

Great Egret

Casmerodius albus (kaz-mer-OH-dee-us AL-buss)
kosmetos = “decorated” *herodius* = “heron” *albus* = “white”

The beautiful feathers of the great egrets (EE-grets) almost caused their extinction. Why? Some of their other names – plume birds, big plume birds, and long whites – give us a clue. In the 1840’s it became fashionable to decorate ladies’ hats with feathers, and by 1903 the lovely, flowing plumes of the great egret and snowy egret were worth \$32 per ounce, twice the value of gold. But by then the egrets were almost wiped out. When the Audubon Society publicized their pitiful plight, laws were passed and the sixty-year slaughter stopped.

Although pesticides poison their food, and the draining of wetlands reduces feeding and nesting sites, they have made an amazing recovery. Watch for them in swamps and marshes.

A great blue heron’s white phase, in south Florida, may be mistaken for a great egret. But the great egret’s legs are black, while the “white” great blue heron’s legs are yellow.

Family Feud Great egret chicks often commit *siblicide* (SIB-lih-side). That is, stronger nestmates often murder smaller nestmates

They peck with their saber-sharp bills, beat with their wings, and shove the smaller nestlings out of the nest. Weaker chicks may trip and fall from the nest.



These chicks are very hot-tempered. It’s not just simple hunger. Even fat chicks have three or four knock-down fights every **day**.

Half of the chicks in a nest may die during their first month. This ensures that the strongest chicks will be well fed and strong, and more likely to survive.

Two to four eggs hatch in the order they’re laid, so the oldest chick may be much larger than the youngest. If there’s extra food, the last-hatched chick **may** get some. Otherwise...

Aigrette Plumes

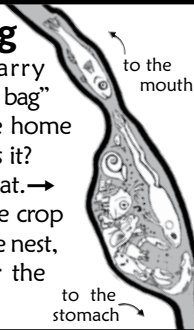
The egret is named for the white feathers, *aigrettes* (ay-GRETS = a French word for “a spray of feathers”), which grow from its back. As many as fifty delicate plumes flow down behind like a fringed cape. When courting or excited, the egret fans them upward in an airy rosette over its body.



Take-Out Bag

Many birds carry along a kind of “doggy bag” (called a **crop**) to tote home extra groceries. Where is it?

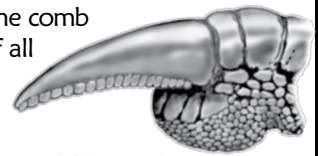
It’s at the base of the throat. → Food is stored in the flexible crop to digest. If they have chicks at the nest, they take it home to urp up for the kiddies’ snack-time. YUM!



Grooming Guide

Because it catches and eats slimy, gooey things (fish, snails, etc.), an egret must have some way to get its feathers clean again.

It combs its neck, face and chin with a special toothed edge on the outer rim of each middle claw. That helps, but the comb can’t get off all the goo, slime, and fish grease.



A shampoo would be perfect.

But Big Bird can’t trot off to the beauty salon, so these dirty birds have evolved another way to clean their grubby plumage.

Patches of “powder feathers” on breast and back erode into a film of waxy powder as they emerge.

With its bill, the egret spreads the waxy powder around to blot up dirt and to waterproof its feathers.

Do you think it would work to powder **your** hair when it needs a shampoo?

Hurricane!

A hurricane is the most dreaded event of a Southeast summer – according to humans.

Animals just hunker down until it passes. If they survive, they get on with living.

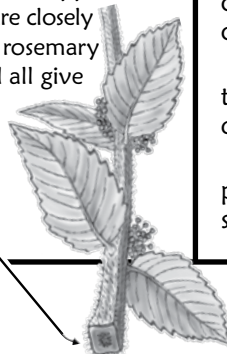
A hurricane changes the swamp’s scenery. As in a theatrical drama, the characters’ lives may change for better or worse; some even die. But ultimately, the swamp is refreshed with new growth, and the curtain goes up on the next act.

Mint, Rosemary & Thyme

Were you ever taking a walk when you suddenly smelled “peppermint tea!”?

Is it possible you just stepped on a mint plant? Mints are closely related to thyme, rosemary and lavender, and all give off a strong scent (especially when they’re mashed).

If it has a square stem, it’s a mint.



38. The Great Egret

The great egret had tensed, body stretched, neck coiled in an S-curve, inching closer and closer to the frog. At exactly the right instant, her neck uncoiled like a spring, shooting her bill forward like open scissors. As bluegills flashed away in panic, the yellow bill snapped shut on the frog, jerking it out from under the protective leaves.

The egret flipped the frog into the air, then caught it just as its head pointed toward her body. She snapped, gulped and the frog rippled visibly all the way down to her crop at the base of her throat. For a moment she stood, opening and closing her bill and swallowing, then she sprang upward, flapping her wings heavily in the steamy air.

Her crop was full. In addition to the frog, she had swallowed three dragonflies, a crane fly, a cotton mouse, and several mosquitofish. Returning to her treetop nest in the island rookery, she flew tilted slightly forward from the weight in her crop, her splendid plumes flowing behind like a silvery scarf.

Hurricane season had arrived, and all afternoon the sky had been filling with dark menacing clouds. The air felt hot and full, and the swamp water, flat and oily-looking, reflected the gloomy overcast sky.

As she arrived at the rookery, the egret was slammed by a gust of hot wind. All around her, egrets, white ibises and herons hunched down in their nests, facing into the rising wind. She landed awkwardly on the tangle of nest sticks that held her three chicks as it swayed springily from side to side with each new gust.

“KUK.....KUK.....KUK!” she yelped, struggling to keep her balance. Her three pushy chicks swarmed around her, poking at her bill, squawking and pecking fiercely at each other – each was determined to get *all* the food.

She arched her neck and regurgitated a glob of partly-digested dinner into the bill of the most persistent chick. The two smaller chicks buffeted their mother and the lucky chick with their wings and bills, but in the blasting wind the smallest chick lost its balance and tumbled over the edge of the nest. Not yet able to fly, it landed in crumpled heap in the peppermint plants at the base of the tree and did not move again.

The chick’s family barely noticed. But its unfortunate plunge was observed with great interest by a bobcat, patrolling her territory with her two young kittens.

