

**California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System**  
**California Department of Fish and Wildlife**  
**California Interagency Wildlife Task Group**

---

SNOWY EGRET

*Egretta thula*

Family: ARDEIDAE  
B053

Order: PELECANIFORMES

Class: AVES

Written by: S. Granholm

Reviewed by: D. Raveling, L. Mewaldt

Edited by: R. Duke

#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

The snowy egret is widespread in California along shores of coastal estuaries, fresh and saline emergent wetlands, ponds, slow-moving rivers, irrigation ditches, and wet fields. In southern California, common yearlong in the Imperial Valley and along the Colorado River; common September to April in coastal lowlands, but rare through summer, and occurs then mainly in San Diego Co. In desert regions, uncommon in spring migration and rare through summer (Garrett and Dunn 1981). In northern California, common March to November in coastal lowlands. Locally common in the Central Valley all year; rare May to October on northeastern plateau and east of Sierra Nevada (Cogswell 1977, McCaskie et al. 1979). There are recent nesting colonies near Redwood City, San Rafael, Pittsburg, Los Banos, Bishop, and the south end of the Salton Sea (Cogswell 1977); and locally in Santa Barbara and San Diego cos., near the Salton Sea and Colorado River (Garrett and Dunn 1981), and on the northeastern plateau (Airola 1980).

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Prefers small fish, crustaceans and large insects (Cogswell 1977), but also eats amphibians, reptiles, worms, snails, and small mammals (Palmer 1962). Feeds in shallow water or along shores of wetlands or aquatic habitats, and is the most active feeder of the California herons. Often dashes through shallow water after prey, but also stalks slowly or stands and waits for prey (Kushlan 1976a). Lures or flushes prey with feet (Meyerriicks 1959) or bill (Kushlan 1973); rarely, hovers just above water and drops on prey at surface (Palmer 1962).

**Cover:** No information found. Presumably roosts in dense, emergent vegetation and in trees near water. Also rests in the habitats where it feeds.

**Reproduction:** In southern California, "dense marshes are required for nesting" (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Also nests in trees, usually rather low (Cogswell 1977). Typically, tree nests are 1.5-3 m (5-10 ft) above ground, but may be up to 9 m (30 ft) (Palmer 1962), and they are built of sticks. San Francisco Bay colonies nested at ground level on *Grindelia humilis* and *Salicornia pacifica*, more commonly on *Baccharis pilularis* 0.5-2.0 m (1-6 ft) above ground (Gill 1977, Gill and Mewaldt 1979); one large colony nested on *Scirpus acutus*.

**Water:** No additional data found.

**Pattern:** Requires either dense emergent wetland or trees within daily commuting range of suitable aquatic or wetland feeding areas.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Yearlong, diurnal activity.

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Many individuals from central California migrate to Mexico for first fall and winter. Thereafter, apparently nonmigratory in much of California, although disperses from nesting colonies after breeding (Gill and Mewaldt 1979). Leaves northeastern plateau November to March. Much of population along central California coast departs December to February. Population on south coast greatly augmented by migrants September to April.

**Home Range:** Sometimes forages up to 20 km (12 mi) from nesting area, but usually less than 2 km (1.2 mi) (Custer and Osborn 1978).

**Territory:** Used for courtship, copulation and nesting; defended against other herons as well as conspecifics (Palmer 1962). Initial territory defended by male is larger than subsequent territory after pair-formation, which is limited to a small area around nest (Palmer 1962, Jenni 1969). Separate feeding territories are defended; size unknown (Palmer 1962).

**Reproduction:** Breeds late March to mid-May in southern and central California (Gill 1977), and late April to late August in northern California. Typically monogamous, although some promiscuity has been noted (Palmer 1962). Colonial nester. Clutch size usually 3-4, range 2-6, and probably single-brooded. Incubation 20-24 days, average 22. Semi-altricial, downy young are tended by both parents, and leave nest at 20-25 days. No information on ages at independence or first breeding.

**Niche:** In California, Christman (1957) saw snowy egrets following and feeding near red-breasted mergansers in shallow water. Palmer (1962) reported feeding on insects frightened by pigs and cattle. At Salton Sea, numbers of nesting individuals have declined, apparently from competition with cattle egrets for nest sites (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Probably similar to the great egret: highly sensitive to human intrusions into nesting colonies, and to pesticides.

## REFERENCES

- Airola, D. A., ed. 1980. California Wildlife Habitat Relationships Program: Northeast interior zone. Vol III. Birds. U.S. Dep. Agric., For. Serv., Lassen Natl. For., Susanville. 590pp.
- Christman, G. M. 1957. Some interspecific relations in the feeding of estuarine birds. *Condor* 59:343.
- Cogswell, H. L. 1977. Water birds of California. Univ. California Press, Berkeley. 399pp.
- Custer, T. W., and R. G. Osborn. 1978. Feeding habitat use by colonially-breeding herons, egrets, and ibises in North Carolina. *Auk* 95:733-743.
- Garrett, K., and J. Dunn. 1981. Birds of southern California. Los Angeles Audubon Soc. 408pp.
- Gill, R. E., Jr. 1977. Breeding avifauna of the South San Francisco Bay estuary. *West. Birds* 8:1-12.
- Gill, R. E., Jr., and L. R. Mewaldt. 1979. Dispersal and migratory patterns of San Francisco Bay produced herons, egrets, and terns. *North Am. Bird Bander* 4:4-13.
- Jenni, D. A. 1969. A study of the ecology of four species of herons during the breeding season at Lake Alice, Alachua Co., Florida. *Ecol. Monogr.* 39:245-270.
- Kushlan, J. A. 1973. Bill-vibrating: a prey-attracting behavior of the snowy egret, *Leucophoyx thula*. *Am. Midl. Nat.* 89:509-512.
- Kushlan, J. A. 1976a. Feeding behavior of North American herons. *Auk* 93:86-94.
- McCaskie, G., P. De Benedictis, R. Erickson, and J. Morlan. 1979. Birds of northern California, an annotated field list. 2nd ed. Golden Gate Audubon Soc., Berkeley. 84pp.
- Meyerriicks, A. J. 1959. Foot-stirring feeding behavior in herons. *Wilson Bull.* 71:153-158.
- Palmer, R. S., ed. 1962. Handbook of North American birds. Vol. 1. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT. 567pp.gret at Humboldt Bay, California. M.S. Thesis, Humboldt State Univ., Arcata. 136pp.
- Wiese, J. H. 1976. Courtship and pair formation in great egrets. *Auk* 93:709-724.
- Yull, P. F. 1972. Ecology of the common egret (*Casmerodius alba*) at Humboldt Bay,

California. M.S. Thesis, Humboldt State Univ., Arcata. 111pp.

B053

Life history accounts for species in the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships (CWHR) System were originally published in: Zeiner, D.C., W.F.Laudenslayer, Jr., K.E. Mayer, and M. White, eds. 1988-1990. California's Wildlife. Vol. I-III. California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, California. Updates are noted in accounts that have been added or edited since original publication.