Medium to large elegant wading birds with long neck and legs, straight dagger-like bill and long unwebbed toes. Flight strong, typically with heavy long-winged beats on broad wings, neck folded back and head tucked in, and legs trailing. Sexes alike. Immatures of most species are like adults but duller. Many species have ornamental plumages, which may be on the head, back and chest, sometimes distinctively coloured. The colours of bill, facial skin, legs and feet may become brighter or change as birds come into breeding condition. They feed in shallow water or on damp pasture, walking slowly or standing motionless and hungering at prey. Diet is mainly aquatic animals. All may make a harsh grating call in flight; otherwise silent except at breeding colonies. Many species breed and most commonly, others are solitary. Lay 2-5 blue-green eggs on a platform of sticks built in trees or on cliffs.

**HERONS, EGRETS and BITTERNs**

**Ardeidae**

About 65 species, 10 in the New Zealand region, including 5 breeding species. An endemic species, the New Zealand Little Bittern *Ixobrychus novaezeelandiae*, became extinct in the late 1800s.

This family occurs worldwide, mainly in the tropics. Their broad-winged flight is ponderous but strong, though the smaller species are faster. Apart from the bitterns and night herons, they are active by day. They have a slender body and long neck and legs; night herons have a shorter body and a shorter neck. All have a straight, dagger-like bill and a short tail. The bill, on a long, often kinked neck, is ideal for seizing or plucking fish.

Patches of powder down are on the breast and rump in bitterns, and the thighs also in egrets. The middle of the three forward-pointing toes has serrations along the side like the teeth of a comb and is thought to remove fish-slime and mud during grooming and preening. All species give a low-pitched croak when alarmed but feed silently.

**110. INTERMEDIATE EGRET**

_Egretta intermedia_

**Egrets and herons are very similar** for example, all have bare facial skin, often distinctively coloured. Egrets are white; herons are usually grey; the distinction is useful but not absolute. Egrets are gregarious and breed in colonies, often mixed with other egrets and with ibises; true herons are solitary. Both typically have plumes when breeding. Their nests are usually platforms of sticks and twigs. Incubation starts with the first or second egg, and so chicks are of different ages and sizes. Adults feed the young with regurgitated food, not offering whole food. The young start breeding at one or two years old, sometimes still in immature plumage.

Heron, egrets and bitterns feed mainly on fish; also frogs and insects. Larger species may take small mammals and birds as chance offers.

**Reading:**