

This resource is based on the following source:

Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

This resource can be cited as:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. 2003, January 6. Florida's breeding bird atlas: A collaborative study of Florida's birdlife. <http://www.myfwc.com/bba/> (Date accessed mm/dd/yyyy).

Great Egret *Ardea alba*

Perhaps no species better symbolizes conservation than the Great Egret. Aigrettes, filamentous plumes adorning the back, breast, and crown of most egrets when breeding, were in demand in the late 1800s and early 1900s, generally to adorn women's clothing. Wholesale slaughter of herons and egrets occurred throughout the United States, but mainly in Florida, where many breeding colonies were extirpated. Conservation efforts to stop this killing began in Florida at the beginning of the present century, leading to the organization of the Audubon societies and eventually to the present-day conservation movement. Great Egrets breed on all continents except Antarctica. In North America they nest as far north as southern Canada and winter south of a line from central California through North Carolina.

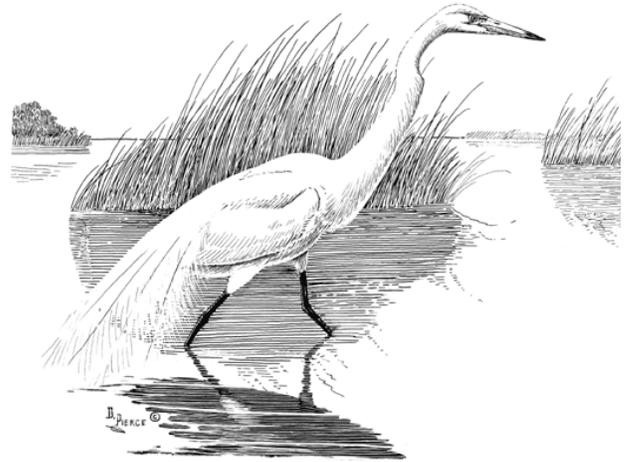


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Habitat. All shallow water habitats and sometimes dry uplands may be inhabited by Great Egrets. They nest in colonies, usually with other herons and ibises.

The Great Egret usually wades in shallow water to capture fish and other aquatic organisms, although it may hover above or swim in deeper water, procuring food where it is particularly plentiful. At times, it forages in upland habitats for small reptiles, amphibians, and mammals.

Nests are shallow platforms of sticks built in trees, often more than 3 m (10 ft) above the ground. Three or 4 blue-green eggs hatch in 28 to 29 days, and the young fledge in about 60 days.

Seasonal Occurrence. The Great Egret may breed throughout the year in Florida, apparently in response to adequate water levels and food supplies. However, most breeding takes place between May and August (Ogder 1978a). Some evidence of spring migration has been gathered in February and March, and banding data indicate migration both in and out of Florida (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). In winter, Great Egrets may concentrate locally in the St. Johns River marshes and the central Everglades (Hoffman et al. 1990).

Status. Great Egrets breed throughout much of the state. The greatest numbers of breeding locations occur in the central and southern peninsula, especially in the Everglades and in west-central Florida. Colonies are few and widely scattered in north Florida and, especially, in the Panhandle, where the species has been reported breeding only as far west as Santa Rosa County. Although numbers were severely reduced at the turn of the century, the species has recovered and currently occupies much of its historic breeding range in the United States. Its range has expanded slightly in north Florida and the Panhandle, where a few colonies have been located in the past 2 decades. However, this widespread species may be declining in the state. Nesbitt et al. (1982) found more than 50,000 birds breeding in statewide surveys between 1976 and 1978. Ten years later, Runde et al. (1991) found only 39,000 breeding birds. Because there was little difference in the survey methods used, the decline of this conspicuous bird is probably real.

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Sponsored by J. W. and Elaine Mullins

Great Egret

