

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

The Snowy Egret has made a great comeback since entire colonies were decimated for plume trade at the turn of the 20th century. It is said that the plumes per ounce were more valuable than gold per ounce back then. The beautiful, lacey “breeding” plumes were in demand to adorn hats for ladies of fashion at that time. In Florida, the Snowy is listed as a species of special concern. Its range extends throughout the continental USA from northern California to Maine, south to Florida, the Gulf of Mexico, and into South America.

This is a medium-size, all-white wading bird, getting 20 – 24 inches long, with a wingspan of 38 inches. Amazingly, it only

weighs about 13 ounces! It has long, thin neck, bill, and legs. Its bill is

black with a bright yellow, fleshy base, and the yellow extends back to the lores and eyes. In adults, the legs are black and feet are bright yellow. Remember Ranger Jim’s saying: “It has black stockings with yellow slippers.” The immature ones have dark greenish legs that sometimes have a yellow

streak on the back. During breeding season adults have prominent plumes on shoulders, neck, and head. Most often, it is confused with the immature Little Blue Heron that is white before changing to its blue feathers. When in doubt, notice the bill and feet...the Little Blue’s bill is not a solid black like the Snowy that has an all-black bill and has those yellow feet.

We see the Snowy year-round in our area. However, numbers swell in the winter because Florida is a host to many wintering birds from other areas that come for the breeding season from January through August (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). It breeds in colonies mostly in the central and southern peninsula. During breeding season is when you see the beautiful plumes. Its nests are found in mixed colonies with other species nesting in areas such as swamps and mangroves islands. The nests are usually made from twigs upon branches of trees or bushes, usually no greater than 30 feet above the ground or water. The eggs are a blue-green and laid in a clutch of 3-5. Eggs are incubated by both adults. They hatch in about 18 days and hop about on branches near the nest before fledging at about 25 days. In order to prevent disturbing nests, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) have developed setback distances of 330 feet around wading bird colonies.

FWC shows that Snowy Egrets occupy much of their historic range and previously unreported colonies have been found in the Panhandle of Florida. Since the late 1970’s, Snowy Egrets appear to be declining dramatically as a breeding bird. Between statewide surveys in 1976-78 and 1986-89, there was a reduction from more than 51,000 breeding birds to just over 14,000, a 73% decline (Nesbitt et al. 1982; Runde et al. 1991). Probable causes of this decline are the loss and degradation of wetlands statewide, particularly in the coastal zone and the southern half of the state.

The Snowy Egret forages in both freshwater and saltwater habitats, where it often actively pursues its prey. Its diet is chiefly small fish, but it will take shrimp and small vertebrates. It is known to shuffle its yellow feet to stir up prey. They have been seen flying low and dipping toes into the water, as if trolling for fish. They will also hover and then drop to the water to catch prey in their bills. Another place you see them, especially at Barefoot, is near fishermen. The Snowy seems to know those bait buckets hold shrimp and five-gallon pails may have freshly caught fish. As always, it is illegal to feed wildlife--please keep it wild!

Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*)

