

SNOWY EGRET

Egretta thula

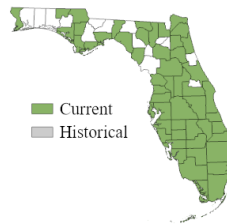
Order: Pelecaniformes

Family: Ardeidae

FNAI Ranks: G5/S3

U.S. Status: none

FL Status: none



Description: Medium-sized, all-white wading bird that has a “slight” appearance in comparison to other wading birds. Bill is black with a bright yellow, fleshy base, and the yellow extends back to the lores and eyes. Legs are black in adults; feet are bright yellow as though wearing gloves. Immatures have greenish legs that sometimes have a yellow streak on the back. Breeding-season adults have prominent plumes on shoulders, neck, and head.

Similar Species: Most often confused with juvenile little blue heron (*Egretta caerulea*; see species account), which is white with greenish-gray legs; however, tips of wing feathers are dusky, not pure white as in snowy egret. Little blue heron also has a bi-colored bill, not the solid black bill found on the snowy egret. Great egret (*Ardea alba*) has solid black legs and orangish bill; white morph of the reddish egret (*E. rufescens*; see species account) has two-toned bill and grayish legs; cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) has orangish legs and bill.

Habitat: Nests both inland and in coastal wetlands with nests placed in many types of woody shrubs, especially mangroves and willows. Almost all nesting is over shallow waters or on islands that are separated from shoreline by extensive open water. Feeds in many types of permanently and seasonally flooded wetlands, streams, lakes, and swamps, and in man-made impoundments and ditches. Usually prefers calm waters. A wide variety of wetland types must be available within 5 - 7 mi. (8 - 11 km) to support breeding colonies. Breeding success is tied to water-level fluctuations.

Seasonal Occurrence: Occurs in Florida in all seasons, but generally less common in winter, especially in western panhandle and northern counties.

Florida Distribution: Generally found throughout peninsular Florida; becoming less

common inland in northern tier of counties (north of Alachua County) and in the western Panhandle. Typically more common along coast throughout its range. Breeding documented for 43 Florida counties but more variable in western Florida Panhandle and in some northern counties in the interior (north of Alachua County). Also rare or absent in southern Keys.

Range-wide Distribution: Northern limits of summer range extend from northern California to southern Montana, central Kansas, and Tennessee, east to Atlantic coast, and then north to coastal Maine; occurs south to southern Chile and central Argentina; winters in North America from northern California to Arizona, along the northern Gulf coast, and along Atlantic coast to South Carolina.

Conservation Status: Since the 1950s, numbers in Florida have been declining, possibly faster than declines of other herons and egrets. In 1989, this species was found in only 22 percent of the colonies where it formerly occurred. Persistent patterns of wetland destruction and alteration are probably eliminating large areas of essential habitat. Most impacts appear to affect quality of foraging habitat rather than areas immediately surrounding nesting colonies.

Protection and Management: Prevent rapid changes in water depth in managed wetlands that will likely adversely affect quality of foraging. Restore and maintain natural hydroperiods in degraded wetland areas. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the Department of Environmental Protection have developed setback distances around wading bird colonies of 330 ft. (100 m) to prevent human disturbance.

References: Poole and Gill (eds.) 2000, 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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