

Great Egret *Ardea alba*

Decimated in southern California at the beginning of the 20th century, the Great Egret has enjoyed a recovery that is still continuing. In San Diego County it was long a nonbreeding visitor only, mainly in fall and winter, and it is still most numerous in that role. The first known nesting was in 1988, and more colonies formed soon thereafter, until by the arrival of the 21st century the county's breeding population numbered about 75 pairs, most at the Wild Animal Park and Rancho Santa Fe. But the establishment of new colonies, often mixed with those of other herons, continued past the end of the atlas period in 2002.

Breeding distribution: The primary Great Egret colony in San Diego County, founded in 1989, is in the Wild Animal Park (J12), in the multispecies colony of herons and egrets in the Heart of Africa exhibit. Counts here range up to 100 birds on 15 June 1998 (D. and D. Bylin) and 40 nests on 9 May 1999 (K. L. Weaver). The colony in Rancho Santa Fe (L8), in eucalyptus trees within a private estate along Escondido Creek near La Bajada, is second in size. In 1998, the first year in which the egret nested there in numbers, there were 25 to 30 nests, with a similar number of Great Blue Heron nests (A. Mauro).

The other colonies established themselves after the atlas period began in 1997. At El Capitan Reservoir (O16), nesting began in 2000 with a single pair with nestlings 21 June (D. C. Seals). The next year, on 9 July, one eucalyptus tree overlooking the lake contained three nests of the Great Egret, two of the Snowy, and one of the Great Blue Heron (J. R. Barth, R. T. Patton, P. Unitt). At Lindo Lake, Lakeside (P14), Great Egret nesting also began in 2000, with one carrying nest material 18 May (M. B. Stowe). On 9 July 2001, there were five nests of the Great Egret, among more of the Great Blue Heron, Snowy Egret, and Black-crowned Night-Heron (J. R. Barth, R. T. Patton, P. Unitt). On 11 August 2001, on the south side of the San Dieguito River estuary (M7), one nest of the



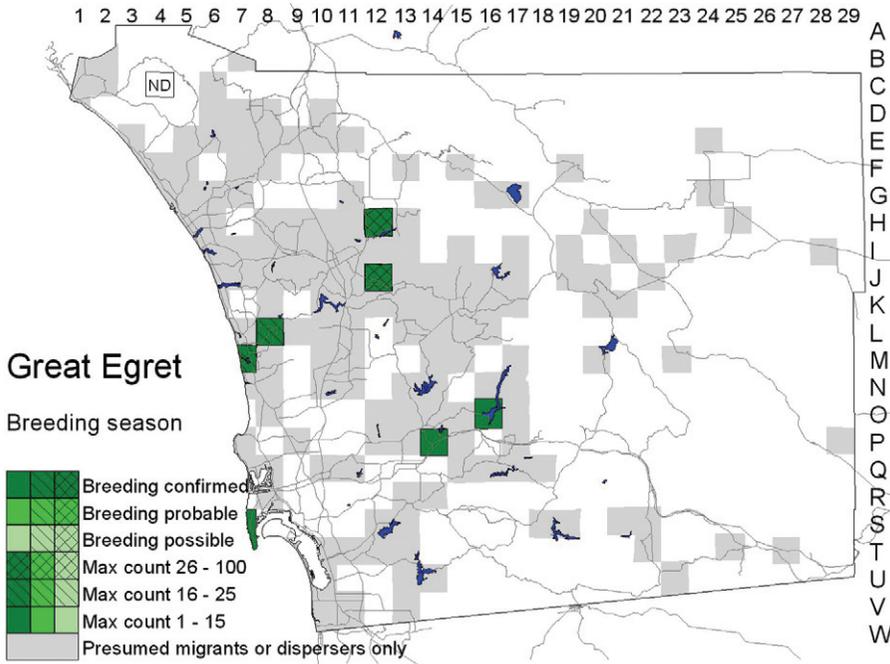
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Great Egret, near two of the Great Blue Heron, had two nearly full-grown nestlings (P. Unitt). In the Great Blue Heron colony at the Point Loma navy research laboratory (S7), one pair of the Great Egret nested in 2000 but failed. In 2002, however, two pairs nested at this site, one successfully, and in 2003 three pairs nested, all successfully (M. F. Platter-Rieger).

Yet another new colony formed in 2000 was at the east end of Lake Wohlford (H12), with six birds on 28 May (P. Hernandez, S. Christiansen, E. C. Hall). On 20 May 2001, the colony appeared to be growing rapidly, with 35 individuals in courtship displays and nest building and incubation apparently begun in one nest. Less than seven weeks later, however, on 7 July, the colony had been deserted and not a single egret remained in the area (P. Unitt).

The establishment of new colonies continued after the atlas period with three nests of the Great Egret on the north side of Batiquitos Lagoon (J7) in 2003 (R. Ebersol).

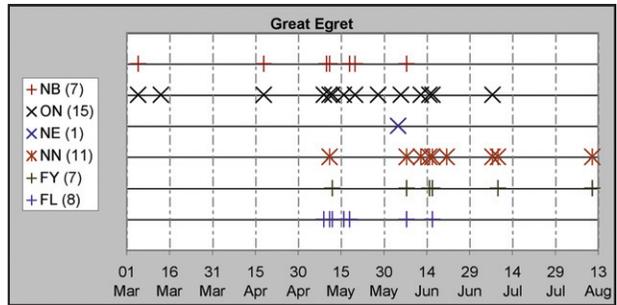
Away from breeding colonies, the Great Egret is wide-



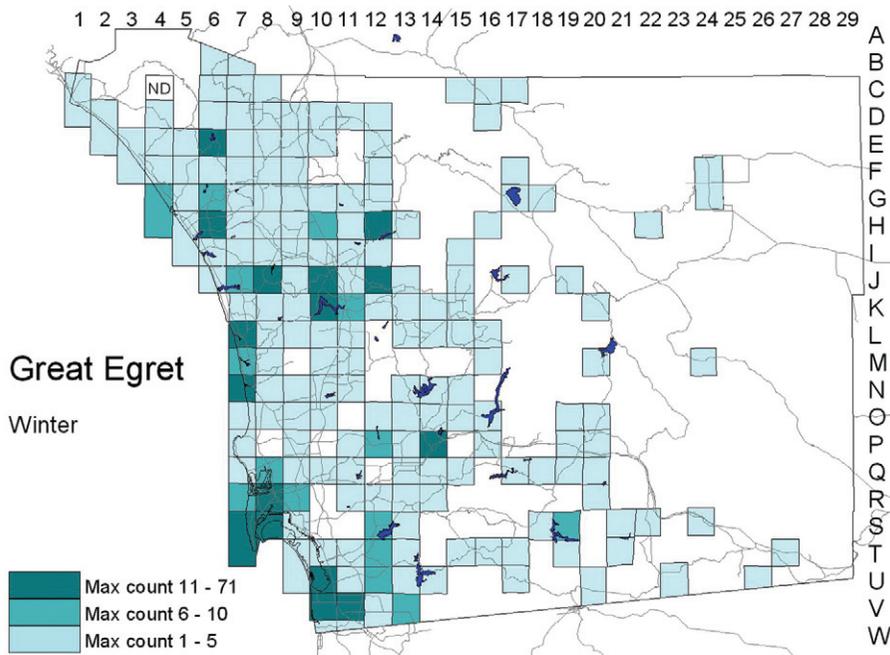
Nesting: Like the Great Blue Heron, the Great Egret builds a platform of sticks high in trees. In the mixed colony at Rancho Santa Fe, the Great Blue's nests were higher, above the egrets'. At most sites in San Diego County, the nests are in eucalyptus, but at the San Dieguito River mouth and Point Loma the birds were in Torrey pines; at Lake Wohlford they were in coast live oaks.

The schedule of Great Egret nesting in San Diego County is variable. In 1998, egg laying in the Rancho Santa Fe colony had apparently begun by late February; a search underneath the colony on 5 March yielded some broken eggs fallen to the ground (A. Mauro). By 11 May some young from this colony

spread at both coastal and inland wetlands. Some of the larger concentrations, up to 75 at Lake Hodges 14 June 1999 (R. L. Barber) and 61 at San Elijo Lagoon 10 July 1999 (P. A. Ginsburg), were probably of birds commuting from or recently fledged from nearby colonies. But others, such as 16 at O'Neill Lake (E6) 9 June 1998 (P. A. Ginsburg), 33 at Batiqitos Lagoon 3 April 1998 (F. Hall, C. C. Gorman), and 18 at Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7) 3 April 1999 (K. Estey) were not—though they suggest sites for future colonies. In the mountains the Great Egret is rare during the breeding season, with reports of no more than two (at Wynola, J19, 17 April–2 July 1999, S. E. Smith; near Julian, K20, 10 June 1998, E. C. Hall).



had already fledged while others were still downy. At Point Loma the young hatched in May and June (M. F. Platter-Rieger). The large nestlings at the San Dieguito River mouth 11 August 2001 must have hatched from eggs laid in early June.



Migration: Although the Great Egret has colonized San Diego County as a nesting species, its primary role is still that of a nonbreeding visitor. Censuses around San Diego Bay show the egret's numbers peaking from November to February and reaching their nadir in June, with gradual changes in between. Around north San Diego Bay, Mock et al. (1994) had their high count of 88 on 9 November 1994; in the salt works, Stadlander and Konecny (1994) had their high count of 83 on 17 November 1993. Postbreeding dispersal to

higher elevations is underway by August, with up to ten at Cuyamaca Lake (M20) 10 August 1998 (J. R. Barth).

In and near the Anza–Borrego Desert, the Great Egret occurs primarily as a rare migrant, recorded in fall as early as 21 July (1994, three at the Roadrunner Club, Borrego Springs, F24, M. L. Gabel), in spring as late as 6 May (1999, one at Banner, K21, P. K. Nelson). Generally the species is seen singly; exceptional concentrations are of ten at the Borrego Springs sewage pond (H25) 10 October 1992 (A. G. Morley) and seven in the north Borrego Valley (E24) 6 May 2000 (P. D. Ache). Most desert records are from the Borrego Valley, but a few are from scattered localities far from suitable habitat, such as Ocotillo Wells (I28; two on 1 April 2000, R. Miller) and Canyon sin Nombre (P29; one on 29 April 2000, F. A. Belinsky, M. G. Mathos).

Winter: In the coastal lowland, wintering Great Egrets are widespread and locally common. Many of the birds in the Wild Animal Park remain through the winter, with up to 71 on 30 December 2000 (K. L. Weaver). Farther inland, the Great Egret is uncommon and scattered, with up to five in Ramona (K15) 30 December 2000 (D. and C. Batzler) and seven at Barrett Lake (S19) 5 February 2000 (R. and S. L. Breisch). Even as high as Cuyamaca Lake the Great Egret is fairly regular in winter, with up to two on 18 February 1999 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan).

In the Anza–Borrego Desert in winter the Great Egret is rare, with just four records of single birds from 1997 to 2002. It has been recorded on just three of 18 Anza–Borrego Christmas bird counts 1984–2001, though the count on 20 December 1987 yielded eight.

Conservation: The Great Egret was decimated in southern California around 1900, when the birds were killed for their plumes, in fashion for decorating ladies' hats. Once this trade was suppressed, recovery began. In the winter of 1912–13, Grey (1913b) reported up to 20 at the south end of San Diego Bay 25 December; previously, he had seen no more than four. By 1936, a large roost had formed at Point Loma, with a maximum of "well over 150" on 25 February (Sefton 1936). The population began another upsurge in the late 1970s. King et al. (1987) noted an increase at San Elijo Lagoon from 1973 to 1983. From 1960 to 1977 the San Diego Christmas bird count averaged 26.5 Great Egrets; from 1997 to 2001 it averaged 106.4.

Nesting began in 1988 with a pair at the Dairy Mart pond in the Tijuana River valley (V11; G. McCaskie, AB 42:1339, 1988). This site soon became unsuitable, but the first nesting at the Wild Animal Park took place the following year (J. Oldenettel, AB 43:1367, 1989), and by 1991 the colony had grown to 30 pairs (J. O'Brien, AB 45:1160, 1991).

Hérons and humanity have an uneasy relationship. People now admire the Great Egret's beauty without having to wear it themselves. But heron colonies are messy affairs, unwelcome when they form over public parks like Lindo Lake. The egrets prefer to nest near water where they can feed, so they are likely to choose sites frequented by people where they are hard to ignore and vulnerable to disturbance.

Taxonomy: Great Egrets in the New World are *A. a. egretta* Gmelin, 1789, differing from the subspecies in the Old World by their almost wholly yellow bills.