

Great Egret

Ardea alba

The Great Egret is the largest of the all-white herons/egrets found in Florida, aside from the rare white morph of the Great Blue Heron.

Although wooded swamps and wetlands are the preferred location, Great Egrets can be found near any form of water: streams, lakes, ponds, mud flats, and saltwater and freshwater marshes.

The Great Egret can reach over three feet in height and weigh a little over two pounds. It can be distinguished from other white egrets by its yellow bill and black legs and feet. Males and females are identical in appearance; juveniles look like non-breeding adults. The smaller Snowy Egret has a black bill and legs with bright yellow feet.

In flight, the Great Egret's neck hangs down more and the legs protrude longer than other egrets. Its wing beats are deep and leisurely.

As the Great Egrets come into breeding condition, the color of the featherless parts of their heads changes. The lores (skin by the eye) turn from yellow to lime green, and the bill becomes dark along the top. The lores change back to yellow after the egrets finish laying eggs, but the bills retain some of the dark color for most of the breeding season.

Since they are frequently hunting in water, Great Egrets need to compensate for refraction, which is why they move their heads from side to side and backward and forward. When hunting, they also tilt their heads towards the shaded side of their bodies and strike into their shadows to avoid the glare of the sun on the surface of the water.

Prey is mostly smaller aquatic and terrestrial insects and vertebrates, small fish, and crayfish. The most common feeding technique is to stand motionless in shallow water and wait for prey to come close enough to catch. Standing upright, they have a better field of vision; crouching permits the bird to put the bill closer to the intended prey.



Studies have found that Great Egrets catch more prey of intermediate size by staying in one spot rather than moving around, which suggests that their goal is not to catch the largest quantity of food, but to catch high quality food.

The Great Egret reproductive strategy for survival is brood reduction – they lay a large clutch of three to five eggs and let sibling competition and food abundance play a large role in how many survive to fledge. Eggs are laid at two to three day intervals. As a result, the eggs hatch days apart and there are significant size differences between chicks of the same brood. Incubation is usually performed by both sexes and begins after the first or second egg has been laid. Both parents feed the chicks once they've hatched.

Competition for food among chicks is fierce. At feeding time the older chicks may peck at their smaller nestlings and try to monopolize the food. The larger chicks will be more successful at competing for enough food for themselves; if food is scarce, the smallest chick starves. In an unusually good year with abundant food, all the chicks may fledge. The youngest chick may also be considered an “insurance” chick to replace an older sibling that dies or an egg that doesn't hatch.

Mosquitofish were the primary prey items offered to nestlings, followed by crayfish, sailfin mollys, bluegills, and shad.

The eggs are incubated by both the male and female for about 23 to 24 days. Nestlings usually fledge 2-3 weeks after hatching.

With a clutch size of only 3-4 eggs, Great Egrets will lay replacement eggs if any of the first eggs are damaged. Great Egrets are capable of reproducing after two years and raise one brood per year.

Mortality of Great Egrets is high in the nest and in the first few months after they fledge. After the young leave the nest, they do not stay near their parents and must find good foraging areas and learn to capture prey on their own.

Estimates for Great Egret mortality are 76% in the first year, then 26% a year. The longest life span recorded in the wild was just under 23 years, but the average life span is a little over five years. So an egret that reaches the reproductive age of two years will typically live to breed for three more years.

Adult great egrets have no non-human predators. However, eggs and nestlings are exposed to numerous predators including crows, vultures, and the most threatening, raccoons.