

A California Riceland Success Story

Egrets are icons of the Central Valley and a common sight when travelling through rice country. Populations of these wading birds have rebounded from near extinction regionally, thanks in part to the abundant food and habitat found in Central Valley rice fields and adjacent wetland areas.

SNOWY EGRET

Egretta thula

Current and past population data and regional population objectives:

Around the turn of the 20th century, egret populations were nearly decimated by market hunting for plumes for the millinery trade, but their numbers have since rebounded strongly. There are no current population estimates available for the Central Valley or Sacramento Valley. Colony counts in the Sacramento Valley and Delta will be completed in 2011, for the rest of the Central Valley in 2012. With 2011 data, a minimum estimate can be made of the number of pairs of these species that are nesting within the riceland matrix of Sacramento Valley. Broad sampling across the Sacramento Valley for birds foraging in rice is planned for the breeding season in 2012.

GREAT EGRET

Ardea alba

&

SNOWY EGRET

Egretta thula

SPECIES IN FOCUS

Prepared by:



prbo

PRBO Conservation Science

GREAT EGRET & SNOWY EGRET

Ardea alba

Egretta thula

Appearance



SNOWY EGRET

Size: 22–26 in

Weight: approx. 13 oz

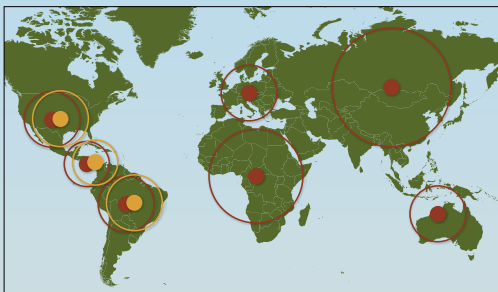


GREAT EGRET

Size: 37–41 in

Weight: approx. 35 oz

Both species with all-white plumage, long legs, long neck and long pointed bill. Great Egrets are much larger with yellow bill and black legs and feet; lores (space between the eye and bill) yellow, becoming green during courtship. Snowy Egrets are smaller with black bill, black legs, bright yellow feet and yellow lores (reddish, pinkish, or orangish in early breeding season). Both species develop wispy plumes during courtship.



● SNOWY EGRETS ● GREAT EGRETS

Range

Breed in coastal and inland wetland areas of the United States, Mexico, the West Indies, Central and South America. Winter along coastal United States, throughout Mexico and the West Indies and coastal Central America. Great Egrets' range extends throughout South America as well as outside the Americas into Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

Habitat



Nest in thick, woody vegetation and stands of trees near water or on islands near a wide variety of wetlands. Also nest in tall marsh vegetation. During migration and winter, use a wide variety of habitats, including fresh- and saltwater marshes, flooded agricultural fields, lagoons, ponds, lakes and human-made impoundments.

Food/feeding



Snowy Egrets use their keen visual sense and various techniques, including stirring water with their bright yellow feet, to capture a wide variety of prey. Prey includes worms, aquatic and terrestrial insects, crustaceans, snails, fish, amphibians and reptiles. Great Egrets are very opportunistic foragers as well and use their visual hunting method of stand, wait and spear or jab with pointed bill. They will take similar prey as Snowy Egrets, but also larger prey such as birds and small mammals.

Behavior



Both of these egrets are social species that nest and forage in mixed-species groups.

Predation

Raptors eat adult Snowy Egrets. Raccoons have preyed on Great Egret adults in roosting colonies. Corvids and raptors eat young and eggs of both species. Brown Pelicans and gulls have also been seen eating Great Egret eggs and young. Snakes eat eggs and young of Snowy Egrets.



◀ Great Egrets are often seen hunting in rice fields, especially when fields are flooded.

Conservation Status



The North American Waterbird Conservation Plan classifies the Great Egret as “Not Currently at Risk” but the Snowy Egret as being of “High Concern.” General protection provided under wildlife laws such as the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Benefits of rice cultivation to species/group

Provides foraging habitat year round.

Additional benefits of adjacent managed wetlands to species/group

Provides foraging habitat year round.