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Recent Nesting of the American Egret in Iowa

By JAMES HODGES

A recent paper by the author (Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science; 54:317-323) brought up to date recent observations of the American Egret (*Casmerodius albus egretta*) in Iowa which was followed by an excellent paper in IOWA BIRD LIFE by Charles A. Stewart which covered past records as well as the historical aspect. However, I wish to add a few more words to the subject concerning this bird in Iowa due to the recent discovery of a new nesting colony.

On June 19, 1949 the author accompanied by Richard Schaefer began a search for the nests of the American Egret which was reported constantly by commercial fishermen on the Mississippi River. A nesting colony was suspected in 1948 because of the few birds that were observed during that summer but the increase in the number of summer birds in 1949 was indication enough that they were nesting in the vicinity.

On the afternoon of this warm June day we found our colony located at the mouth of the Rock River where it enters into the Mississippi River. The exact location of the colony is in Rock Island County, Illinois which is just opposite of Scott County, Iowa. As a matter of fact, the nests can be seen clearly from the Iowa shore with the aid of a twenty power telescope. The timber in which they were nesting is the old camping ground of Chief Blackhawk of a century ago. I understand that this area is an undeveloped city park of Rock Island, Illinois.

The first thing that we noticed on entering the nesting site was that the ground was literally white-washed by the droppings of the birds with the addition of egg shells and molted feathers including several of the head plumes for which the bird was killed almost to the brink of extinction years ago. One nestling egret, that had evidently been evicted from the nest and was killed in the fall, was found on the ground. The timber was full of the shadows of the flying birds returning to feed their young. In order to hear each other we had to shout as the noise that the birds made was tremendous coupled with the noise the droppings made as they hit the hard soil sounding very much like a hard fall rain on dry leaves. This entire nesting area was about a block square as far as we could determine at the time. On the ground, also, were the remains of previous meals such as the skeletons of fish. The majority of the remains were those of the common Carp Fish from one to one and one-half

feet in length. Though large fish of this species are quite common in the area it does seem almost impossible that such a fish can be caught and brought back to the nest, in one instance close to a distance of three miles.

However, the American Egrets were not the only residents of this colony as the Black-crowned Night Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax hoactli*), Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) and perhaps one or two pair of Green Herons (*Butorides virescens virescens*) were found also. The nests of the Black-crowned Night Heron were closer to the river while those of the American Egret and Great Blue Heron were more in the center of the heronry. We noted one fledgling Black-crowned Night Heron that had left the nest but in the lower branches of the tree, as all the nests were at the very tops of the trees, who had the misfortune of having its long neck entangled with a crotch in one of the trees, and was unable to extract itself and so strangled to death. We also found one more American Egret that would have been able to fly in a few days dead on the ground from the fall from the nest. The greatest mortality factor in such a colony are those birds that are killed just before or as they leave the nest through such accidents.

During the succeeding days I made several attempts to visit the colony from the mainland without the use of a boat but found it to be impossible because of the tall weeds and other obstructions which were at least in the favor of the birds, preventing others from visiting the colony and doing possible damage. By questioning residents of that vicinity I found that none of them were aware of the colony though they knew that the birds had been spending the summer in that area.

During July the Credit Island Harbor, which is located in Scott County just opposite the nesting site, was always full of these birds indicating that the majority of the young were fledged by then. By July 16th I found evidence that the adult birds were starting to molt and by July 23rd very little activity was in evidence at the nesting site, only a lone bird now and then who was probably engaged in a late nesting. I watched the birds go to roost for a number of nights but they seemed to roost at their feeding area (Credit Island Harbor) and did not return to the nesting site to roost, as I had expected them to do.

August 3rd the colony was deserted and migrants were starting to pass through in larger numbers. The last American Egrets were seen on October 22nd, a group of six at Credit Island Harbor.

On November 27, 1949 I returned to the colony to make a study

of the nests and prepare for more extensive studies if the birds return to nest in 1950.

In an area of a square city block forty-five individual trees contained a total of ninety-seven nests, the maximum nests in one tree being twelve. There were about twenty more trees in one group with interwoven branches which contained about sixty nests and another such a group containing about forty more nests. This makes about one hundred and ninety-seven nests in this colony. Judging by nest size I estimated that seventy-five percent of these nests were those of the Black-crowned Night Herons while the other twenty-five percent were divided equally between the American Egret and the Great Blue Heron. The nests were between fifty and seventy-five feet from the ground.

However, it can not be assumed that all of these nests were constructed during 1949 as the Black-crowned Night Herons have been nesting there for at least two years now. The nests of the American Egret, or at least the majority of these nests, were from the 1949 season.

The only other recorded nesting colony of the American Egrets was found in the bottom lands of the Mississippi River in Jackson County, Iowa in 1942 but the birds did not return the following year. Without a doubt a few pair still nest in the more favorable areas in the upper Mississippi Valley or along the inland waterways; perhaps even other nesting colonies exist. But never-the-less this is the second reported nesting colony in this portion of the middle west.

Needless to say, I am awaiting with great anticipation for the 1950 nesting season so that I can carry out extensive studies of this colony, in particular the American Egret.

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