

Little Egret intergrade *Egretta garzetta garzetta* x *E. g. immaculata*

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In February 2013 we were staying at the De Palma Resort in Kuala Selangor, Selangor, Malaysia. On 25 February 2013, we walked along the road north of the resort in the morning before breakfast, along a road called Jalan Hakim. We saw an egret in the trees by a small river that ran alongside the road.

At the time, I struggled to identify it, and came to the conclusion that it was most likely an Intermediate Egret (now split to Medium Egret) *Ardea intermedia*, due to the all-black feet (Plate 1). More images of the bird can be viewed at this eBird link:

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S41505231>.

The bird was recently discussed by eBird reviewers, James Eaton and Dave Bakewell. They came to the conclusion that it is a Little Egret intergrade (*Egretta garzetta garzetta* x *Egretta garzetta immaculata*¹). Note that the bird has all black feet which is typical for *E. g. immaculata* but bluish loreal skin and a whitish underside of the lower mandible, which is typical for *E. g. garzetta*.



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Plate 1: Little Egret *E. g. garzetta* x *immaculata*. Kuala Selangor, Selangor, Malaysia, Feb 2013.

¹ The black-footed form of Little Egret which occurs in Australasia was formerly known as *Egretta garzetta nigripes*. However, the syntypes upon which the description of *E.g.nigripes* was based were later considered to be hybrids or intergrades between *E.g.garzetta* and the black-footed Australasian population, and so *nigripes* was discarded and replaced by *immaculata* (Clements et al. 2024).

Table 1 and Plate 2 compare the *E. g. garzetta* and *E. g. immaculata* subspecies of the Little Egret.

Table 1: Geographic and morphological differences between *E. g. garzetta* and the *E. g. immaculata* (Mlodinow et al. 2024).

Characteristic	<i>Egretta garzetta garzetta</i> (Nominate Subspecies)	<i>Egretta garzetta immaculata</i> (Australasian Subspecies)
Native Range & Distribution	Widespread across Europe, Africa, the Middle East and mainland Asia.	Native to Australia, New Zealand and parts of Indonesia/Australasia.
Foot Coloration (adults)	Bright yellow to orange-yellow feet, contrasting sharply with black legs.	Mostly black to dark brownish-black feet; any yellow restricted to the soles
Loral Skin (adults)	Dull blue-grey to greenish-grey; brighter blue during the breeding period (occasionally red or pinkish).	Yellow throughout the year; brighter during the breeding period.



Plate 2: Left: *E. g. garzetta*, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, Jan 2022. Right: *E. g. immaculata*, Shoalhaven, New South Wales, Australia, Dec 2023.

Eaton et al. (2021) note that there is wide intergradation zone between the two taxa, extending at least from northern Sulawesi to northern Sumatra. A perfunctory survey of photographs of Little Egrets in the Macaulay Library (<https://www.macaulaylibrary.org>) with the location filter set to 'Indonesia' confirms this. Within this region, birds conforming to the appearance of pure *garzetta* and pure *immaculata* occur alongside individuals showing a similar mix of characters to the bird which I observed.

Mlodinow and colleagues (2024) note that "*Birds in Borneo, previously attributed to subspecies nigripes, may represent intergrades between immaculata and nominate garzetta; presumed intergrades are thought to be of equal abundance with garzetta here*". Birds attributed to *nigripes* but undoubtedly representing intergrades occur along the western coast of Peninsular Malaysia to Perak (Wells 1999; Mlodinow et al. 2024). The Little Egret is well known to hybridize with closely related birds (Mlodinow et al. 2024).

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References

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