



## Snowy Egret

### *Egretta thula*

The snowy egret, a widely distributed Western Hemisphere wading bird, is represented on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of North America by the race *Egretta thula thula*. Seldom found far from brackish water, it is a fairly common breeder along the coast of North Carolina.

The snowy egret has been described as the “most charming of all our marsh birds.” Whether displaying its gorgeous breeding plumage or racing about in pursuit of small fish in shallow water, it is an exquisite sight, with gleaming white plumage, jet black beak and legs, and bright yellow feet.

### History and Status

This beautiful bird species had a very close brush with extermination in North Carolina early in the 20th century. Beginning in the late 19th century, the plumes of this and other wading birds were in great demand by the makers of women’s hats. Thousands of egrets and herons were shot, usually in the nesting colony, and stripped of their delicate feathers, and the bodies discarded where they fell. Because the birds were slaughtered during the breeding season, the impact was exaggerated, resulting in the loss of breeding adults and the dependent young, that died from starvation.

During the summer of 1898 ornithologist T. Gilbert Pearson was unable to locate breeding snowy egrets anywhere on the coast of North Carolina! Intensive

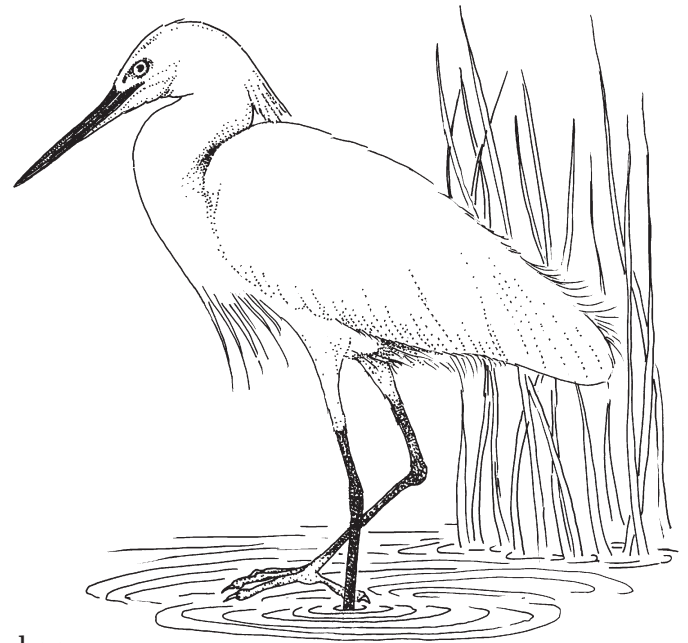
educational efforts of Pearson and the National Association of Audubon Societies brought the devastation to the attention of the American public. Later, in 1904, Pearson noted the presence of eight breeding pairs of snowy egrets in southeastern North Carolina at Orton Plantation, near Wilmington. In 1917 he located approximately 30 pairs of snowies in a large heron colony in Carteret County, N.C. The safety of these birds was assured when a warden was hired to protect them from plume hunters.

An enlightened public and aggressive protection of the breeding colonies that remained have allowed the snowy egret to recover throughout its range. In 1977 it was the fourth most abundant wading bird censused on the North Carolina coast.

### Description

One of the smallest wading species, the snowy egret is approximately 2 feet long, with a wingspread measuring as much as 3½ feet. The plumage is pure white throughout the year; the beak and legs are black, and the feet are yellow.

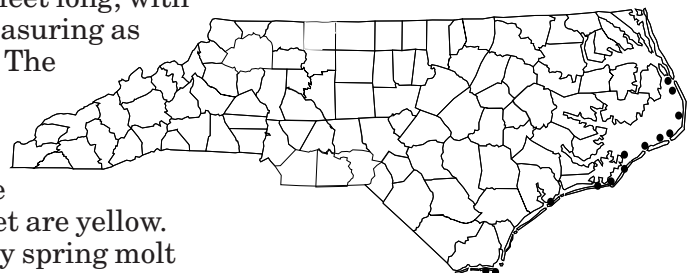
A partial early spring molt produces approximately 50 recurved, filamentous plumes on



the back, in both sexes. Also, the back of the head and upper breast acquire elongated feathers. The bird erects these feathers, producing a very dramatic visual effect. Paired snowy egrets display their feathered finery to each other in courtship. This behavior is likely required in order for the female to ovulate. The birds erect the same elegant feathers when it is necessary to defend their tiny breeding territory against other individual birds in the breeding colony.

### Habitat and Habits

This egret can be found in coastal areas all year; however, at most inland sites it is a rare visitor, generally in late summer and fall after the nesting season. Small numbers overwinter along the entire coast. During late



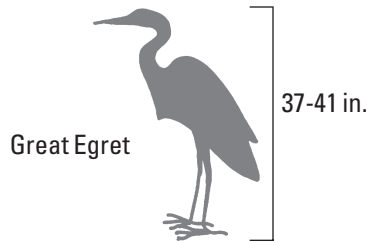
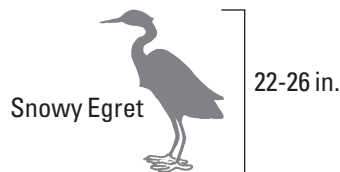
**Range Map:**  
Breeding range ■

March, with large numbers of birds returning from wintering areas farther south, the birds acquire their elegant nuptial plumes and begin their breeding activity. They assemble in appropriate woody vegetation along the barrier islands and edges of the sounds from Currituck County to Battery Island, at the mouth of the Cape Fear River in Brunswick County. Most of the breeding colonies contain several species of colony-nesting waterbirds, hundreds of them congregating in raucous communities of less than an acre.

The egrets defend a small nesting territory from other individuals and soon begin constructing a nest. Crude stick nests are placed close together, usually only a few feet above ground. The average clutch size is four or five pale bluish green eggs, requiring 21 to 24 days' incubation. Because incubation begins when the first egg is laid, the young egrets within a nest vary in age and size. Both parents share in care of the young, feeding them a regurgitated slurry of shrimp, fish fry, insects and amphibians. Growth is rapid, and the young birds are climbing around the nest site by the time they are 3 weeks old. Periods of cool, wet weather during April and May result in high mortality of young egrets.

## Range and Distribution

The snowy egret has a definite affinity for salt or brackish water and is therefore not expected to be encountered far from the beaches and marshes of the coastline of the North American continent. Unlike most other long-legged waders, this egret remains in its marine environment throughout the year; other wading species tend to wander widely during the summer, often being found hundreds of miles inland from their breeding or wintering areas.



## People Interactions

The snowy egret is not a game species. In spite of its diet of small fish and other aquatic organisms, it has never been accused of competing with humans for any food items. Its reestablishment in the North Carolina coastal environment is indeed a fortunate event for those who find the presence of such beauty and grace so vital.

## References

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Terres, John K. *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1980).

## Credits

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## SNOWY EGRET

### Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Ciconiiformes

### Average Size

Length: 22 to 26 in.

Wingspan: 38 to 45 in.

### Food

Aquatic insects, small fish, crustaceans and amphibians.

### Breeding

The snowy egret is monogamous. In North Carolina breeding activity begins in late winter, after a partial molt produces the nuptial plumes of the back, head and upper breast. Four or five blue-green eggs are laid in a crude stick nest, often only a few feet from another nest. Approximately three weeks' incubation is required for hatching.

### Young

Young snowy egrets are completely dependent upon their parents for food and protection from the elements and predators. Both parents share in these duties, and the energetic young are climbing around in the nest tree by their third week. Weather is a big factor in the survival of young snowy egrets. Periods of cold, rainy weather during the breeding season result in high fledgling mortality in the rookeries and often cause a second nesting attempt by unsuccessful breeding adult egrets.