southeast Asia (Lansdown *et al.* 2000). Reporting of the number of nesting pairs in Hong Kong was started by enthusiastic volunteers of the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society as early as 1958. This kind of record submission was suspended between 1975 and 1989 (Young and Cha 1995). Recording was far from complete, and on many occasions only breeding species were recorded with no count of nesting pairs made. In addition, not all colonies were counted each year. A total of 34 egretries, active or abandoned, have been reported in Hong Kong up to 2000. Quantitative monitoring of them was first monitor in 1998. Therefore, the dataset of ardeid nesting population is less than 10 years. As a result of these factors, it is difficult to study long-term trends in the ardeid nesting population in the HKSAR.

The recording of breeding populations of egrettries in the Deep Bay area as part of the long-term monitoring of waterfowl abundance in the Mai Po and Inner Deep Bay Ramsar Site started in 1998. Systematic surveys, including annual recording of both breeding species and the number of nesting pairs, in the Deep Bay area have been carried out. Since the 1999 breeding season, we have attempted to survey all known breeding colonies in the HKSAR. In addition to recording breeding species and breeding population, an estimation of breeding success was incorporated into the surveys. This information will be useful for the long-term monitoring of the ardeid population in the HKSAR and Inner Deep Bay area.

2 METHODS

Active egrettries between 1999 and 2001 were surveyed between April and June 2001 (Table 1, Figure 1). In addition, suspected new nesting sites, based on observing flight pathway of ardeids, were also visited. New egrettries were located by personal observations and from various information sources. Apparently occupied nests, determined by the presence of incubating adults or chicks, were counted directly from vantage points at all egrettries, except the Stonecutters and Shing Uk Tsuen egrettries. The nest numbers of these two egrettries were counted by estimation of birds around egrettries because most nests were built in dense vegetation. In addition, the nesting substratum was noted. The nesting colony size of each species in each egrettry was taken to be the sum of the highest count of the number of nests of each species (for egrettries surveyed more than once).

At Mai Po Village, Mai Po Lung Village and Ho Sheung Heung egrettries, the maximum number of chicks per nest was observed from vantage points outside for assessing potential breeding success. Caution should be taken when interpreting the results as the counting of chicks is prone to error.

After clarification of the location of the Shek Wu Wai egrettry reported in 2000, we have renamed this egrettry as the Mai Po Lung Village egrettry because it lies closer to this village

Table 1. Dates of egrettry surveys in the 2001 breeding season (Locations in Figure 1). (Ho Chau Lang (Au Tau) was active in March but was abandoned as early as May, and is thus not considered as active egrettry in this breeding season.)

Egrettry	Date
1. Mai Po Village	16 April, 2 June
2. Tam Kon Chau	16 April
3. Pak Nai	25 March
4. Ngau Hom Shek	25 March, 28 May

5. Ho Sheung Heung	16 April, 2 June
6. Tai Po Market	23 March, 6 May
7. Centre Island	6 May, 2 July
8. Penfold Park	16 April, 2 June
9. A Chau	4 May
10. Stonecutters	23 April, 20 May
11. Shui Mei	16 April, 24 May
12. Lam Tsuen	16 April, 21 May
13. Tai O	5 May
14. Ho Pui	1 May
15. Ma On Kong	1 May
16. Mai Po Lung Village*	16 April, 2 June
17. Small Traders New Village	30 April
18. Shing Uk Tsuen	30 April
[Ho Chau Lang (Au Tau)]	25 March, 30 April

*: named as Shek Wu Wai in the 2000 report (Kwok *et al.* 2001).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Breeding population

A total of 830 nests were recorded at 18 egrettries in the HKSAR in the 2001 breeding season (Figure 1, Appendix 1 - 19). Of these 18 egrettries, the breeding of ardeids at Small Trader New Village and Shing Uk Tsuen was first discovered this year. In addition, nesting at Ho Chau Leng (Au Tau) by Little Egrets and Chinese Pond Herons was observed in March 2001, but was later abandoned in late April. The egrettry at the Stonecutters moved to a new location, though near the former site.

The highest number of nests was recorded at A Chau (31.0% of total nests) while the lowest was at Ma On Kong (0.6%) (Table 2). In 2001 A Chau was the main nesting site of Great Egrets (*Egretta alba*) (63% of Great Egret nests), Black-crowned Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) (71% of Black-crowned Night Heron nests), and Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) (46% of Cattle Egret nests). With regard to Little Egrets, Mai Po Village (19% of Little Egret nests), Pak Nai (18%) and Shing Uk Tsuen (15%) are the three most important sites, while Ho Sheung Heung is the main nesting site of Chinese Pond Herons (*Ardeola bacchus*) (33% of Chinese Pond Heron nests).

Numerically, the dominant breeding species in Hong Kong in the 2001 breeding season was Little Egret (32% of total nests), while Cattle Egrets were the least (7% of total nests, Table 2). Little Egrets and Chinese Pond are the two most widespread species. Little Egrets were found to breed at 15 egrettries, while Chinese Pond Herons were at 14 egrettries.

Egrettries in Deep Bay

There were seven egrettries in the Deep Bay area during this breeding season (Mai Po Village, Tam Kon Chau, Pak Nai, Ngau Hom Shek, Ma Po Lung Village, Small Trader New Village and Shing Uk Tsuen). Tam Kon Chau is the only egrettry in the Inner Deep Bay Ramsar Site. The total number of nests in egrettries in the Deep Bay area comprised 35.5% of the total number of nests in Hong Kong (Table 3). Little Egret was the dominant breeding species in the Deep Bay area.

Table 2. The number of nests at surveyed egrettries in the Hong Kong in the 2001 breeding season.

	Great Egrets	Little Egrets	Black-crowned Night Herons	Chinese Pond Herons	Cattle Egrets	?	Total nests (% of total nests)
1. Mai Po Village	12	50	25	7	15		109 (13.1)
2. Tam Kon Chau				21		1	22 (2.7)
3. Pak Nai		47		5	2		54 (6.5)
4. Ngau Hom Shek		1		6			7 (0.8)
5. Ho Sheung Heung		13		61	1		75 (9.0)
6. Tai Po Market	3	24	9			10	46 (5.5)
7. Centre Island	15	12	6		1		34 (4.1)
8. Penfold Park		10		2			12 (1.5)
9. A Chau	52	21	157		27		257 (31.0)
10. Stonecutters		26	18	2			46 (5.5)
11. Shui Mei		3		11	3		17 (2.1)
12. Lam Tsuen				15			15 (1.8)
13. Tai O		12	7				19 (2.3)
14. Ho Pui		2		2	5		9 (1.1)
15. Ma On Kong				5			5 (0.6)
16. Mai Po Lung Village		1		43			44 (5.3)
17. Small Traders New Village #		6		3			9 (1.1)
18. Shing Uk Tsuen #		40		5	5		50 (6.0)
Total	82	268	222	188	59	11	830 (100.0)

Table 3. Importance of Deep Bay egrettries (Mai Po Village, Tam Kon Chau, Pak Nai, Ngau Hom Shek, Mai Po Lung Village, Small Traders New Village, and Shing Uk Tsuen) relative to other egrettries in the HKSAR in the 2001 breeding season.

Species	No. of nests in Deep Bay	Total no. of nests in Hong Kong	Deep Bay nests as % of all nests in Hong Kong
Great Egret	12	82	14.6
Little Egret	145	268	54.1
Black-crowned Night Heron	25	222	11.3

Chinese Pond Heron	90	188	47.9
Cattle Egret	22	59	37.3
Undetermined	1	11	9.1
Total	295	830	35.5

3.2 Potential breeding success

Potential breeding success of Great and Little Egrets and Black-crowned Night Herons at Mai Po Village, and Chinese Pond Herons at Ho Sheung Heung and Mai Po Lung Village was estimated (App. 20-27). This is defined as the maximum number of chicks per nest observed from vantage points outside egretty. The chicks observed were mostly about three weeks old. At Mai Po Village, the potential breeding success of Little Egrets was highest (Table 4). The potential breeding success of Little Egrets nesting at Mai Po Village is higher than at Tai Po Market, while they are similar for Black-crowned Night Herons. At Ho Sheung Heung and Mai Po Lung Village, the potential nesting success of Chinese Pond Herons is similar. Potential breeding success of Little Egret nesting at Mai Po Village in 2000 and 2001 were similar (2000: 1.9 ± 0.15 (SE), $n = 38$) (Kwok *et al.* 2001).

Table 4. Potential breeding success of ardeids nesting at Mai Po Village, Ho Sheung Heung Tai Po Market and Mai Po Lung Village in 2001.

Species	No. of nests observed	Potential breeding success (no of chicks per nest \pm SE)
<i>Mai Po Village</i>		
Great Egret	10	1.9 ± 0.2
Little Egret	19	2.1 ± 0.2
Black-crowned Night Heron	14	1.5 ± 0.1
<i>Ho Sheung Heung</i>		
Chinese Pond Heron	5	2.2 ± 0.4
<i>Tai Po Market</i>		
Little Egrets	7	1.6 ± 0.3
Black-crowned Night Heron	5	1.4 ± 0.2
<i>Mai Po Lung Tsuen</i>		
Chinese Pond Heron	5	2.2 ± 0.4

3.3 Nesting habitats

Nesting habitat was recorded at Mai Po Village, Tam Kon Chau and Ho Sheung Heung egretries. All nests at the Tam Kon Chau egretty were built on a single Banyan tree (*Ficus microcarpa*). All nests at the Ho Sheung Heung egretty were built on bamboo. Nests at Mai Po Village egretty were built on bamboo and trees (*Melaleuca leucadendron*, *Ficus microcarpa* and *Cassia* sp.).

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Comparison between the 1999 and 2000 breeding seasons

A general comparison

There was a 12% increase in total nests between 2000 and 2001. The increase was mainly due to more nests being recorded at Mai Po Lung Tsuen (formerly Shek Wu Wai in the 2000 report) and the discovery of the Shing Uk Tsuen egretty.

The numerically dominant status of Black-crowned Night Herons in 2000 was replaced by Little Egrets this year. A comparison between nesting numbers of the two species between 2000 and 2001 showed that there was a 10% decrease of Night Herons while there was a 10% increase in Little Egrets. Fewer nesting at Mai Po Village, Centre Island and Stonecutters contributed to a decline of the nesting population of Night Herons this year, while the discovery of 40 Little Egrets' nesting at Shing Uk Tsuen contributed to the increase in the nesting population of this species. The population of Black-crowned Night Herons is of concern as fewer have nested in Deep Bay in recent years.

The 2001 nesting population of Great Egrets was found to increase continually since the commencement of egretty counts as part of the Ramsar Site Waterbird Monitoring Programme in 1998. During this year, there was a marked increase in the number of nests on Centre Island and A Chau, but the nesting of Great Egrets is still restricted to four egretries. In addition, the nesting population of Chinese Pond Herons also increased this year as more nests were found at Ho Sheung Heung and Mai Po Lung Village.

Egretries counted both in 2000 and 2001

A total of seven egretries have been counted every year since 1998 (Table 5). The counts between 2000 and 2001 are similar but fewer nests were found at Ngau Hom Shek, Ho Pui, Stonecutters and Ma On Kong, and more nests were present at Pak Nai. At Ho Pui, there was a 68% decrease in the nesting population since 1996, mainly due to disturbance and feeding habitat loss resulting from infrastructure construction (e.g., West Rail and flood control projects). The decline in the number of Cattle Egret nests on A Chau egretty may be related to human disturbance at Luk Keng freshwater marsh, which is the main feeding habitat of Cattle Egrets nesting on A Chau (Wong *et al.* 1999). Since early 2000 this marsh has suffered

disturbance in the form of remote-controlled helicopters, and no Cattle Egret was seen feeding at the marsh when these were in the air. Counting at the Stonecutters egretty in 2001 was difficult as most nests were screened by dense shrubs and climbers. Thus, the number of nests in this egretty was estimated by counting the number of birds at the nesting site. The continued decline of nest numbers at this egretty indicate that there may be degradation of nesting and feeding habitats, as the decline of nesting populations of ardeids is often linked to reduced feeding habitats, prey availability and suitable nesting habitats (Hafner 1997).

Table 5. Number of nests of egrettries counted between 1998 and 2001

	Mai Po Village	Pak Nai	Ngau Hom Shek	Ho Pui	A Chau	Stonecutters	Ma On Kong	Total
1998	133	57	6	34	292	79	4	567
1999	105	25	10	22	392	80	7	612
2000	108	44	15	13	251	51	6	488
2001	109	54	7	9	257	46	5	487

4.2 Deep Bay egrettries

In this breeding season, there was a marked increase in the number of nests in the Deep Bay area when compared with the count in 2000. In addition, although fewer Black-crowned Night Herons nested in the Deep Bay egrettries, more Little Egrets and Great Egrets were found this year. The reason for this increase is not known. One suggested reason is a change of food availability as their preferred prey items and lengths are different (Wong 1999). However, it is not possible to rule out the possibility that there may be a change of nesting sites of these ardeids from the Hong Kong side of Deep Bay to Shenzhen side, as there is at least one large egretty at Fu Tian (L. Young pers comm). Therefore, it is expected that the actual number of nesting ardeids in Deep Bay should be greater than the figures provided by this nest count when considering the egretty in Shenzhen. The nesting population in the Deep Bay area showed an overall decline between 1994 and 1999 ($r_s = -0.989$) (Fig. 2), primarily due to the abandonment of the Tsim Bei Tsui Egretty where about 400 nests have been recorded. The number of nests in 1999 was only 22.5% of that in 1994, when the peak nesting population in Deep Bay was recorded. The decline is an underestimate as counts of nests before 1999 were largely incomplete. However, an increase in nesting population was observed in 2000 and 2001.

4.3 Management

Inside egretty

Suspected illegal collection of eggs and chicks in Deep Bay (Mingpao and Appledaily on 4 May) and Starling Inlet (Mingpao on 2 September) was reported by local newspapers this

year. As prolonged human disturbance around egretries can result in abandonment (Young and Cha 1995), we recommend that the protection of these egretries should be enhanced.

Clearance of invasive climbers at Mai Po Village, A Chau and Centre Island is planned to be undertaken by AFCD in late 2001. This management should help control the invasion of climbers and reduce the risk of loss of suitable trees for ardeids to nest. Also, this management should be conducted annually as regular removal of climbers manually is currently the most effective control method. On Centre Island, wild dogs were seen again in 2000 and newly-fledged juveniles, particularly Black-crowned Night Herons that were active on the ground after fledging, were potentially threatened by these predators.

Many local ardeid colonies are threatened by climbers, particularly *Mikania micrantha*. It is recommended that more studies on the control of this exotic species should be carried out. In addition, the results obtained can be also applied to management of local country parks.

The data collected between 1998 and 2001 merely showed the number of nesting pairs of ardeids in Hong Kong, but did not provide much information about actual recruitment to ardeid populations. A separate study is necessary to better understand ardeid population ecology.

5. CONCLUSION

In order to investigate the feeding habitat use pattern of nesting ardeids in Deep Bay, an AFCD funded flight-line study of ardeids nesting at Mai Po Village, Pak Nai and Shing Uk Tsuen was first conducted in this year. Preliminary results indicated that shallow coastal waters and mudflats, and fishponds are two major feeding habitats during low tide. This information is valuable for habitat management, and the prediction of impacts on nesting birds due to proposed infrastructure development, such as the Deep Bay Link and Shenzhen Western Corridor. Long term monitoring of habitat use by nesting ardeids is essential for ensuring sustainable use of Deep Bay wetlands as feeding habitat.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would to thank Dickson Wong for surveying the Pak Nai egretty, and P. H. Lee, Rosita Lee, Kwok Tze Lung and Cheung Chun Kwok for assisting in the field surveys. Thanks were also expressed to Geoff Carey and Carrie Ma for their coordination.

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Figure 1. Locations of egrettries in Hong Kong. Egrettries in the Deep Bay area are enclosed. (1: Mai Po Village, 2: Tam Kon Chau, 3: Pak Nai, 4: Ngau Hom Shek, 5: Ho Sheung Heung, 6: Tai Po Market, 7: Centre Island, 8: Penfold Park, 9: A Chau, 10: Stonecutters, 11: Shui Mei, 13: Tai O, 14: Ho Pui, 15: Ma On Kong, 16: Mai Po Lung Tsuen, 17: Small Traders New Village and 18: Shing Uk Tsuen).

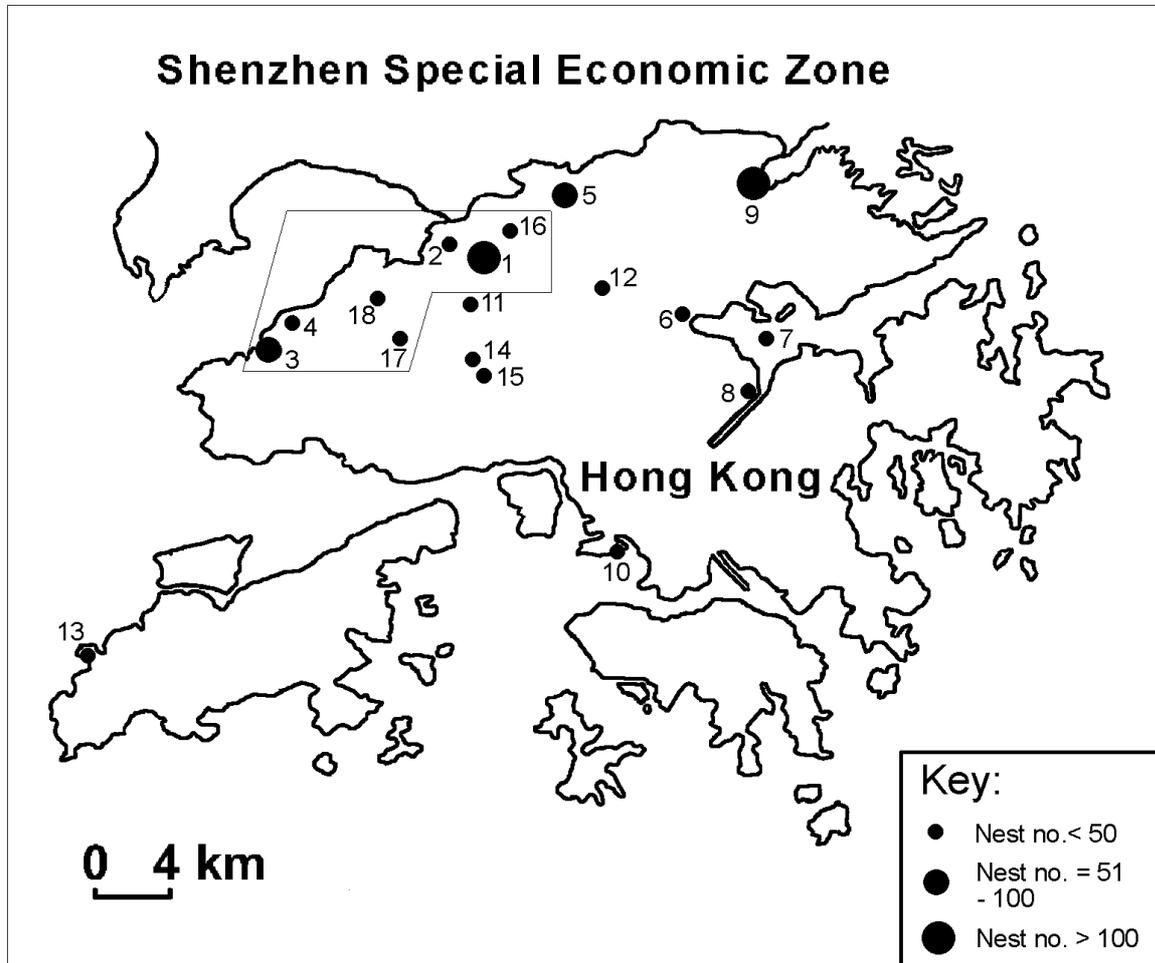
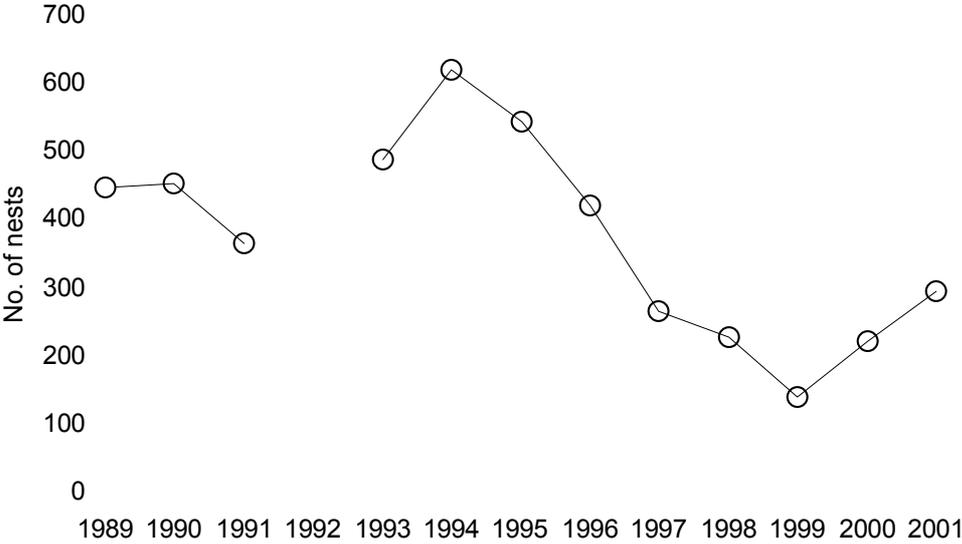


Figure 2. Number of ardeid nests in the Deep Bay area between 1989 and 2001



APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Number of nests at the Mai Po Village Egretty

Species	16 Apr	2 Jun	Max no.		
Great Egret			9	12	12
Little Egret	50	22	50		
Black-crowned Night Heron	9	25	25		
Chinese Pond Heron	7	Not counted	7		
Cattle Egret	15	8	15		

Appendix 2. Number of nests at the Tam Kon Chau Egretty

Species	16 Apr
Chinese Pond Heron	21
Undetermined	1

Appendix 3. Number of nests at the Pak Nai Egretty

Species	25 Mar
Little Egret	47
Chinese Pond Heron	5
Cattle Egret	2

Appendix 4. Number of nests at the Ngau Hom Shek Egretty. No breeding activity was noted on 25 March

Species	25 Mar	28 May
Little Egret	0	1
Chinese Pond Heron	0	6

Appendix 5. Number of nests at the Ho Sheung Heung Egretty

Species	16 Apr	2 Jun	Max no.
Little Egret	7	13	13
Chinese Pond Heron	61	49	61
Cattle Egret	1	1	1

Appendix 6. Number of nests at the Tai Po Market Egretty

Species	23 Mar	6 May	Max no.
Great Egret	3	2	3
Little Egret	23	24	24
Black-crowned Night Heron	9	9	9
Undetermined	10	0	10

Appendix 7. Number of nests at the Centre Island Egretty

Species	6 May	2 Jul	Max no.
Great Egret		15	
Little Egret	12	8	12
Black-crowned Night Heron	6	3	6
Cattle Egret	1	0	1

5 15

Appendix 8. Number of nests at the Penfold Park Egretty (+: present). Black-crowned Night Herons were seen during the first survey but no breeding activity was noted.

Species	16 Apr	2 Jun	Max no.
Little Egret	10	8	10
Chinese Pond Heron	2	1	2
Black-crowned Night Heron	+	+	+

Appendix 9. Number of nests at the A Chau Egretty

Species	4 May
Great Egret	52
Little Egret	21
Black-crowned Night Heron	157
Cattle Egret	27

Appendix 10. Number of nests at the Stonecutters Egretty

Species	23 Apr	20 May	Max no.
Little Egret	26	4	26
Black-crowned Night Heron	18	4	18
Chinese Pond Heron	2	2	2

Appendix 11. Number of nests at the Shui Mei Egretty.

Species	16 Apr	24 May	Max no.
Little Egret	1	3	3
Chinese Pond Heron	8	11	11
Cattle Egret	3	2	3

Appendix 12. Number of nests at the Lam Tsuen Egretty

Species	16 April	21 May	Max no.
Chinese Pond Heron	11	15	15

Appendix 13. Number of nests at the Tai O Egretty. (+: Present, and numbers in parenthesis: number of individual seen)

Species	5 May
Great Egret	+(2)
Little Egret	12
Black-crowned Night Heron	7
Chinese Pond Heron	+(1)

Appendix 14. Number of nests at the Ho Pui Egretty.

Species	1 May
Little Egret	2
Chinese Pond Heron	2
Cattle Egret	5

Appendix 15. Number of nests at the Ma On Kong Egretty.

Species	1 May
Chinese Pond Heron	5

Appendix 16. Number of nests at the Mai Po Lung Tsuen Egretty (+: Present).

Species	16 Apr	2 Jun	Max no.
Little Egret	+	1	1
Chinese Pond Heron	30	43	43

Appendix 17. Number of nests at the Small Traders New Village Egretty.

Species	30 Apr
Little Egret	6
Chinese Pond Heron	3

Appendix 18. Number of nests at the Shing Uk Tsuen Egretty.

Species	30 Apr
Little Egret	40
Chinese Pond Heron	5
Cattle Egret	5

Appendix 19. Number of nests at the Ho Chau Leng (Au Tau) Egretty

Species	25 Mar	30 Apr
Little Egret	6	0
Chinese Pond Heron	3	0

Appendix 20. Number of chicks at the Mai Po Village Egretty on 2 June 2001

No. of chicks	Great Egret	Little Egret	Black-crowned Night Heron	Cattle Egret
1	2	3	6	0
2	7	12	8	1
3	1	4	0	0

Appendix 21. Number of chicks at the Ho Sheung Heung Egretty on 2 June 2001

No. of chicks	Chinese Pond Heron
1	1
2	2
3	2

Appendix 22. Number of chicks at the Tai Po Market Egretty on May 2001

No. of chicks	Little Egret	Black-crowned Night Heron
1	4	2
2	2	2
3	1	1

Appendix 23. Number of chicks at Centre Island Egretty on 2 Jul 2001

No. of chicks	Little Egret
2	1

Appendix 24. Number of chicks at the Penfold Park Egretty on 2 June 2001

No. of chicks	Little Egret
1	1

Appendix 25. Number of chicks at the Stonecutters Egretty on 20 May 2001

No. of chicks	Black-crowned Night Heron
2	1

Appendix 26. Number of chicks at Tai O Egretty on 5 May 2001

No. of chicks	Black-crowned Night Heron
1	1

Appendix 27. Number of chicks at the Mai Po Lung Village Egretty on 2 June 2001

No. of chicks	Chinese Pond Heron
2	3
3	1