

REDDISH EGRET

Egretta rufescens

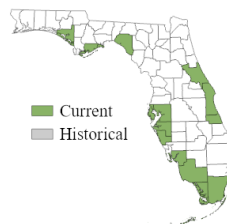
Order: Pelecaniformes

Family: Ardeidae

FNAI Ranks: G4/S2

U.S. Status: none

FL Status: Threatened



Description: Striking, long-legged wader with a neutral gray body and shaggy chestnut plumes on head, neck, and upper breast. In breeding season bill is distinctly bicolored (pink or flesh-colored at base and black at end) and legs become turquoise blue. Late in nesting season and in non-breeding adults, pink in bill fades and bill becomes dusky overall, and legs and feet black. White morph exhibits white plumage at all ages. Actively pursues small fish by running erratically, flapping its wings, and generally lurching about.

Similar Species: The little blue heron (*Egretta caerulea*; see species account) is smaller, darker bird with bluish bill with a black tip and black (breeding) or grayish-green (non-breeding) legs. Immature little blue heron has white plumage like white phase reddish egret, but has bluish bill with black tip and yellow-green legs. Distinctive foraging behavior of reddish egret also distinguishes it from other wading birds of similar size.

Habitat: Almost exclusively coastal. In Florida, typically nests on coastal mangrove islands, or in Brazilian pepper on manmade dredge spoil islands, near suitable foraging habitat. Generally forages in shallow water (typically < 6 in. [15 cm]) of variable salinity. Broad, open, marine tidal flats and shorelines with little vegetation are ideal feeding areas. Also important are salt evaporation pools and lagoons, often located inside mangrove keys or just inside shoreline on mainland.

Seasonal Occurrence: Mostly resident where it breeds. Immatures and non-breeding adults especially may disperse north along Atlantic and Gulf coasts, rarely into interior. Rare but regular visitor in spring and fall (less frequent in winter) to panhandle and northern peninsula. Nests in Florida Bay and Keys primarily November - March, although may occur year-round. Nesting begins late February - April along Atlantic and Gulf coasts, with late nests in May.

Florida Distribution: Nests from Pinellas County on the Gulf coast and Brevard County on the Atlantic coast, south through the Florida Keys. An estimated two-thirds of the Florida population occurs in Florida Bay and the Lower Keys. The non-breeding range extends north along both coasts.

Range-wide Distribution: Occurs along coasts of Florida and Gulf coast states, Mexico, Belize, Greater Antilles, Bahamas, and north coast of Columbia and Venezuela and associated islands. Accidental or only scattered sightings in Lesser Antilles and most of Central America. A few individuals may disperse as far north as Carolinas and southern California following nesting season.

Conservation Status: Our rarest heron. Only 2,000 pairs are thought to breed in U.S. Nearly extirpated from Florida by plume hunters by 1910. Florida's population in early 1990s estimated at 350 - 400 pairs, only about 10 percent of population prior to plume hunting. Of these, 100 - 125 pairs occur in Florida Bay. Most known breeding sites occur within National Audubon Society sanctuaries and national parks and wildlife refuges. As with other coastal species, increasing human population and concomitant increase in recreational activity place additional strains on population, even in protected areas. Because of restricted habitat requirements, extremely vulnerable to coastal development and alterations including dredging, filling, and bulkheading.

Protection and Management: Health of Florida Bay is crucial to success in Florida. Educate public regarding sensitivity of coastal species to disturbance. Increase funding to continue and supplement surveying, monitoring, and patrolling. Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Department of Environmental Protection have developed setback distances around wading bird colonies of 330 ft. (100 m) to prevent human disturbance.

References: Paul 1991, Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Rodgers and Smith 1995, Rodgers et al. (eds.) 1996, Runde et al. 1991, Stevenson and Anderson 1994.



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