

Great Egret *Ardea alba*



Folk Name: Big Plume Crane, Big White Crane, Big White Heron

Status: Migrant, Winter Visitor, local Breeder

Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

Habitat: Lakes, rivers, ponds, wetlands, marshes

The sight of a breeding Great Egret foraging along the water's edge is truly a spectacular sight to behold. This very large all-white heron looks almost regal as its long breeding plumes, or "aigrettes," trail behind. This stunning wader stands just 6 inches smaller than the Great Blue Heron. It has a long, pointed, all-yellow bill and long black legs, and at the height of breeding it has shamrock-green lores.

The Great Egret, like our other egrets and herons, is an opportunistic carnivore. It stalks its prey slowly and deliberately, using its strong bill to quickly catch or spear animals, anytime, anywhere something looks tasty. Great Egrets have been known to eat everything from fish, crayfish, and frogs, to snakes, dragonflies, grasshoppers, and even small birds and small mammals. In some areas, they regularly forage on upland sites like lawns at golf courses, parks, and in neighborhoods.

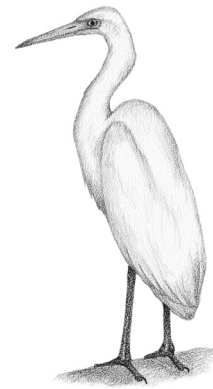
In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Great Egret was one of the species hit hardest by both plume hunters and "egggers" (nest raiders). They were almost wiped out.

"Did you ever connect aigret, that beautiful and delicate filamentary white feather which stands up so straight in milady's hat, with egret, the white heron?...Aigrets were in such demand that these beautiful birds became almost extinct. Egrets are now protected by law in North Carolina and are again seen with more frequency.

All herons have aigrette decorations of some sort somewhere, but the white ones are most sought after."
—*Gold Leaf*, Henderson, NC, November 3, 1904

"No bird in America has so melancholy a history as the Egret. Those of us living today are witnessing the passing of the race, and we doubt seriously if a single individual will be alive in the United States twenty-five years hence, unless the precautions now being taken by the National Association of Audubon Societies should prove to be successful." —*Birds of North Carolina*, 1919

Thankfully, ongoing protection efforts over the last century did result in the recovery of the Great Egret. By the 1940s and 1950s, they had become "quite numerous" along the coast once again. Reports of birds visiting the Carolina Piedmont in the summer slowly increased.



This account was published in *The Chat* in the summer of 1944:

A large white bird was reported on a chimney of a house on Idlewild Circle shortly after noon, August 10th, and that evening a *Charlotte News* photographer and columnist Dorothy Knox were taking pictures and interviewing the Russell boys, Erwin and Eddie, who had caught the bird in the back yard of their home on Lexington Ave. Mrs. E.O. Clarkson identified the bird as an American Egret. She found it badly emaciated but it was eating fish which its friends had cut into strips and put into the water for it.

The bird was taken to be rehabilitated and was to be released on a local pond with other herons present.

Today in the Central Carolinas, the Great Egret has been recorded every month of the year, and there are now a handful of breeding sites. However, most are



Great Egret in Mecklenburg County. (Jeff Lemons)

seen scattered throughout the region between June and October, after sizable numbers of post-breeding birds disperse from the coast, westward into the Piedmont and Foothills. The highest one-day count in the region is a group of 71 birds tallied by Eleanor O'Neill on Lake Twitty in Union County on August 26, 2011. Great Egrets have been sighted in nesting colonies with Great Blue Herons along both the Catawba and the Yadkin Pee Dee River

systems. At least 12 nesting pairs were counted amongst a large colony of Great Blue Heron nests below the High Rock Dam in the summer of 2007. Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers were unable to confirm breeding of the Great Egret in Mecklenburg County. However, breeding is suspected at a few sites along the Catawba River corridor from Lake Hickory south to Great Falls.

Spotlight on Local Research: Tracking Great Egrets with Satellites

Dr. John Brzorad, Director of the Reese Institute at Lenoir-Rhyne University in Hickory, has partnered with the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences to use new satellite telemetry technology to study the movement of Great Egrets in the Carolinas. The researchers tracked several Great Egrets captured on the coast that stayed and bred on the coast and migrated less than 60 miles. They were able to learn a great deal about their movements within the state during the year. However, two other Great Egrets they captured surprised them. One named "Ms. Palma" flew from North Carolina to New York City in one night reaching a top speed of 60 miles per hour. It then flew to an island off the coast of Maine where

it spent a few months during breeding season. Then it flew south all the way to Honduras for the winter. Another bird named "Mr. Brisbing," a male, was released 21 April on the Outer Banks where it then nested. In mid-July he left the breeding grounds and lingered along the coast. In late October, he left North Carolina and flew to the Bahamas in one night. After that he made his way south to Cuba, Jamaica, and, finally, all the way down to Colombia, South America, arriving in the first week of December. Unfortunately, at that point, Mr. Brisbing died or lost his transmitter and no more data was received. Studies like this are providing a completely new understanding of where "our" Carolina birds go each year.