

Avery Island Egrets: A Success Story

by Elaine Radford
Metairie, Louisiana

The egrets were doomed. Everyone agreed on that. The new wealth created by the conquest of America had, in turn, created a large middle class whose women demanded the finest fashions — including the lovely plumes of the egret to adorn their enormous collections of hats. Since the birds developed the plumes only during the breeding season, collecting the feathers meant killing the adults and leaving eggs or chicks to die. Unable to reproduce, the egrets faced almost certain extinction.

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Photos by Roger Williams at Avery Island



More than 20,000 families of herons, mostly the white varieties known as egrets, are raised at Avery Island each year.



Even if you're bad at judging sizes, the common egret is easily distinguished from the snowy because the larger common egret has black feet. The snowy has bright yellow feet on the end of its long, black legs.



A closer view of one of the nesting platforms shows many baby and juvenile egrets.



A great egret (Egretta alba) fishing.

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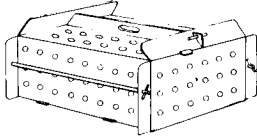
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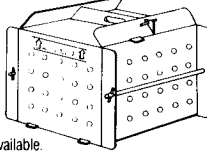


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Avery Island Egrets. . .

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As the birds grew rarer, the value of their plumes skyrocketed. By 1903, an ounce of white plumes — the amount collected from four birds — had reached twice the price of an equivalent weight in gold. "There will always be men who would break any law for such profit," wrote a despairing observer in 1905. "No rookery of these herons can long exist, unless it be guarded by force of arms day and night."

Yes, the egret was surely doomed. Ladies must have their hats, men their gold, and no amount of legislation was going to change those basic facts.

Today, hundreds or even thousands of egrets may nest in a single rookery. At one site, "Bird City" on Avery Island near New Iberia, Louisiana, more than twenty thousand pairs of egrets raise their families each year. The birds have extended their ranges so far from their traditional southern homes that nestings have been reported along the Utah/Idaho border and even on Long Island!

What saved the egret? The same thing that had threatened it in the first place: people. The Audubon Society and many other concerned organizations clamored for legislation and insisted on telling people the truth about the ugly practice of plume hunting. A Florida game warden gave his life to defend an egret rookery from plume hunters, arousing public outrage at the ruthlessness of the collectors. Women began to ask why wearing the feathers (and sometimes whole bodies) of dead birds on their heads was considered attractive.

Yet, people's minds changed slowly. One man, Edward Avery McIlhenny, wanted to make sure that there would still be egrets around by the time the law and outraged opinion fully protected them. He decided to use some primitive techniques of aviculture to teach the birds to nest in a safe place on his own property on Avery Island.

In 1892, McIlhenny collected seven young snowy egrets (*Egretta thula*) and placed them in a cage he'd built over an island on an artificial lake. Since he fed them himself without the benefit of the elaborate puppets we might use today, the young birds became very tame. No doubt he experienced a great deal of anxiety when he destroyed the cage at the beginning of the migration period.

Would the young birds know where to go for the winter? Would they be able to care for themselves? Would they return safely?

The answer was yes. Six of the birds returned the next season. Two pairs mated, raising four young apiece. And the next spring, these young returned along with their parents to make their first attempts at their own families. Soon, the larger great egrets (*Egretta alba*) also discovered the protected rookery. Eventually the colony became so successful that the caretakers were forced to build breeding platforms because there weren't enough trees around to accommodate all the birds that wanted to nest in the rookery. Today, thirty truckloads of twigs are brought in each year to supply the birds with nesting material, and over 20,000 families nest under the excited gaze of photographers, bird-watchers, and tourists.

Arthur Cleveland Bent, author of the *Life Histories of the North American Birds*, said of McIlhenny's work: "This has proven to be one of the most remarkable and most successful experiments in conservation of which we have any record in this country. It demonstrates what can be done under intelligent supervision and illustrates the great recuperative powers of wildlife under favorable circumstances."

When we're fighting people who don't believe that aviculture has a place in the conservation of wild birds, we need to remember our success stories. McIlhenny's care for his birds wasn't one hundred percent natural. He intentionally won their trust in hopes of convincing them to breed on his property, rather than in the beleaguered swampland rookeries that their kind had inhabited for generations. Today, many so-called conservationists would howl at the very idea of such an interventionist move. (Witness the outcry that accompanied Noel Snyder's suggestion that some of the captive-bred California condors eventually be released in Arizona's Grand Canyon National Park, where plenty of people can watch them to make sure that they're safe.)

But the fact remains that McIlhenny's effort worked. By teaching the snowy egret to breed on Avery Island, he helped keep these beautiful birds alive for future generations to enjoy. ●

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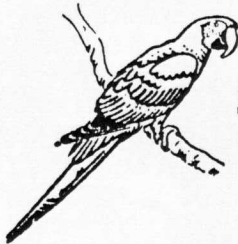
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