

Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*



Folk Name: Little Plume Crane, Little White Crane

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Rare

Habitat: Lakes, rivers, ponds, wetlands, marshes

Herbert Ravenel Sass of Charleston, SC, published an essay on the Snowy Egret in the journal *Bird Lore* in 1908. In it he wrote:

Twenty-five years ago, it is true, this species was common in the South, breeding in the thousands on small islands or “hammocks” in the salt marshes—a race so strong in numbers, so beautiful, and so harmless to man that none could foresee the doom which was so shortly to overtake it. Yet, when once Fashion had decreed that the Snowy heron’s delicate nuptial plumes be used to ornament women’s hats, this loveliest of all our marshland birds was in very short time almost blotted out of existence.

Indeed, the Snowy Egret was a primary target of plume hunters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For decades, they were relentlessly hunted at breeding colonies in both Carolinas, even after state and federal laws were passed to protect them:

“During the summer of 1908 two small colonies of Snowy Egrets were discovered on the South Carolina coast and every effort was made to give them complete protection. Notwithstanding all that was done, both of these rookeries were “shot out” quite recently.”

—*Bird Lore*, August 1909

“Word has just reached this office that a colony of Snowy Herons in eastern North Carolina has been ‘shot out.’ It is reported that the men who did the killing realized something over \$70 for the plumes gathered that day from the backs of the birds which were killed. Our information is that the feathers were shipped to a northern market, and, as this is a violation of the federal statute, known as the Lacey Act, the case has been placed in the hands of the United States Attorney for the eastern district of North Carolina.”

—*Bird Lore*, July–August 1910

In 1919, the authors of *Birds of North Carolina* wrote: “The fate of the small Snowy Egret is scarcely less sad than that of the large Egret. In fact, today it is decidedly the rarer bird. This is the heron from which comes the short curved plumes known to the millinery trade as ‘cross aigrettes.’”



J F M A M J J A S O N D

Thankfully, what was then known as “the rare Snowy,” ultimately escaped extirpation as a breeding bird in the Carolinas, and its population began a long recovery that continued through the 1970s and 1980s. Unfortunately, for reasons not quite clear, the breeding population of this exquisite egret in the Carolinas appears to be struggling once again today.

The Snowy Egret is a medium-sized white heron with a black bill, black legs, and yellow feet or, what some call “golden slippers.” It is now an uncommon to fairly common bird along the coast of the Carolinas, where it breeds in colonies with other herons and egrets. After breeding, some wanderers make their way inland to the Carolina Piedmont.



Snowy Egret. (Jeff Lemons)

There are a small number of records of this egret in the Central Carolinas in the twentieth century. Our earliest report is of two Snowy Egrets seen on High Rock Lake on August 10, 1948. Another was seen in Mecklenburg County in the 1950s, but the date of the observation is unclear. Flo Cobey found a single Snowy Egret on Lake Wylie (York/Mecklenburg County) on August 7–8, 1979, and Doug McNair spotted one in Anson County at Pee Dee NWR a week later on 16 August. David Wright discovered a pair of immature Snowy Egrets on August 29 through September 10, 1989, that were visiting two small ponds at the end of Jim Kidd Road near the Town of Huntersville. Rob Van Epps and David Wright reported three egrets seen near the dam at Cowan's Ford on October 2, 1995. Snowy Egrets had been widely reported at inland locations that fall. Wildlife photographer Gareth Rasberry reported one in Charlotte on September 8, 1996,

and an observer reported an extremely late bird at Lake Hollifield in Cleveland County on November 23, 1996. He noted a "Medium sized white heron, black bill and legs. Feet not visible." This is an extreme date and could possibly have been a lingering injured bird.

Snowy Egrets have been found at various sites throughout the region almost annually since the turn of the twenty-first century. There have been more than 20 reports. Observations range from 2 May through 10 October. We have no records in the months of December, January, or February, one March report, two April reports, and the previously mentioned November report. Our largest one-day tally stands at a total of three birds. The Fishing Creek tailrace, near Great Falls, SC (off Hwy 200 on the border of Chester and Lancaster counties), is one of the best spots in the region to find a mixture of post-breeding dispersal wading birds each summer.