

1947

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### Recommended Citation

Hodges, James (1947) "The American Egret in Iowa," *Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science*: Vol. 54: No. 1 , Article 52.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/pias/vol54/iss1/52>

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## The American Egret in Iowa

JAMES HODGES

### *Introduction*

An Iowa bird which has received state wide attention during the last few years from both ornithologists and non-ornithologists is the beautiful American Egret (*Casmerodius albus egretta*). The American Egret may be called a "bird with a history" due to the fact of its on and off presence in the state of Iowa. I have felt that there is a need for bringing up to date the American Egret records of now and the past, and so it is with this thought in mind that I have prepared this brief paper. The body of the paper is divided into three parts which deal with the history, migration, and habits during migration.

The data in this paper are not taken just from the journals of the author, but much data has been very graciously sent to me by other Iowa ornithologists. The data that has been contributed have been more than helpful for the part on present-day distribution of the bird in Iowa. I wish to take this opportunity to thank the following individuals for their help in supplying data: Dr. Paul L. Errington, Iowa State College, Ames; Mr. M. L. Jones, Ledges State Park, Boone; Mr. Charles A. Stewart, New Albin; Mrs. W. C. DeLong, Clarion; Mr. Ed. Heuser, Dubuque; Mr. Charles C. Ayres, Jr., Ottumwa; and Mr. Frank Berry of Lewis.

All county records known to me have been included in this paper: there may be unrecorded county records or recorded ones that I may have missed, but this must be anticipated as there are a large number of counties in Iowa.

### *History in Iowa*

#### *Past*

The first annotated list of Iowa birds by Keyes and Williams (1887) states that the American Egret, "was a rare summer resident observed along the borders of wooded streams." This record can not be considered as very complete because ornithological interest was very lax at this period, so it may have been possible that the bird did have a larger distribution than formerly realized.

The next list of Iowa birds was written by Rudolph M. Anderson and was published in 1907, which contained records of this bird from only a few counties. All who did have records of this bird listed it as rare, with the exception of Harold J. Giddings of Sabula, Jackson County, who stated that he had, "formerly seen hundreds at a time on sand-bars in the Mississippi River." Sabula, Iowa, borders the Mississippi River, thus accounting for its being more common there. Anderson considered the bird at that time as a casual or irregular visitor in Iowa.

The next state work was written by Philip A. DuMont in 1934. The Egret is listed as, "formerly a common late summer visitor, but absent for nearly twenty years." Mr. DuMont reports records from fifteen counties.

*Present and Future*

In 1942 a nesting colony of these birds was found in the bottom lands of the Mississippi River in Sabula, Jackson County, Iowa. James Harlan wrote an article (1943) in "Iowa Bird Life" on this colony, where he says in part, "For at least the second successive year American Egrets are known to have made their home and successfully raised their young in an Iowa rookery. The colony is located in the Mississippi River bottoms in Jackson County. . .

"For a number of years egrets have been increasingly common, after having been almost entirely absent from the state for nearly 20 years."

In 1945 Mr. Harlan reported (Iowa Bird Life) that this colony was abandoned and the cause of this act was unknown.

I sent out requests for information on this bird and received replies from seven individuals representing eleven counties in Iowa. Of the eleven counties reported on, the Egret was found to occur only in seven.

The following material is a summary of the letters that I have received from other Iowa Ornithologists in regard to distribution.

The following counties were reported on where Egrets have never been observed: Cass, Delaware, Fremont, and Story.

The Egret occurs in the following counties, according to the letters of information that I have received: Dallas, Dubuque, Hamilton, Wright, Hancock, Allamakee, and Wapello.

This gives an excellent idea as to its distribution at the present time. It seems as though the American Egret is found wherever it can find food and cover, which are easily found along the Mississippi River and such areas as wooded streams and sloughs.

All records mentioned in this paper may be classified as shown in Table I. Thirty-three counties are represented in this paper, but there may be more records which are yet unpublished.

The state of Minnesota borders Iowa, and consequently it would be interesting to know what the status of the Egret is in Minnesota at the present time. Mr. W. J. Breckenridge records in "THE AUK", "Minnesota's bird-minded naturalists have been watching with great interest the ever-increasing number of records . . . in the State during the past few years, with the hope that this bird may become a regular nesting species in Minnesota. Most of these recent records have been in late summer and fall and were probably of both adult and young birds wandering northward from their normal southern breeding range at the close of the nesting season.

"In 1938 a surprising invasion of these egrets occurred. Mr. Albert Van S. Pulling . . . reported nearly 200 along the river in north-

eastern Iowa and from 50-100 in the bottom lands between Wabasha and the Iowa line.

"These records indicate that the American Egrets in the Mississippi Valley must be re-establishing themselves in numbers approaching those of 75 years ago when they may have nested here before."

The future of this bird is not difficult to chart if the conditions at the present time remain the same. Several correspondents state that the bird is on the increase, and I believe it is true wherever they are found, due to the protection of Federal and State laws. Perhaps the colony will be established again in Sabula and new colonies be formed in favorable parts of Iowa. At any rate, an increase in the number of Egrets along our water habitats will be welcomed by everyone who has an eye for natural beauty.

### *The Migration*

The American Egret is both a spring and fall migrant in Iowa, and so I shall begin with the spring migration.

Information contained in the letters of information sent to me showed a lack of data on the spring migration which compares to my own observations and data, that this bird is not common in the spring but instead quite an uncommon spring migrant through the Mississippi Valley which borders the state of Iowa. Mr. Ayres reported, "My earliest record of the American Egret in this county (Wapello), is the 24th of April, 1943."

My records for the area of Scott County show that this bird passes through during the middle of April.

The fall migration is the larger and more conspicuous of the two. Almost all of the letters I received contained information on the extent of the fall migration in their counties, and so I quote quite often from this up-to-date information.

Let us begin in the county that is on the Iowa-Minnesota line which is bordered by the Mississippi River—Allamakee County.

Mr. Stewart writes that in Allamakee County the first birds arrive in the middle of July, increasing in number till the first of August. By the middle of September they have left. On July 25, 1946, he counted forty-two Egrets on a dead tree along a slough, plus six Great Blue Herons. He feels that the Egrets migrate in small flocks but separate when they arrive at the sloughs.

The next county down the river is Dubuque, where Mr. Heuser found from one to a dozen or more birds during the late summer months.

The next down-river county is Jackson, where the Egrets nested for several years but later abandoned (see under history). From my own observations they are a common fall migrant in that area, even though they no longer nest in that area.

In Scott and Muscatine Counties I have my own records to draw from. As soon as the first hint of fall appears the Egrets arrive,

which is on the average is during the last week of July or the first week of August. They arrive in the early morning hours or in some cases just about dusk. These flights may contain as many as thirty individuals. The largest number of birds I have found at one time in one flock is thirty-two individuals.

When the birds arrive they find some spot that has a good supply of food and remain in that area until the supply is gone or they are driven away for some other reason. A typical example of this is a group of eight birds that were found at the Credit Island harbor every day from August 22 to September 22, 1946. They left because of the arrival of the high water stage of the Mississippi River, which in a large measure eliminated their food supply in that immediate area. The last bird passes through this area in the second week of October.

Mr. Ayres of Ottumwa found that these birds arrive about July 20th, when he has found as many as seventeen at one time.

#### *Habits During Migration*

The migration period is rather limited, thus reducing a more detailed account and study of their habits to a minimum, though some data have been collected by myself and others during this period of their life history.

Charles Stewart of New Albin, Iowa, writes of their habits, "In La Crosse, Wisconsin, there is a small lake fairly well down town in the city, with a stream of cars passing at all times and a foundry across from it. This lake usually has at least two Egrets in it. I have noticed that this bird is more easily approached when taking its summer vacation than was my experience when watching them in Florida."

From Edward Heuser of Dubuque, Iowa, I received the following, "At a lake where we have the cabin an Egret lived the greater part of the summer of 1945, often fishing in the company with a Great Blue Heron. Again this summer (1946) apparently the same bird frequented the same spots in solitude, sometimes fishing within 15 or 20 yards from where I fished out of an anchored boat."

Along with his letter of information Mr. Ayres sent some newspaper clippings on the occurrence of the Egret in Ottumwa, so it may be of interest to others in the sense that they are a little on the novel side. Someone had shot an Egret and wounded it during the fall of 1946. The bird was retrieved by Mr. Ayres and taken to his home. There a veterinarian and several members of the local bird club worked several hours to save the bird's life by amputating the bird's right wing. The same bird was on exhibit at the state fair, but it was killed after the fair as demanded by law.

The Egret is an easy bird to study during migration. In some cases they allow closer approach than any other waders found in this area. When they arrive they are quite shy and wary, and on the average you can get within fifty feet from them. After they

have been here for about three weeks you can, under favorable conditions, get within fifteen feet.

The call note and vocal efforts of this species is as outstanding as its plumage. I have heard a call given that sounded very much like a long drawn out snort. Then again I heard a call given that sounded like a "caw" with the addition of a call which reminded me of the noise made by sucking air through a hollow straw. The best way to describe the call is to say it is a crow-like "caw" but more drawn out with the addition of a few grunts and groans for good measure.

The call is given with the neck stretched in the air. If you disturb them while they are feeding and force them to take flight, they always give their call. They sometimes "caw" to other feeding companions and in some cases they were even heard to call "sotto voce".

While wading in the water they go through many actions and poses. In most cases they keep next to the shore, but in some cases a few daring individuals wade out far enough to submerge the tail feathers. While in the water they do a lot of preening and vibrating certain parts of the body such as the back and the wings. They expand one wing at a time as if stretching them. They stand quite erect taking slow steps and then halt a moment so as to seize their unlucky prey or to see if there is any danger nearby. The neck in its normal position is slightly curled, but when they are aroused or nervous they stretch the neck to its full extent at about a 45 degree angle.

When not in the water or in flight they perch on a fence post or in the upper branches of a large tree so as to be safe from enemies.

I was unable to determine if they had molted before they arrived here, but I believe they had. In some cases in this area where they are found in their post-nuptial wandering I have found small feathers plus several large feathers floating in the water where they frequented. This is during August.

It was interesting to note the reaction to each other and other species' reaction to them. The Egrets get along well between themselves; I have never seen any of them acting pugnacious toward each other except once, when an Egret made a jab at a nearby Egret with its bill. At every slough that the Egrets visited, Killdeers (*Oxyechus vociferus vociferus*) were also found; and they were constantly giving their loud call, but the Egrets took no notice of them. Nobis Slough is surrounded by the Common Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*). In this bush the Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) construct their nests. One day an Egret got too close to a Blackbird's nest that contained young, and the male Blackbird became angry and flew at the Egret's head in a most threatening manner. The Egret gave several harsh calls and took a short flight to another part of the slough eight feet away from the Blackbird's nest and then was again able to feed in peace.

The diet of the Egret at this time is made up of the usual fare

of aquatic insect life and crayfish. On August 22, 1946, I saw something unusual in the way of feeding. An Egret was flying over the Mississippi River and all of a sudden it stopped and hovered in the air in Hummingbird style, dropped into the river, and immediately came up with something in its bill and flew over to the neighboring shore to devour its catch. I think it was either a small fish or a piece of refuse. This was the first time that I had seen such a performance and have not seen it again.

The manner of roosting was of interest to me. For an example we shall take the case of the eight birds that spent all of their time on the Credit Island harbor. There was no visible relationship between these birds, so consequently they did not roost in the same tree or in the same area. In about all cases they roosted as individuals. They usually left to roost about a half hour before dusk. But the departure of one bird from the loose flock of feeding birds does not seem to urge the other birds to follow immediately. They roosted in trees fifty feet from the ground at the minimum and seventy-five feet at the maximum.

#### *Summary and Conclusions*

The American Egret was at one time a rare migrant in the state of Iowa. After an absence for nearly twenty years from this state they were found nesting in the bottom lands of the Mississippi River near Sabula, Iowa. After nesting in that area for several years they deserted the colony, but the Egret remains as a migrant through most of the counties in the state.

From data published in Iowa bird books and in ornithological periodicals and data sent to me, the Egrets are known either to occur or to have occurred in thirty-three Iowa counties during their migration.

The nearby state of Minnesota has had an increasing number of Egrets during the last few years.

From the present population trend it seems fairly safe to say that the American Egret will continue to increase as a migrant, and new nesting sites may be established and old ones re-established.

The spring migration is very small, with birds passing through in the middle of April, while the fall migration is not large enough to be classed as a common migrant but still large enough to attract the attention of even non-bird-minded individuals. The fall migration starts in the middle of July with increasing numbers until the first of August, where the population remains about the same until perhaps the middle or latter part of September, when they leave and continue on their flight to the wintering grounds.

Egrets are not as wary during the migration as they are when engaged in the nesting cycle, though they are a little shy when they first arrive.

Their call is given quite often while they are wading and searching for food.

They roost as individuals and depart from the feeding grounds one at a time when they go to roost.

Their food at this period of their life history is composed of aquatic insect life, crayfish, and frogs.

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DAVENPORT, IOWA.

**Table I**

Classification of Iowa County Records of The American Egret.

Anderson—1907.

|         |            |
|---------|------------|
| Monona. | Wayne.     |
| Lee.    | Van Buren. |

DuMont—1934.

|            |             |
|------------|-------------|
| Clayton.   | Johnson.    |
| Polk.      | Louisa      |
| Woodbury.  | Scott.      |
| Emmet.     | Des Moines. |
| Palo Alto. | Jefferson.  |
| Dallas.    | Union.      |
| Marion.    | Henry.      |
| Mahaska.   |             |

Iowa Bird Life—1940-47.

|             |          |
|-------------|----------|
| Clinton.    | Cedar.   |
| Black Hawk. | Linn.    |
| Iowa.       | Jackson. |