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THE SMALLEST DETAIL

When I returned home, I told Jewel, "I got this photo of a bird flying over at quite a distance, but I'm not completely sure what it is. It's a heron, but it doesn't really fit the exact description that I would expect for any of them." I had been out in the western part of St Lucie County hoping to obtain a nice late afternoon flight shot of one of the four Scissors-tailed Flycatchers (left) that had shown up at one location. Unlike our trip to Maine

last spring, this time I was successful.



When identifying all white herons, it is necessary to focus on the non-white parts of the bird. Great Egrets have yellow bills, and black legs; Snowy Egrets have black bills and black legs with yellow feet, "golden slippers;" Cattle Egrets are smaller and have both orange-yellow bills and legs; juvenile white morph Reddish Egrets have black bills, while adults have pink bills with black tips and bluish legs; and juvenile Little Blue Herons have gray bills with black tips and green legs, just as they will have when they obtain their adult plumage. These Little Blue Heron features are distinctive even when seen in an adult flying bird in the rain (*below left*) and in a juvenile walking just outside our condo door looking for geckos in our shrubbery. (*below right*)



But the distant flying heron (*top of the page*) didn't really fit neatly into any of these descriptions: the bill looks black on top with a yellowish edge on the bottom part of the upper mandible, and possibly a lighter colored lower

mandible, certainly not the expected gray with a black tip for a juvenile Little Blue Heron. In addition, the legs seem to be gray rather than a convincing shade of green. Whether the late afternoon light or the great distance was affecting the photo, or whether the bird was some exotic from some faraway place made the encounter interesting to contemplate.

I have long since learned, "If all else fails, read the directions;" or in this case look it up in a field guide. When I checked in David Allen Sibley's excellent field guide "The Sibley Guide to Birds" for some kind of explanation for my dilemma, there it was right on the page for Little Blue Heron: the juvenile has small dark tips on the wings which are distinctive. (photo 5) After birding more than 70 years, and seeing probably thousands (well, certainly hundreds) of juvenile Little Blue Herons, I was never aware that they had dark wing tips. The smallest detail nailed the identification of the bird conclusively, even though some of the other features were not as clear as one would expect.



There are a couple of lessons from this experience: First, there is always something new to be learned, even about the most familiar and common birds that we see regularly and often dismiss with an, "Oh, that's just another immature Little Blue." Second, lighting, distance from the bird, length of time of the sighting, and other factors can distort our view so that we can be fooled into a mistaken identification quite easily. And: Third, we have a tremendous wealth of resources available to us today, with detailed information resulting from the sum total of knowledge gathered over many years, but we still need to access it to check it out. And yes, the smallest detail can make all the difference in identifying a bird. Now me, I'm a big picture guy, so Jewel is often after me to take care of some of the smallest details that I sometimes miss, like forgetting to pick up a gallon of milk on the way home. But I'm still learning. I did have to go back

out that evening for the milk.

For more on birding resources, see my 2012 article "Birding Encyclopedias."

Little Blue Heron

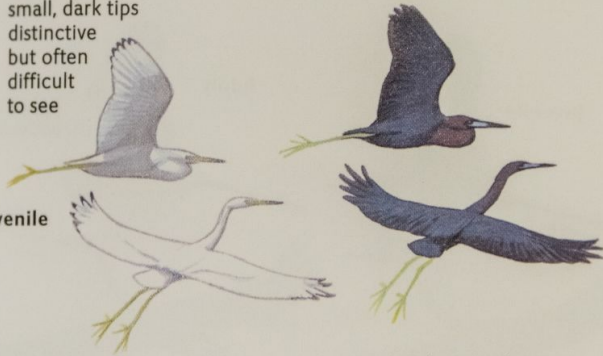
Egretta caerulea

L 24" WS 36" WT 12 oz (340 g)

A small heron, adults always dark blue-gray, immatures always white and extremely similar to Snowy Egret, best distinguished by foraging posture with neck extended forward, greenish legs and feet, slightly thicker bill with pale base.

small, dark tips
distinctive
but often
difficult
to see

Juvenile



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