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Photo: Jessica Manzak

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A population estimate for *Egretta rufescens* (Reddish Egret) for North, Middle, and East Caicos, Turks and Caicos Islands

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Cover Page: Foraging *Egretta rufescens* (Reddish Egret) on Andros, Bahamas, in December 2024. Photograph by Jessica Manzak.

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Abstract

A short survey to assess the population of *Egretta rufescens* (Reddish Egret) on East Caicos, Turks and Caicos Islands was undertaken in January 2024. We observed 99 egrets during airboat surveys and 22 during stationary surveys on East Caicos. Applying correction factors to the data and a small amount of reasonable extrapolation suggests a population of at least 143 adult *E. rufescens* on East Caicos and 592 adults across the contiguous wetland complex spanning North, Middle, and East Caicos. Taking the upper figure of the current global population estimate (9,999) implies that East Caicos likely supports an absolute minimum of 1.46% of the species' global population, and the wetlands of North, Middle, and East Caicos together support at least 5.9%. The entire area is designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) and as a Wetland of International Importance (Ramsar site) and is proposed as a Key Biodiversity Area (KBA). Much of it is protected as a statutory Nature Reserve. *E. rufescens* is likely the bird species for which both East Caicos and Turks and Caicos are most important on a global scale.

Keywords

East Caicos, *Egretta rufescens*, Key Biodiversity Area, population estimate, Ramsar site, Reddish Egret, Turks and Caicos Islands

Resumen

Estimación poblacional de *Egretta rufescens* (Garza Rojiza) en Caicos del Norte, Central y del Este (Islas Turcas y Caicos) • En enero de 2024 se realizó un estudio breve con el objetivo de estimar la población de *Egretta rufescens* (Garza Rojiza) en Caicos del Este (Islas Turcas y Caicos). En los censos con hidrodeslizador se observaron 99 individuos y 22 más durante los estacionarios en Caicos del Este. Si hacemos una extrapolación razonable y aplicamos factores de corrección a los datos obtenidos se obtiene que hay una población mínima de 143 adultos de *E. rufescens* en Caicos del Este y 592 adultos en el complejo de humedales adyacente que se encuentra en Caicos del Norte, Central y del Este. Si consideramos el límite máximo de la estimación actual de la población mundial (9 999 individuos), es probable que Caicos del Este albergue al menos el 1,46 % de la población mundial de la especie, y que el complejo de humedales de Caicos del Norte, Central y del Este contengan al menos el 5,9 % de dicha población. Toda esta zona está inscrita como Área Importante para la Conservación de las Aves (IBA) y Humedal de Importancia Internacional (sitio Ramsar); también está siendo como Área Clave para la Biodiversidad (KBA) y una gran parte está protegida por ley como reserva natural. *E. rufescens* es probablemente la especie de ave por la que Caicos del Este y, en general las Islas Turcas y Caicos, tengan mayor relevancia a escala mundial.

Palabras clave

Área Clave para la Biodiversidad, Caicos del Este, *Egretta rufescens*, estimación poblacional, Garza Rojiza, Islas Turcas y Caicos, sitio Ramsar

Résumé

Une estimation de la population d'*Egretta rufescens* (Aigrette roussâtre) pour North, Middle, et East Caicos (Îles Turques et Caïques) • Une courte étude visant à évaluer la population d'*Egretta rufescens* (Aigrette roussâtre) sur East Caicos

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(Îles Turques et Caïques) a été menée en janvier 2024. Nous avons observé 99 aigrettes lors de prospections en hydroglisseur et 22 lors de prospections stationnaires sur East Caicos. L'application de facteurs de correction aux données et une légère extrapolation raisonnable laissent supposer l'existence d'une population d'au moins 143 adultes d'*E. rufescens* sur East Caicos et 592 adultes dans le complexe de zones humides contiguës s'étendant sur North, Middle et East Caicos. Si l'on retient le chiffre supérieur de l'estimation actuelle de la population mondiale (9 999), il est probable qu'East Caicos abrite un minimum absolu de 1,46 % de la population mondiale de l'espèce, et que le complexe de zones humides de North, Middle et East Caicos accueille au moins 5,9 % de la population mondiale. La zone dans son ensemble est inscrite en tant que Zone importante pour la conservation des oiseaux (ZICO) et Zone humide d'importance internationale (site Ramsar), est proposée comme Zone clé pour la biodiversité (ZCB), et une grande partie est protégée en tant que réserve naturelle statutaire. *E. rufescens* est vraisemblablement l'espèce d'oiseau pour laquelle East Caicos et les Îles Turques et Caïques sont les plus importantes à l'échelle mondiale.

Mots clés
Aigrette roussâtre, East Caicos, *Egretta rufescens*, estimation de la population, Îles Turques et Caïques, site Ramsar, Zone clé pour la biodiversité

Egretta rufescens (Reddish Egret) occurs locally along coastal regions of the southern United States, Mexico, the Caribbean, and parts of Central America and northern South America, where it inhabits shallow marine and estuarine habitats such as tidal flats, lagoons, and mangroves (BirdLife International 2020, IUCN 2024). The global population is estimated between 5,000 and 9,999 mature individuals with a moderately declining trend and is thus classified as Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2020, IUCN 2024). The species is a resident breeder in the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI; Bradley 1995, eBird 2021, SB unpubl. data) where it is an obvious and occasionally numerous species, present in suitable habitat on most of the TCI (SB pers. obs.). No formal survey work specifically for this species in the TCI has been published.

Data on the species' breeding in the TCI are also limited. Successful nesting has been recorded in recent years for West Caicos, Providenciales, Little Ambergris Cay, Grand Turk (SB pers. obs.), and Salt Cay (Emery 2021). There are no records from the TCI of colonies formed solely of *Egretta rufescens* and all breeding records are of individual pairs (eBird 2021, SB pers. obs.). No movement in or out of the TCI has been documented (Wilson *et al.* 2012), though the absence of evidence does not rule out movements, underscoring the need for surveys to better understand the size and status of this population.

The primary objectives of our survey were to estimate the population size and assess breeding activity of *E. rufescens* in part of East Caicos, an area that has long been suspected to support substantial numbers of the species (K. McNary pers. comm.). While these observations were of feeding rather than breeding concentrations, they suggest the potential presence of a local population. We then use our estimates to extrapolate *E. rufescens* population size across 58,000 ha of similar wetland habitat on North, Middle, and East Caicos. Our short field survey confirmed the global importance of this area for *Egretta rufescens*, and we also present data on color morph ratios and behaviors useful for evaluating breeding status in the field.

Methods

This study took place in East Caicos (Fig. 1) on 5–6 January 2024. The area consists of 14,000 ha of extensive shallow intertidal flats largely comprised of open, low mangrove savannah vegetation with dense mangrove strips bordering some channels. The areas surveyed comprised 9,000 ha of linear wet creeks within broader, clearly unsuitable areas of habitat, and a large central tidal wetland area of ~5,000 ha. We conducted surveys using Swarovski 8.5 × 42 EL binoculars (Wattens, Austria); onboard an airboat (~10 cm draft) piloted by an experienced guide familiar with the area. Much of the area is extremely shallow and hydrologically dynamic, requiring both a suitable craft and a knowledgeable guide to gain access.

Our survey targeted areas of assumed suitable *Egretta rufescens* habitat (i.e., the survey was stratified, not randomized) within this area and survey routes (hereafter non-linear transects) were chosen based on accessibility. We mapped each non-linear transect using a hand-held GPS unit (Garmin eTrex 22, Olathe, Kansas, USA). Our total effort during the two-day survey was 15 hr over 100 km. While most surveying was conducted from the boat, surveyors occasionally disembarked to either investigate possible nest sites or access drier areas.

During the airboat survey, it became clear that the large tidal wetland in the middle of East Caicos needed to be surveyed using a different method. This area comprises a mosaic of shallow, permanently and temporarily flooded areas and dry saline flats which we were unable to access either by boat or by foot. We anticipated that this tidal wetland might support significant numbers of foraging *E. rufescens*, so we carried out several stationary surveys from two locations along the wetland's edge. All surveys were conducted during fair weather conditions with good visibility and no significant technical or logistical difficulties were encountered.

We recorded all bird species observed during our surveys, though here we focus on heron species only (see Busuttil 2021a–e for all observations). For *E. rufescens*, our focal species, we aged individuals when possible (adult or non-adult). Aging was based on bill color; birds with bright bi-colored bills were categorized as adults and those without as non-adults. We used additional criteria, e.g., feather plumes (present for adult, absent for non-adult) when proximity allowed. In addition, we classified individuals as either red or white color morphs (Fig. 2), with birds showing feathers of the other morph additionally designated as "intermediate". For each *E. rufescens* observed, we visually estimated the initial distance to the individual and noted its behavior (e.g., direction of flight, where it landed) to reduce risks of double counting. Decisions as to whether a bird was new or previously observed were made in the field based on common sense and experience. Given that *E. rufescens* are large and conspicuous, and considering the open landscape, their behavior, and the rapid coverage of survey areas, we believe

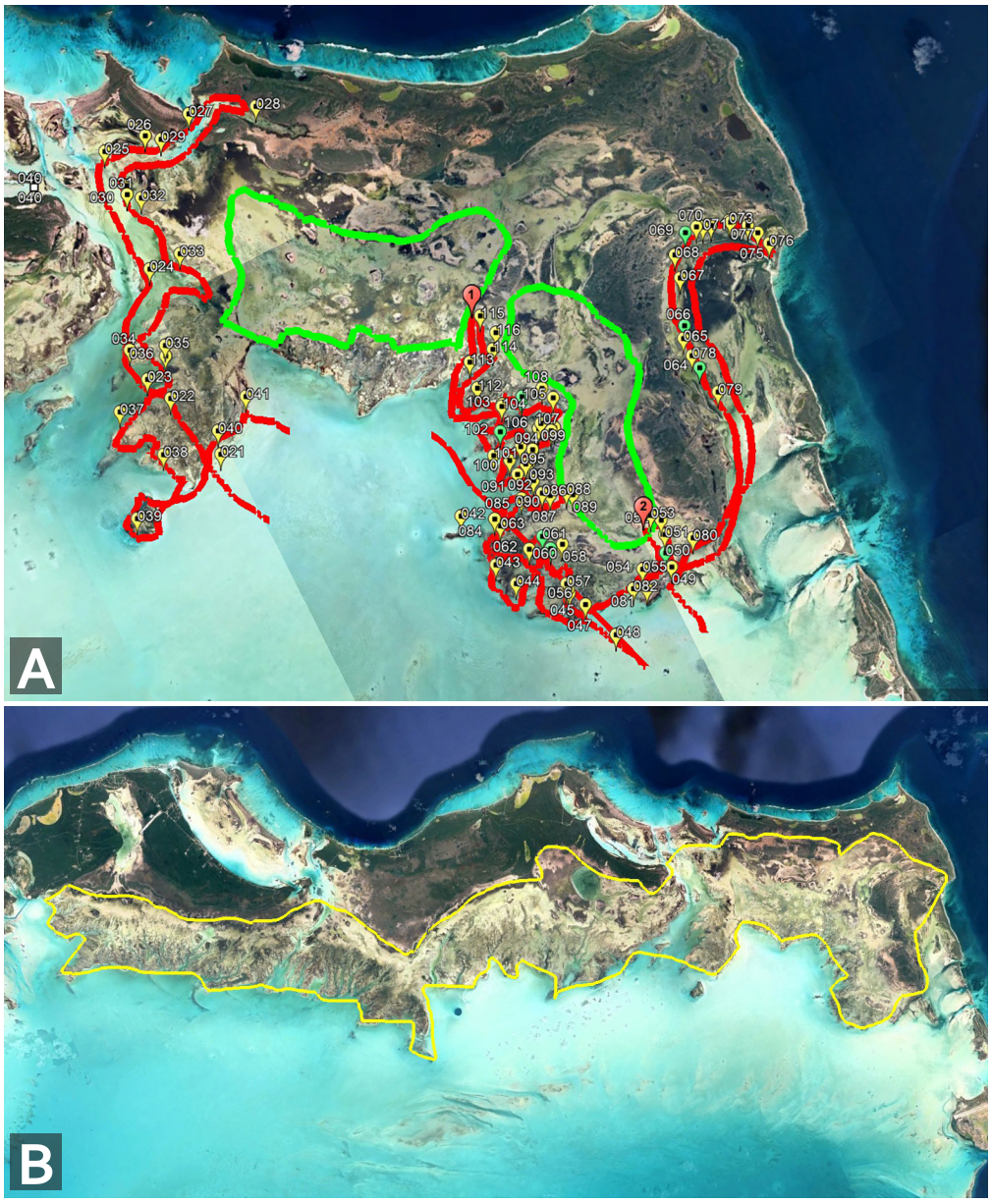

Fig. 1. (A) *Egretta rufescens* survey, East Caicos, 5–6 January 2024. Red lines are the airboat survey routes. Yellow markers are *E. rufescens* detections (*n* = 99 individuals), and green markers are confirmed (*n* = 4) or probable (*n* = 6) nesting attempts. Green polygons delineate the two central wetland areas (west and east), with the two stationary survey locations indicated with red markers. Locations were not recorded for individuals detected during stationary surveys. (B) The yellow polygon delineates the area of the Turks and Caicos Islands over which data from the 5–6 January 2024 *E. rufescens* survey were extrapolated.

that there were few, if any, duplicated sightings. We recorded the coordinates of all *E. rufescens* individuals and nests observed during the airboat surveys (Fig. 1). Locations were not recorded for individuals detected during stationary surveys because birds were too distant.

We recorded evidence of *E. rufescens* breeding following the British Trust for Ornithology's breeding evidence criteria (British Trust for Ornithology n.d.). Early in the survey we identified a distinctive behavior closely associated with active nests, which we named "sentinel duty". During sentinel duty, a single bird would stay perched at the top of the tallest tree within ~10 m of the nest (Fig. 3). This behavior differed from occasional birds perched in bushes and roosting, which were generally lower down in the vegetation and tended to fly more readily. Of four nests found, examined, and confirmed to be active, all four had a single adult *E. rufescens* in close attendance, behaving in a consistent manner. None of the sentinels showed significant signs of anxiety, even when the nest was examined. We minimized our time at the nest and disturbance to the adult bird, e.g., by taking a route to and from the nest that reduced the chances of the bird flushing. We subsequently used this distinctive behavior as sufficient evidence of probable nesting at five other

Fig. 2. (A) Adult red morph *Egretta rufescens*, Andros, Bahamas, December 2024. Photograph by Jessica Manzak. (B) White morph *E. rufescens*, South Caicos, TCI, June 2021. Photograph by Michael Tibbetts.

sites (essentially equating to a bird on territory). Brief searches for nests were made at non-sentinel sites, but none were found, thus confirming, for the purposes of this survey, that the sentinel behavior is a useful behavioral trait for assessing whether a bird is likely nesting. When observed in the immediate proximity to potential breeding sites, we classified sentinel duty as "probable breeding" in our figures.

We made several assumptions when calculating the number of *E. rufescens* in the central tidal wetland. First, conditions in the central wetland—characterized by very large distances and significant heat haze rising from the extensive saline flats—make white morphs easier to detect than red morphs. To address this, we applied the ratio of red to white morphs calculated from the airboat surveys, which were not affected by these detection issues, as a correction factor to estimate the number of red morph individuals missed. Second, the central wetland conditions also made it difficult to determine the ages of individuals, so we used the ratio of adults to non-adults from the airboat surveys to estimate an age breakdown. Third, we estimated that 35% of the central wetland was observable and extrapolated our count—after correcting for differential color morph visibility and age class proportions—to produce a population estimate of adult *E. rufescens* for the entire central wetland.

Lastly, we extrapolated the adult *E. rufescens* density calculated from our airboat and stationary surveys in the East Caicos wetlands to the entire 58,000 ha contiguous wetland complex spanning North, Middle, and East Caicos.

Results

We observed 286 herons across nine species during the airboat surveys (Table 1), including 99 *Egretta rufescens* (Fig. 1). All subsequent results concern *Egretta rufescens* only. The average distance at first sighting (estimated by eye) was ~100 m, ranging from 20 m to 1,800 m. We were unable to age 16 of the 99 individuals as they were too distant, or views were inadequate, e.g., the bird was nearby but flying away and we could not observe bill color. Of the remaining 83 birds, 62 were adults in breeding plumage and 21 were non-adult or non-breeding. Adults thus formed 75% of the subset of individuals that we were able to age. If we apply this adult to non-adult ratio to the 16 unaged birds, we get a total of 74 adults and 25 non-adults in the area surveyed. The color morph split was 63% red (n = 61) and 37% white (n = 36). Two birds were too distant to assign to a morph category. Five of the 99 individuals were clearly intermediate birds; four of these were dark morph birds showing some white feathers, and one bird was a white morph showing some dark feathers. All intermediate birds showed the opposite morph coloring in the wing feathers (though not exclusively in this area), with the color variations being broadly symmetrical. Given the large observation distances, it is possible we missed intermediate birds with small amounts of opposite-morph feathers. After excluding birds too distant to reliably assess small details of color variation, intermediate birds accounted for 13% of the sample (3 of 23 birds on survey day 1).

We confirmed four *E. rufescens* breeding attempts. One nest contained two unfledged young and another contained four eggs (Fig. 4A). The other two nests were complete (i.e., had a well-rounded shape and depth) and clean (i.e., no droppings,

Fig. 3. Adult *Egretta rufescens* on "sentinel duty", East Caicos, 6 January 2024. The active nest is in the foreground. Photograph by Simon Busuttil.

Table 1. All heron species observed during airboat surveys, East Caicos, January 2024.

Species	No.	Breeding Evidence and Status
Egretta rufescens Reddish Egret	99	Confirmed – nests with eggs and nearly fledged young
Nycticorax nycticorax Black-crowned Night Heron	57	Confirmed – nests with eggs and nearly fledged young
Egretta tricolor Tricoloured Heron	47	
Ardea herodias Great Blue Heron	39	
Butorides virescens Green Heron	17	
Egretta caerulea Little Blue Heron	13	Confirmed – nest with almost fledged young
Nyctanassa violacea Yellow-crowned Night Heron	11	
Ardea alba Great Egret	2	
Egretta thula Snowy Egret	1	

eggshells, feathers, or food waste), yet were empty (Fig. 4B) and each had an individual clearly on sentinel duty, all of which strongly suggests that egg laying had not yet taken place. A further six sites were classed as probable breeding: five where a bird was in sentinel position in suitable habitat, and one at an active mixed species heronry where two adult breeding-plumaged *E. rufescens* showed extreme anxiety in our presence suggesting at least one active nest, likely with young.

Koczur *et al.* (2020) state that clutch size is usually 3–4 eggs (very rarely as many as 7) and that the incubation period is estimated at 26–29 days. The two well-grown young observed were estimated to be 3.5 weeks old, implying that egg laying took place in the latter half of November and the nest with a presumed full clutch of four eggs would have likely been laid at the earliest c. 10 December. Neither of the adult birds associated with these two nests showed any sign of anxiety but stayed close by. Given the length of incubation and time to fledging totaling 56 days (Koczur *et al.* 2020) and assuming the eggs would be laid the next day, there would likely be young in the two observed empty nests until 2 February at least.

All confirmed nests and probable breeding attempts appeared to be solitary except for a single nest in an active heronry with *Egretta caerulea* (Little Blue Heron) and *Nycticorax nycticorax* (Black-crowned Night Heron). All nests were noted in either *Conocarpus erectus* (silver [green] buttonwood) or *Rhizophora mangle* (red mangrove). The four observed nests were relatively exposed, over tidal water and ~1.2 m above the water level.

We detected 22 *Egretta rufescens* in the East Caicos central tidal wetland during the stationary surveys. 55% (n = 12) were white morph compared to the 37% white morph detected during the airboat surveys, and 45% (n = 10) were red morph. Correcting for the discrepancy in color morph detection (i.e., being able to detect white birds more easily in this area) suggests that we missed 10 red morph birds, yielding a corrected estimate of 32 individuals. If we apply the 3:1 ratio of adult to non-adult birds observed during the airboat surveys, it suggests the central wetland area we surveyed has 24 adults. If we extrapolate this to the entire central wetland, we have an estimate of 69 adult *E. rufescens* present.

We added the figure for adult *E. rufescens* recorded along the non-linear transects (n = 74) to the estimate for the central wetland area (n = 69) to arrive at a population estimate for the 14,000 ha of East Caicos wetlands of 143 adults, a density of one bird per 98 ha. Lastly, we applied this density figure to the 58,000 ha wetlands of North, Middle, and East Caicos to arrive at a population estimate of 592 adult birds.

Discussion

The wetland areas of the southern side of North, Middle, and East Caicos comprise large, intact, and relatively undisturbed habitats. However, overall numbers and diversity of birds are not high. For example, we observed fewer than 100 individual shorebirds representing just 10 species along 100 km of non-linear transects across inter-tidal habitats during our January 2024 surveys (SB pers. obs.). The generally low densities of birds in these types of environments in the Caicos Islands have been noted before (Hilton *et al.* 2000), though ephemeral concentrations of birds do occur (SB pers. obs.). The high numbers of *Egretta rufescens* in this area thus seem consistent with the species' "affinity for barren shallow flats" (Koczur *et al.* 2020). Consequently, *E. rufescens* was (likely because we were in its identified prime habitat) the most numerous heron species encountered (Table 1). The species comprised 35% of all individuals of the nine species of Ardeidae encountered.

Whilst little systematic work appears to have been carried out on the geographic differences in color morph ratio in this species (Koczur *et al.* 2020), the proportion of white morph we observed (37%) appears to be low. Green (2005) estimated that 40–50% of the *E. rufescens* at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, Texas, were white morph. Buden (1987) quoted Allen (1955), who found 89% of birds on nearby Great Inagua island, Bahamas to be white morph whilst a study at the same location between 2008 and 2010 found 68.4% to be white morph (Green *et al.* 2011). Buden (1987) himself noted "approximately equal numbers" of white and red morph birds in the Southern Bahamas in which he included the TCI. The only TCI-specific figure is that of Sanderson (1982) who estimated 40% of birds in the TCI as white morph, a figure remarkably consistent with ours.

Breeding was unsurprisingly confirmed, as we had timed field surveys to coincide with what we expected to be the breeding season. Based on our observations therefore, *E. rufescens* breeding in the surveyed area extended from at least mid-November 2023 through to early February 2024. This is consistent with records from elsewhere in the TCI that suggest a breeding season that extends from early November to the end of March (eBird 2021). This is a slightly earlier season than what has been reported from nearby Great Inagua (Green *et al.* 2011) which

spans from December to May. We do not know if breeding within our study area is continuous or bimodal during this period, nor do we know what differences in timing might occur on a yearly basis, as might be expected in response to varying environmental factors such as rainfall and consequent water levels.

The extensive, "barren" tidal wetlands of East Caicos and, by extension, similar habitats of Middle and North Caicos, have long been understood to support a globally important resident population of breeding *Egretta rufescens*. The only previous estimate for the TCI comes from work to define the North, Middle, and East Caicos Ramsar site (Pienkowski 2002) and two contiguous Important Bird Areas (IBAs; Birdlife International 2024). Estimates in 2007 for the two IBAs were 700 wintering individuals (BirdLife International 2025a, 2025b), consistent with our estimate of 592 adults. Accordingly, the TCI accounts for 5.9% of the global *E. rufescens* population using the high-end estimate of 9,999 birds, and over 8% of the "best estimate" of 7,000 adults worldwide (BirdLife International 2020, IUCN 2024).

Fig. 4. (A) *Egretta rufescens* nest with four eggs in red mangrove ~1.2 m above water level, East Caicos, 6 January 2024. (B) Empty nest in red mangrove ~1.2 m above ground level, East Caicos, 6 January 2024. Presumed to be pre-egg laying. Photographs by Simon Busuttil.

The consistent habitat and independent observations of *E. rufescens* abundance justify extrapolating our survey data to estimate the broader TCI population. The southern areas of North, Middle, and East Caicos are similar in terms of topography, vegetation, and hydrological features (B.N. Manco and K. McNary, pers. comm.). Observations by those familiar with exploring the area (pers. comm.) suggest *E. rufescens* are often seen and in good numbers. During an aerial survey for *Phoenicopterus ruber* (American Flamingo) carried out in February 2024 (Busuttil *et al.* 2025), we noted two foraging *E. rufescens* flocks totaling ~60 birds. We believe that simple, cautious extrapolation across the extended area can be assumed to give a reasonable population estimate for this species.

Egretta rufescens are widely distributed and observed across the Turks and Caicos Islands (eBird 2021) and there are known breeding records for several other islands, all of which are much smaller and more easily accessible than the area surveyed. Habitats used extensively are intertidal shores and the large saline ponds on South Caicos, Salt Cay, and Grand Turk, and the species is regularly observed on the smaller uninhabited cays of the outer banks. A conservative estimate based on recent breeding records in eBird (Busuttil 2021a–f, Emery 2021, Hind 2021, SB and BJ pers. obs.) suggests at least another 17 pairs elsewhere across the TCI. Further work would likely confirm that many more pairs are present. We suggest that this is the bird species for which the Turks and Caicos Islands is most important and thus has the greatest global responsibility.

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Author Contributions

SB conceived and planned the survey, collected data, and wrote the manuscript. BJ contributed his considerable experience of the area regarding nesting and sustained activity, provided airboat transportation, and navigated the waters for a successful outing. – Editorial comment: SB passed away after acceptance of the article, and saw the copyedited manuscript. BJ drafted the author contributions.

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