

## NONGAME FIELD NOTES

# Great Egret

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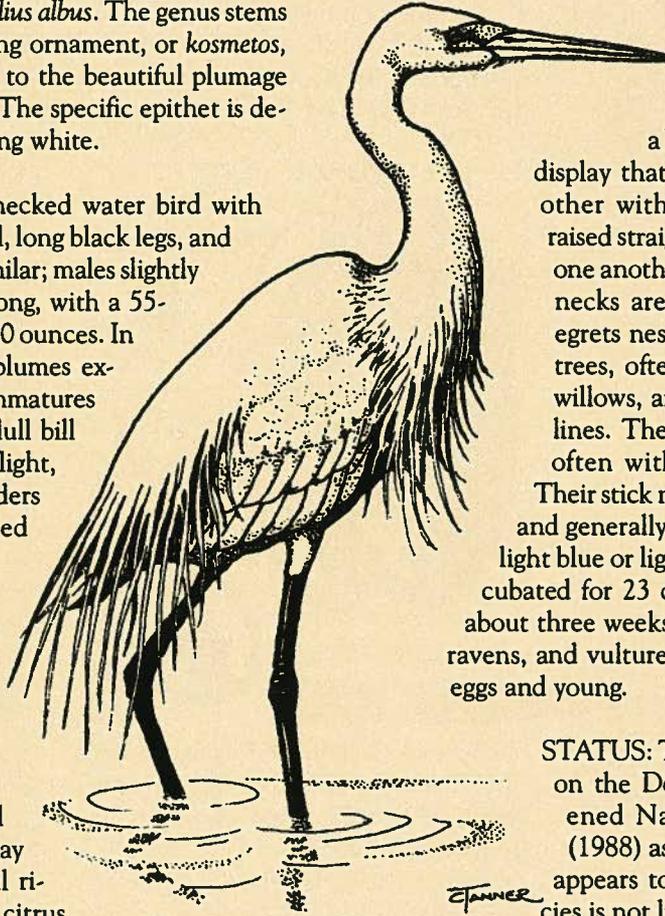
**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Casmerodius albus*. The genus stems from the Greek *Kosmos*, meaning ornament, or *kosmetos*, meaning adorned, in reference to the beautiful plumage and nuptial plumes (aigrettes). The specific epithet is derived from the Latin *alb*, meaning white.

**DESCRIPTION:** A tall, slim-necked water bird with white plumage, heavy yellow bill, long black legs, and black feet. Males and females similar; males slightly larger. About 37 to 41 inches long, with a 55-inch wingspread. Weight 32 to 40 ounces. In breeding season, long nuptial plumes extend from back to beyond tail. Immatures and nonbreeding adults have dull bill and legs, and lack plumes. In flight, long neck tucked back on shoulders in S-shape, and legs extended straight back.

**HABITAT:** Inhabits rivers, streams, ponds, lakes, marshes, and mud flats that are often dominated by cattails, reeds, and other emergent plants. Forages in open wetland habitats, especially along vegetated edges of large waters. Breeding may be limited by availability of tall riparian trees for nesting, though citrus groves have been used in the Yuma area.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Breeds in southern North America to South America. Winters in southern and western United States to South and Central America. Scattered breeding flocks occur along the lower Colorado River. Found in central Arizona as a post-breeding wanderer during most of the summer. During winter, scattered flocks and individuals are often seen along larger rivers and lakes in southern and western Arizona.

**BIOLOGY:** Great egrets consume fish, insects, and amphibians with equal abandon. They rake the watercourse bottom with their feet to flush prey into sight, then strike with their long, spear-like bills. Egrets forage during the day, and in late evening congregate at roosts, where they remain until daybreak.



During nesting season (spring), pairs of egrets perform a beautiful, graceful courtship display that includes greeting one another with erect plumes and wings raised straight out. In flight, they circle one another and emit calls while their necks are stretched skyward. Great egrets nest in waterside thickets and trees, often in mature cottonwoods, willows, and salt cedars along shorelines. They nest singly or in groups, often with other egrets or herons. Their stick nests are loosely constructed and generally unlined. The three or four light blue or light bluish-green eggs are incubated for 23 days. Young leave the nest about three weeks after hatching. Raccoons, ravens, and vultures often prey on unguarded eggs and young.

**STATUS:** The great egret was included on the Department's list of Threatened Native Wildlife in Arizona (1988) as endangered, but no longer appears to be at risk here. The species is not listed or proposed for listing by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as endangered or threatened.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** Great egret numbers plummeted at the turn of the last century, when the millinery feather trade was thriving and plumes were valued at \$32 per ounce. Market and feather hunting devastated egret and heron populations, leading to the creation of the National Audubon Society and federal laws to protect migratory birds. Those days of unregulated harvest are long since over, although vandalistic shooting still takes a toll (especially of nesting birds). Today, the principal threats are loss of riparian trees, drainage of marshlands, and environmental contaminants. Recreational use of backwaters and coves by boaters and jet skiers may also disturb breeding egrets. Protection of important nesting areas and wetlands will provide safeguards against population declines. ♣