



## SNOWY EGRET

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**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Egretta thula*. The genus is derived from the French *aigrette*, for egret. The specific epithet *thula* is derived from a Chilean name for the bird from which the species was first described in 1782.

**DESCRIPTION:** The snowy egret is a typical member of the heron family. Mid-sized at 24 inches in body length, with a wingspan of about 41 inches, its distinguishing characteristics are a snow-white plumage, yellow lores (naked skin between the bill and the eye), slender black bill and (often mud-stained) black legs, and bright yellow to yellow-green feet. Immatures have a yellowish stripe down the back of the leg. In breeding plumage, long plumes drape from the head, neck, and back. Those on the back curl upward, making a duck-like tuft above the tail.

**HABITAT:** Snowy egrets are marshland birds that are encountered less frequently than Arizona's other common diurnal herons. Cattle egrets are more common in meadows and pastures, and great blue herons and great egrets are more common along rivers and streams.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Snowies are year-round residents of coastal marshlands in the southeastern United States (from the mid-Atlantic states through Texas) and California, south to South America. In Arizona they occur year-round along the lower Gila River from Phoenix to the Colorado River, and in our "Everglades," near Yuma. In summer, they breed inland through the southern states, locally as far west as California. Arizona breeding colonies exist near Yuma and below Painted Rock Dam. As with most herons, post-breeding dispersing snowies may show up almost anywhere.

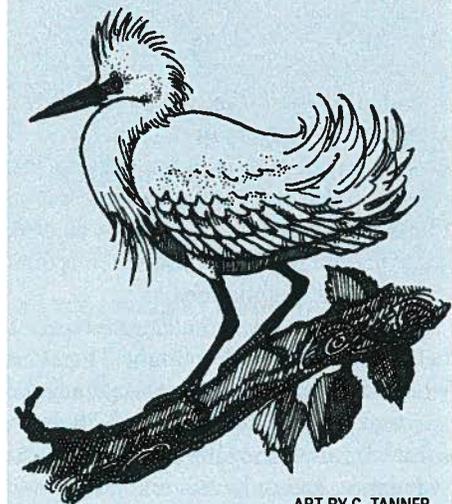
**BIOLOGY:** The snowy egret is one of the more actively foraging herons. It

wades about in shallow water, shuffling its feet to stir up a variety of prey items and showing little of the patience that we sometimes associate with great blue herons and great egrets. Most anything it encounters will be consumed, after being captured by repeated, remarkably fast, spearing motions with its sharp bill. Among the favored foods are fish, frogs, snakes, crabs, crayfish, and aquatic insects.

Snowies leave their roosts at dawn to forage, and return again in the evening. They may nest in trees, often up to 30 feet above ground, or on the ground, but most often use small trees and shrubs up to 10 or so feet tall. They nest in large colonies (up to a thousand or more nests per colony), small groups, or solitarily. The eggs are laid in spring, both sexes incubate (for about 18 days), and the young leave the nest about 20-25 days after hatching.

**STATUS:** The snowy egret was included on the Department's draft list of *Wildlife of Special Concern in Arizona* (AGFD in prep.), but has not been listed or proposed for listing by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as endangered or threatened. Concerns have been expressed about the snowy egret's status in other parts of its range, but most serious problems seem to be local rather than range-wide issues.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** Management of this species could be improved by better information on key roosting and nesting habitats statewide. Habitat requirements should be documented, as should the effects (if any) of specific recreational uses of occupied areas. Baseline information on population status will become more crucial as wetlands continue to be affected by a variety of land uses. 🦶



ART BY C. TANNER

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