

### **Snowy Egret *Egretta thula***

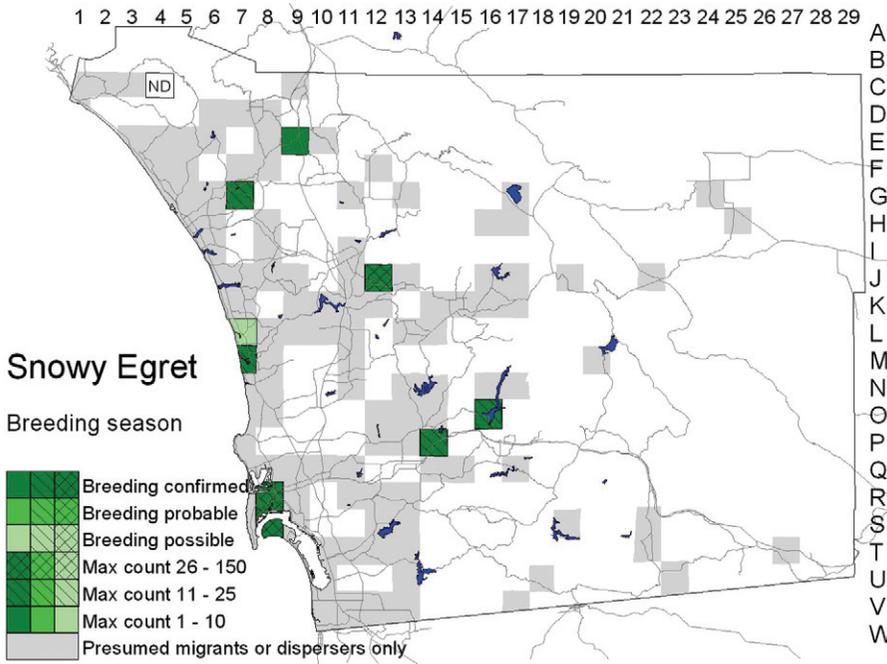
One of California's most elegant birds, the Snowy Egret frequents both coastal and inland wetlands. Since the 1930s, when it recovered from persecution for its plumes, it has been common in fall and winter. Since 1979, it has also established an increasing number of breeding colonies. Yet, in contrast to the Great Egret, the increase in Snowy Egret colonies has not been accompanied by a clear increase in the Snowy's numbers. Though dependent on wetlands for foraging, the Snowy Egret takes advantage of humanity, from nesting in landscaping to following on the heels of clam diggers at the San Diego River mouth, snapping up any organisms they suck out of the mud.

**Breeding distribution:** The first recorded Snowy Egret colonies in San Diego County were established at Buena Vista Lagoon in 1979 (J. P. Rieger, AB 33:896, 1979) and in the Tijuana River valley in 1980 (AB 34:929, 1980). By 1997 these were no longer active, but during the atlas period we confirmed nesting at eight other sites. Because Snowy Egrets often hide their nests in denser vegetation than do the Great Egret and Great Blue Heron, assessing the size of a Snowy Egret colony is more difficult than for the larger herons.



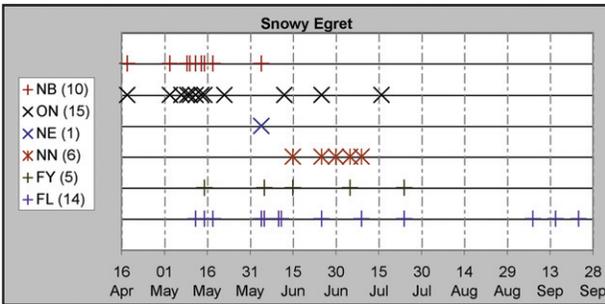
*Photo by Anthony Mercieca*

Two of the largest colonies lie near San Diego and Mission bays. The colony on the grounds of Sea World, behind the Forbidden Reef exhibit (R8), was founded in 1991 and contained 42 nests and fledged 44 young in 1997 (Black et al. 1997). The colony within North Island Naval Air Station (S8) contained 37 nests and fledged



15 young in 1999 (McDonald et al. 2000). Another large colony is in the mixed heronry at the Wild Animal Park in the Heart of Africa exhibit (J12). Our maximum count of individuals here was 150 on 15 June 1998 (D. and D. Bylin); there were at least 14 active nests on 9 May 1999 (K. L. Weaver). The colony in Solana Beach (M7) at the corner of Plaza Street and Sierra Avenue had 10–20 nests in 1997 and was still active in 2001 (A. Mauro).

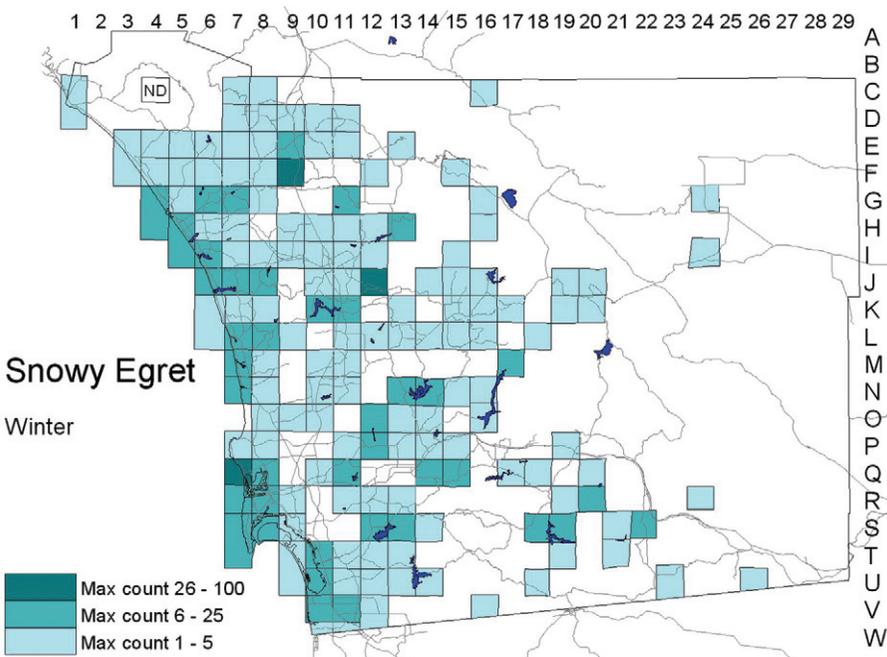
Other colonies are small or new. In the San Luis Rey River valley just east of Interstate 15, at least one pair nested in 2000 and 2001 at a pond formed when a new housing development blocked the drainage of Keys Canyon (E9; C. and D. Wysong, J. E. Pike). At Guajome Lake



(G7), at least eight pairs nested in 2001 (K. L. Weaver). At El Capitan Reservoir (O16) Snowy Egrets founded a new colony in 2001, two pairs nesting in one eucalyptus tree with three pairs of the Great Egret and one of the Great Blue Heron (J. R. Barth). Snowy Egrets helped found the mixed heronry at Lindo Lake (P14) in 2000 (M. B. Stowe); they had about five active nests there on 9 July 2001 (P. Unitt). In 2002 Snowy Egrets joined the Great Blue Herons on the north side of Batiquitos Lagoon (J7); in 2003 there were about five nests of the Snowy (R. Ebersol). At the mouth of the San Luis Rey River—in trees over the parking lot of a Jolly Roger restaurant (H5)—were 48 nests of the Snowy Egret, plus four of the Great Blue Heron and two of the Black-crowned Night-Heron,

on 3 July 2003 (K. L. Weaver). Information from nonbirders in the area, including one of the restaurant's managers, suggests that this colony, although probably not new, increased greatly in 2002 and 2003 (J. Determan).

Even during the breeding season Snowy Egrets are widespread in the coastal lowland away from nesting colonies. Some high counts exemplifying this are of 60 at Lake Hodges (K10) 16 June 1999 (R. L. Barber), 29 at Batiquitos Lagoon 1 May 1998 (F. Hall), and 25 at the upper end of Sweetwater Reservoir (S13) 23 March 2001 (P. Famolaro). In the foothills the Snowy Egret is uncommon and scattered in the breeding season, with counts of up to five only, as at Sutherland Lake (J16) 25 June 2000 (J. R.



Barth). In the mountains the Snowy Egret is rare, reported during the atlas period only from Wynola (J19; up to two on 17 April 1999, S. E. Smith) and Cuyamaca Lake (M20; one on 25 June 1998, A. P. and T. E. Keenan).

**Nesting:** Even though San Diego County colonies are few, they encompass a surprising variety of nest sites. At Solana Beach, where the egrets nest in company with Black-crowned Night-Herons only, the nests are in a dense-foliaged fig tree. At North Island, also shared with the night-heron, the nests are in eucalyptus and pines as well as figs. The mixed heronries at Lindo Lake and El Capitan Reservoir are in eucalyptus trees. At Sea World, where the only species nesting in close association with the Snowy Egret is the Little Blue Heron, most of the nests are in thick bamboo, a few in figs. At Guajome Lake and Keys Canyon, where the egrets' companions are White-faced Ibises, the birds nest on islands of matted cattails.

The schedule of Snowy Egret nesting in San Diego has been monitored most closely at Sea World (Black et al. 1997). In 1997, incubation had apparently begun in some nests by 21 March, and most young fledged between 22 May and 21 June, corresponding to laying from late March to late April. But eight nests were still active on 20 August, suggesting egg laying as late as the end of June.

**Migration:** Although the Snowy Egret occurs in San Diego County year round, its numbers vary with the seasons. Surveys of San Elijo Lagoon (King et al. 1987) and north San Diego Bay (Mock et al. 1994) found it most numerous in fall; those of south San Diego Bay (Macdonald et al. 1990, Stadtlander and Konecny 1994) found it most numerous in winter. Generally it is least numerous in summer.

In the Anza–Borrego Desert the Snowy Egret is a rare migrant, recorded mainly at artificial ponds, only a few times at natural oases, from 22 September (1999, four at the Borrego Springs sewage pond, H25, A. G. Morley) to 27 May (1990, one along Vallecito Creek, M24, Massey and Evans 1994). The only desert records of more than five individuals were of 11 in Borrego Springs (G24) 3 April 1999 and 19 there, in a pond filled by a flash flood, 24 August 2003 (P. D. Ache).

**Winter:** In winter, the Snowy Egret is more widespread than in spring or summer, visiting small ponds as well as larger lakes throughout the coastal lowland. The Wild Animal Park remains a major center for the species, with winter counts as high as 100 on 30 December 1999 (D. and D. Bylin). Along the coast, notable late fall or winter concentrations have been of up to 152 around north San Diego Bay 11 November 1994 (Mock et al. 1994), 91 at the out-flow channel for the power plant in Chula Vista 7 February 1989 (Macdonald et al. 1990), and 115 in the salt works 17 November 1993 (Stadtlander and Konecny 1994).

Even in the foothills and mountains the Snowy Egret is more of a winter visitor. Our winter counts in this region ranged up to eight, at Barrett Lake 2 February 2001 (R. and S. L. Breisch) and at Corte Madera Lake (R20) 20 February 1999 (L. and M. Polinsky). Winter records range as high as 4000–4200 feet elevation near Julian (J20, one on 2 December 1999, M. B. Stowe; K20, one on 1 December 1997, E. C. Hall). There are only five winter records from the Anza–Borrego Desert, two during the atlas period, of one in Borrego Springs (G24) 9 February 1998 (P. D. Ache) and one at Tamarisk Grove (I24) 31 January 1999 (R. Thériault).

**Conservation:** Though “plentiful at all seasons” along the coast of southern California in the 1860s (Cooper 1870), the Snowy Egret was the species most gravely affected by hunting for hat plumes. It went unrecorded in San Diego County from 1890 to 1922. Recovery took place largely from 1929 to 1939. The egret's colonization of San Diego County beginning in 1979 suggests that another population expansion is underway, in parallel with the Great Egret's. Yet Christmas bird counts suggest another story, that the number of Snowy Egrets, at least in winter, peaked in the 1970s and 1980s and may have declined since the early 1990s. The factors governing Snowy Egret numbers in San Diego County, and the degree to which the birds move in and out of the county, are unknown.

**Taxonomy:** Snowy Egrets in San Diego County, like those elsewhere in the western United States, are closer in size to those of the eastern half of the country, smaller and thinner billed than those of Baja California, and so best called *E. t. candidissima* (Gmelin, 1789) (Rea 1983).