

HERON AND EGRET FACT SHEET

Great Blue Herons and Great Egrets

By Helen Pratt

Great Blue Herons and Great Egrets are long-legged, long-necked birds adapted for wading in shallow water such as lake edges, marshes and tidal flats and for capturing fish, frogs, small crustaceans and other aquatic prey. They also sometimes hunt for small rodents, grasshoppers, snakes and lizards in grassy fields.

The Great Blue Heron is the largest North American wading bird. It stands up to 4 feet tall, weighs about 5 pounds, and has a wing span of 6 feet. In spite of its name, it looks grey under most viewing conditions. But when seen in flight from above, if the light is right, the wing feathers take on a bluish cast.

The Great Egret weighs about 2 pounds and has a wing span of 4 1/2 feet. It is all white and is distinguished by long plumes or "aigrettes" that grow from the shoulder and can be elevated and spread fan-shaped during pair formation displays.

The herons begin to occupy the nesting area at Audubon Canyon Ranch and throughout the Bay Area in late January or early February. Egg laying generally starts in late February or early March and peaks sometime in March.

The egrets are more variable in their arrival dates than the herons. They usually arrive in mid-March and start laying in the fourth week of March, but they have arrived as late as the second week in April. Their laying peak is sometime in April.

Both species lay 2-5 greenish-blue eggs. Heron eggs are about as big around as a large chicken egg but they are longer and somewhat more pointed. Egret eggs are proportioned like heron eggs but they are a little smaller. At Audubon Canyon Ranch, 3 egg clutches are the most common for both species. They lay their eggs at 2-3 day intervals.

Incubation starts sometime between laying of the first and second egg. The adults alternate in incubating, and the first egg hatches in from 25-29 days, usually between 27 and 28 days. The second egg hatches within 24 hours of the first and the succeeding eggs hatch at 2 to 3 day intervals depending on the laying interval.

Chicks of both species are sparsely covered with down on hatching. Heron chicks are grey, egret chicks are white.

Both parents feed the young. Heron parents feed their chicks about 4 times during the daylight hours. They may also bring food to the young once or twice during the night. Egret parents feed their chicks 3 or 4 times during the day but probably not during the night.

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During incubation and for the first 3 weeks after hatching an adult is always present at the nest. When the chicks are between 3 and 4 weeks of age, the nest is sometimes unattended by an adult, and after the chicks are 4 weeks old, the adults are at the nest only long enough to feed the young.

Both species feed their newly hatched young by regurgitating food into the nest and the chicks pick it up and gulp it down. As the chicks increase in size and strength they seize their parents' bills on their own at feeding time and try to pull them down into the nest perhaps hoping to hasten the delivery of food. After egret chicks are large enough to grasp their parents' bills in this way, food goes directly into the mouths of the young instead of being deposited in the nests. Food for young herons continues to be dropped into the nest until they reach independence.

Not all chicks survive to independence. In broods of 3 or 4, the chicks that hatch later are smaller and weaker than their older nest mates. Older chicks aggressively peck the younger ones at feeding time and force them away from the food. When the adults bring plenty of food all the chicks in the brood survive, but if food is limited, the younger chicks die. Successful adults usually raise 2 young, sometimes 3 and rarely 4.

Heron young take their first long flight at about the age of 8 weeks but usually remain at the nest and are fed by the parents for 2 or 3 weeks longer. Egret young are able to fly at about 7 weeks of age but usually do not leave the nest until they are 10-12 weeks old.

We don't know where the birds from Audubon Canyon Ranch go when they leave the colony. Members of the heron family are noted for extended post-breeding dispersal especially among the young. Recent evidence suggests that the Great Blue Herons spend their winter scattered throughout the bay area. Young Great Egrets may fly south some perhaps as far as Mexico or Central America, but the adults probably winter closer to the colony.

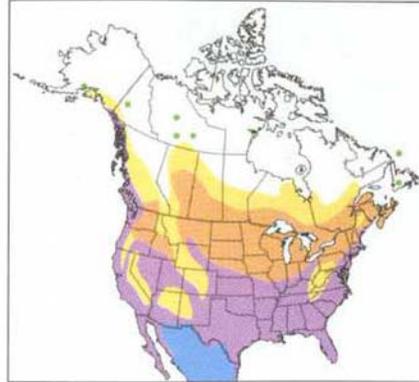
Mortality of the young in the first months after leaving the nest is high. Estimates for Great Blue Heron mortality during the first year range from 65-76% although Bayer found that mortality for nestlings banded at National Wildlife Refuges in the west was only 33%. He suggested that fledglings from these refuges suffered less harassment. A study of Great Egret mortality found that 76% of the fledglings died in their first year. After the first year, mortality declines for birds of both species to around 36% in the second year and 22% each year afterward. Some individuals can live a long time. The oldest heron recovery on record was 23 years of age and an egret was recovered at age 22.

Great Blue Heron

Ardea herodias

L 46" WS 72" WT 5.3 lb (2,400 g) ♂ > ♀

Large, sturdy; heavy bill.



DARK MORPH

Juvenile



Adult



Juvenile
(1st year)



Adult



Voice: Voices of all forms call a very deep, hoarse, trumpeting *fraaahnk* or *braak*. In aggression a slow series *fraank fraank fraank taaaaw taaaaw*; last notes lower, croaking.

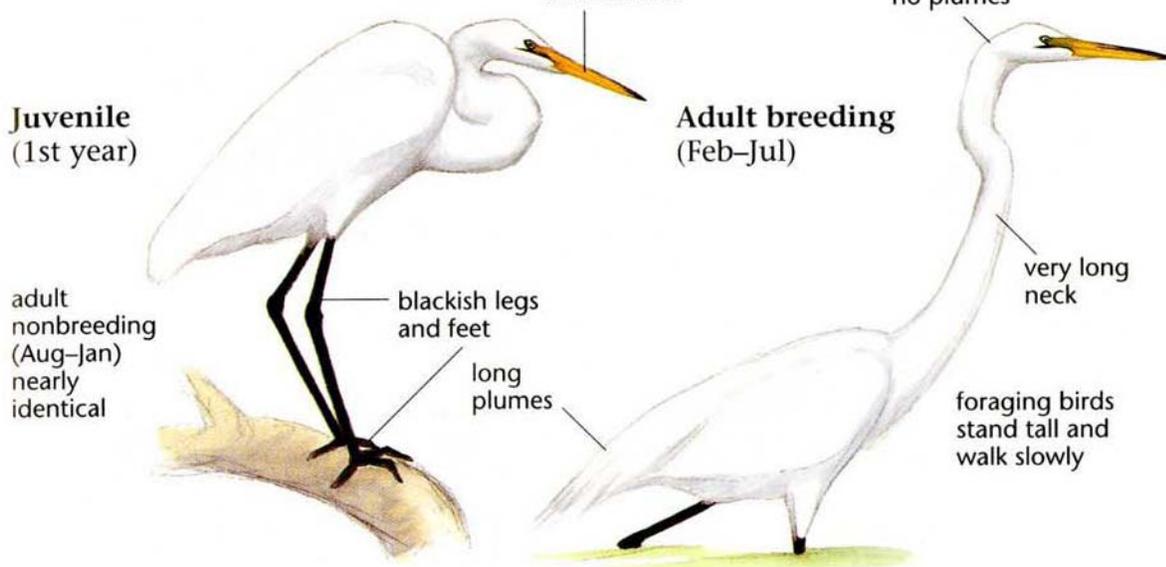
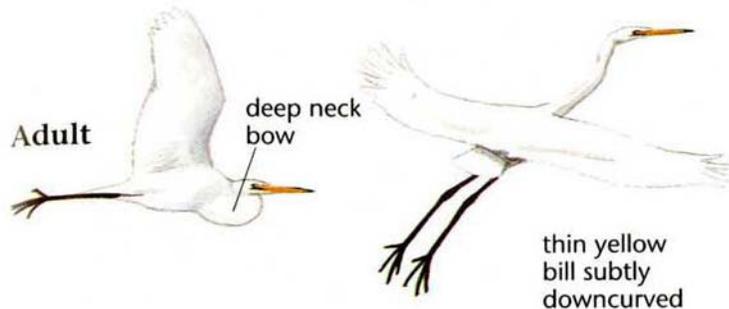
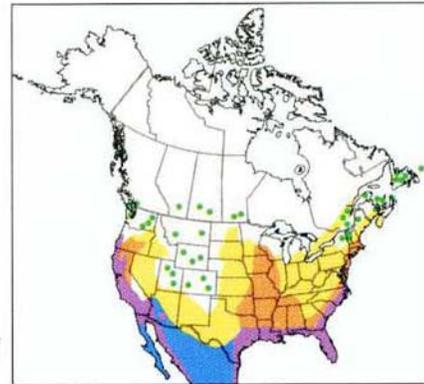
Adapted from Sibley, David A. 2001. *National Audubon Society The Sibley Guide to Birds*. Chanticleer Press, Inc., New York.

Great Egret

Ardea alba

L 39" WS 51" WT 1.9 lb (870 g) ♂ > ♀

Tall, extremely slender, and long-necked.



Voice: Very deep, low, gravelly *kroow*, grating unmusical *karrrr*, and other low croaks; fading at end; lower and coarser than Great Blue Heron without trumpeting quality.

Adapted from Sibley, David A. 2001. *National Audubon Society The Sibley Guide to Birds*. Chanticleer Press, Inc., New York.

Black-crowned Night-Herons, Snowy Egrets, and Cattle Egrets

(from *The Birds of North America* series, issues 74, 489, and 113)

Black-crowned Night-Herons are a cosmopolitan species that breeds on every continent except Australia and Antarctica. As they are nocturnal, usually feeding from evening to early morning in shallow ponds, creeks and marshes. During the breeding season, birds also feed during the day to meet the extra food demand of their young.

Black-crowned Night-Herons are medium sized, with a stocky build and relatively short neck and legs. Both males and females have a distinctive black cap and back, with gray wings and body. The bill is predominantly black and the eyes are red. Legs are yellow for most of the year, but become pink at the height of the breeding season. Juvenile birds are brown with white spots above and pale below with striped underparts.

Breeding is initiated when males select nest sites and advertise for females. Black-crowned Night-herons may choose to nest in many different substrates, including trees, shrubs, and marsh reeds. Males may engage in light nest building before pair formation. The first egg is usually laid 4-5 days after pair formation and additional eggs are laid at 2 day intervals. Both parents incubate and hatching occurs in 23-26 days. By 12 days post-hatch, both parents are actively foraging most of the day. Both parents feed the young at the nest; chicks are fed mostly fish, but also amphibians, crustaceans, insects, and other nestlings.

Young are fed by regurgitation, which is initially given directly to young chicks, and later delivered into the nest cup. Young can leave the nest platform in 12-14 days and can fly 6 weeks post-hatch. Black-crowned Night-Herons usually have one brood per season, though they will re-nest if the initial nest fails.

Snowy Egrets are one of our most beautiful egrets--their delicate back plumes were once highly prized for use in ladies hats. Snowy Egrets have apparently made a remarkable recovery from a severe reduction in population size due to plume hunting in the late 1800s-early 1900s. Despite this comeback, Snowies are still a species of concern, as they are particularly sensitive to factors that influence prey density and availability such as wetland destruction and fragmentation.

Snowy Egrets are medium sized, with all white plumage, black bill, black legs, and bright yellow feet. Immature and nonbreeding adults have duller greenish-yellow feet. Adults in breeding plumage develop long plumes on the lower back and breast. The bright yellow skin of the lores and feet turn red at the height of breeding.

Snowy Egrets may take a wide variety of prey items, including worms, insects, crustaceans, amphibians, and fish; however studies have shown their actual diet to be somewhat specialized, composed of about 75% fish and 25% crustaceans. They generally prefer to feed in shallow, brackish habitats.

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Breeding is initiated when males select nest sites and advertise for females. The usual clutch size is 3-5 eggs; both sexes incubate. Hatching occurs in 20-21 days. Both parents feed chicks. Chicks are capable of leaving the nest as early as 10 days old, but are known to stay close to the nest site until 6-7 weeks of age. Snowy Egrets usually have one brood per season, though they will re-nest if the initial nest fails.

Cattle Egrets are well-known for their association with lawns, fields, and pastures. The range of cattle egrets expanded to include the continental United States in the 1950s. Cattle Egrets are stocky, whitish with a buff colored head, and have a short-necked appearance. Nonbreeding birds have yellow bill, lores, and irises, and greenish-yellow legs. During the breeding season they develop orange-buff colored plumes on head, lower back, and chest. At the height of breeding, legs, bill, and iris become red, and lores purple-pink.

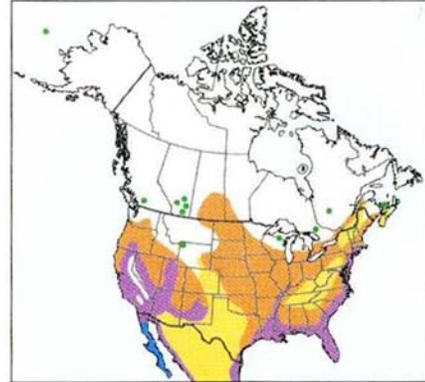
Cattle Egrets have a broad diet that is mostly grasshoppers, crickets, moths, and fish taken in shallow water. Birds will nest in trees, shrubs, or reeds. Average clutch size is 3-4 eggs. Both sexes incubate eggs, and hatching occurs in 22-25 days. At 14 days post-hatch chicks frequently leave the nest but remain nearby to be fed. Chicks can fly at 25 days post hatch. Cattle Egrets generally have one brood per season, but like our other species of herons and egrets, will re-nest if the initial nest fails.

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Nycticorax nycticorax

L 25" WS 44" WT 1.9 lb (870 g)

Very stocky, large-headed, and short-necked.



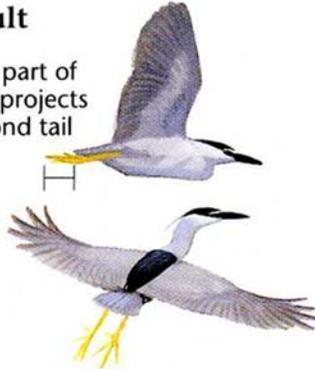
Juvenile



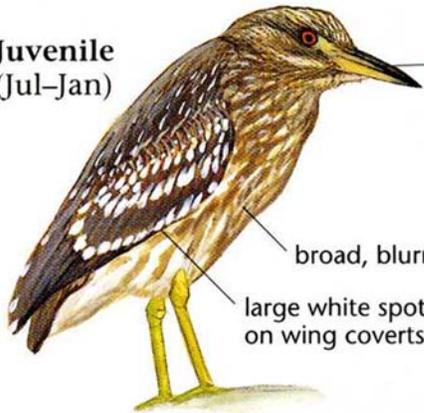
Adult

only part of foot projects beyond tail

very stocky, chunky



Juvenile (Jul-Jan)



heavy but sharply pointed, extensively yellowish bill

broad, blurry streaks

large white spots on wing coverts

1st summer (Feb-Aug)



foraging birds crouch



Adult



Voice: Common call in flight a flat, barking *quok* or *quark*. Other calls of similar quality given in nesting colony.

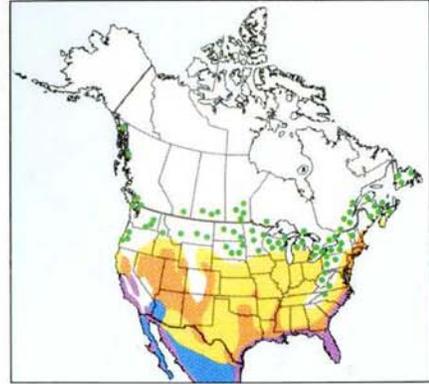
Typical sleeping posture of Black-crowned, with bill tucked into breast feathers.

Snowy Egret

Egretta thula

L 24" ws 41" wt 13 oz (360 g)

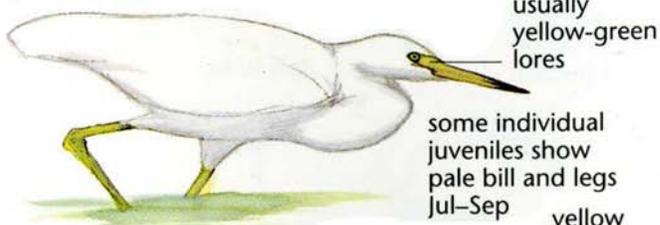
Small and slender; yellow feet contrasting with dark legs distinctive.



Adult



Juvenile (Jul–Apr)



Juvenile (Jul–Apr)

adult nonbreeding (Aug–Jan) similar



Adult breeding (Feb–Jul)

lacy plumes



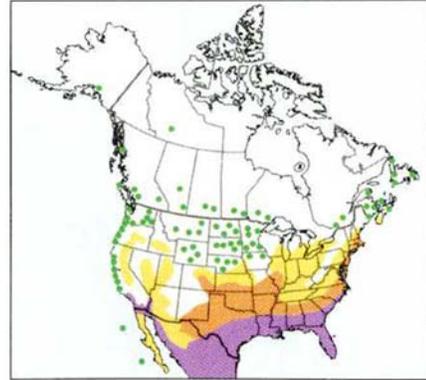
Voice: Hoarse, rasping *raarr* or nasal *hraaa* very similar to Little Blue Heron; higher and more nasal than Great Egret. In flight occasionally a hoarse cough *charf*.

Cattle Egret

Bubulcus ibis

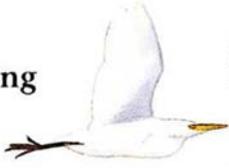
L 20" WS 36" WT 12 oz (340 g)

Shorter-necked and shorter-billed than other white egrets.



Adult nonbreeding

wingbeats deeper than other egrets



Adult breeding

stocky



Juvenile (Jul–Oct)

black bill and legs recall Snowy and Reddish Egrets, but shape and habits distinctive



short, dark legs

short yellow bill

stocky neck

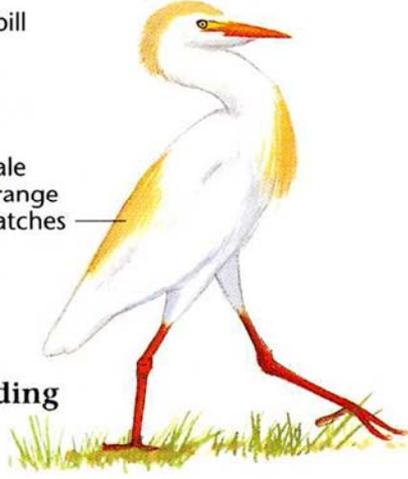
pale orange patches

black legs

Adult nonbreeding (Aug–Feb)



Adult breeding (Mar–Jul)



Voice: Short croaks or quacks on breeding grounds; generally silent elsewhere. Most common year-round call a subdued, nasal quack *brek* or *rick rak*; occasionally a short, soft moan.

foraging birds walk slowly with exaggerated head-bobbing, usually following livestock or tractors; never in water