

# Variable Roosting Habits of Great Egrets at Cornwall and Ottawa/Gatineau

*D. V. Chip Weselob, Rod Dubois,  
Bruce Di Labio and Bob Scranton*



Great Egret. Photo: Ann Brokelman



Great Egret. Photo: Ann Brokelman

## Introduction

The Great Egret (*Ardea alba*, henceforth egret) is a resident of southern Ontario from approximately late March through November, with stragglers remaining into December (James 1991, Sandilands 2005, Curry 2006). During the first half of this period, up to approximately late July, most egrets in southern Ontario are resident on their breeding colonies and range only within foraging distance of it, i.e. approximately 16 km (10 miles) but occasionally a bit farther (McCrimmon *et al.* 2011). Their activities during this period are well known: selecting territories and mates, nest building, courtship and copulation, egg laying, incubation and brooding, and feeding

young (McCrimmon *et al.* 2011). The activities of egrets during the post-breeding period, from July through November, are not as well documented but there is ample evidence that egrets are more widely distributed across much of southern Ontario during this period than during the breeding period (Speirs 1985, Sandilands 2005, Curry 2006, Weir 2008, Black and Roy 2010).

During the period from July to November, the activities of egrets in southern Ontario would include: dispersal from the breeding and natal colony by adults and juveniles, daily foraging in new territory, temporary residence and roosting within their dispersal area, migratory staging, nutritional preparation

for migration and, finally, southward migration. However, the details, and even the existence of many of these post-breeding activities in Ontario are not known or seldom recognized. For example, it is not known if there is a differential migration chronology (timing) where adult egrets migrate ahead of juvenile egrets, as there is with many other birds, e.g. shorebirds (Pienkowski and Evans 1984, Nol and Blaken 1999). Also, it is not known to what extent the egrets in southern Ontario undergo a northward post-breeding dispersal as do egrets from more southerly areas (McCrimmon *et al.* 2011). The Great Lakes and southern Ontario are already at the northern edge of the egret's breeding range in eastern North America and records to the north are rare.

For this paper, we have focused our attention, primarily, on the roosting habits of Great Egrets during the post-breeding period in the Cornwall and Ottawa River area. Some of the unknowns in this area include: are individual roosts used continuously during the July to November period or only sporadically? How many birds occupy given roosts? What is the most common size of roosts? What is the roosting substrate? Where do they roost? Are the same roosts used year after year? There are many unknowns pertaining to local movements and roosting habits of egrets in Ontario (and elsewhere) during the post-breeding season. Here, we describe the roosting habits of Great Egrets at two southern Ontario locations, one at Cornwall, Ontario, and the other at the

adjacent locations of Ottawa (Ontario) and Gatineau (Québec) in 2010 and 2011. These were two of the three most intensively monitored egret roosting sites in southern Ontario during this time with the third being Luther Marsh (DVCW and L. McLaren, unpubl. data). To the best of our knowledge, the types of questions posed above have not been addressed by any previous studies of Great Egrets (McCrimmon *et al.* 2011)

### Background

In the area of Cornwall, Ontario, Great Egrets formerly bred at Dickerson Island, approximately 10 km downstream (east) from the town site, in the Québec waters of the St. Lawrence River. They are known to have bred there from 1984 (David 1996) to 2003. Ninety-one nests were counted there in 2003 and (probably due to mammalian predation) they have not been known to nest there since (L. Harper unpubl. data). In the Cornwall area, egrets were first noted roosting in a small backwater section of a large wetland complex just south of where Richmond Drive crosses a set of railroad tracks, on the west side of Cornwall, Ontario, in August 2008 (BS unpubl. obs).

In the area of Ottawa, Ontario, and Gatineau (formerly Aylmer), Québec, Great Egrets are a relatively recent arrival; they were first reported as single birds in the former in 1972 (BD unpubl. obs.) and just east of the latter, at Masson (QC), in 1973 (RD unpubl. obs.). Reports of one to two egrets in Ottawa and east of Gatineau were received occasionally during the 1980s and 1990s





Great Egret. *Photo: Ann Brokelman*

(RD unpubl. obs.). In the early 2000s, the number of egrets began to increase; five to eight egrets were noted in Ottawa in the autumn (BD unpubl. obs.) and up to a dozen egrets were reported just east of Gatineau (RD unpubl. obs.). Egrets were first observed on Conroy Island in 2007 but were not noted to be roosting there, or anywhere in the area, until 2010, when more than 30 egrets were recorded (BD and RD unpubl. data). Up to the end of 2011, Great

Egrets did not breed anywhere near the Ottawa/ Gatineau area. In fact, the nearest colony was at Dickerson Island (approximately 100 km to the SE).

### **Methods**

At Cornwall, all observations were made from the backyard of the house at 5696 Richmond Drive by BS and colleagues. This yard abuts the extension of the wetland complex where the egrets roosted (Figure 1). From the backyard, across

Figure 1.  
The location of the  
egret roost off  
Richmond Drive in  
Cornwall, Ontario.

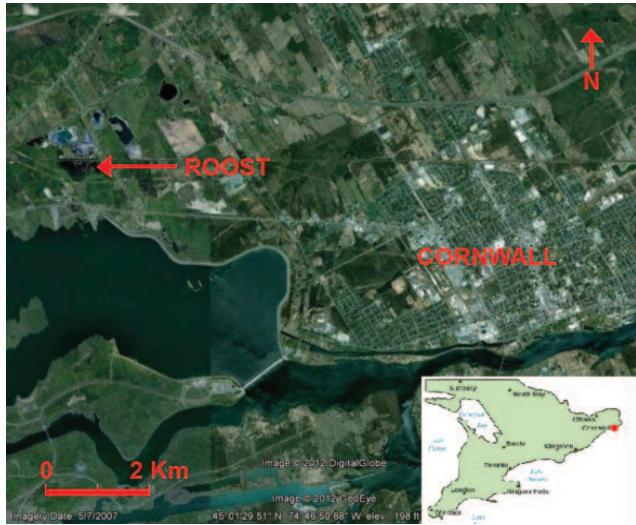
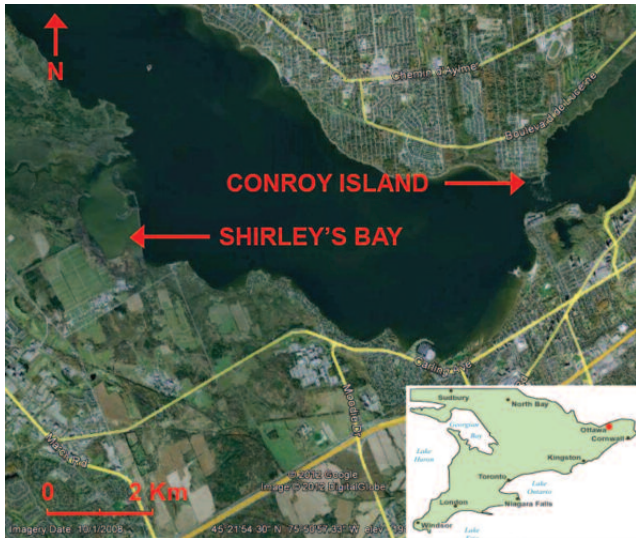


Figure 2.  
The Ottawa/Gatineau  
study area. Egrets  
roosted in/near the  
west side of Shirley's  
Bay in 2010 and in  
the east side in 2011.



the small wetland, to the trees where the egrets roosted was approximately 100m. In the Ottawa River in 2010, the egrets roosted, sequentially, at two different areas: Conroy Island (on the Gatineau

side of the River) and at an unconfirmed location west of, or at the west end of, Shirley's Bay (in Ottawa) (Figure 2); this exact roost site could not be located. All observations of roosting egrets on Conroy

Island in Gatineau were made from a paved bike path along the Ottawa River at a distance of approximately 200 m by RD. From the Ottawa side of the River, where observations were made by BD, Conroy Island was observed most closely from the Britannia Yacht Club. It could also be seen more distantly (4 km) from the old causeway that directly overlooks Shirley's Bay and from which flight lines of egrets going to and from the unconfirmed roost site were also visible. In 2011, along the Ottawa River, egrets roosted sequentially on Conroy Island (as in 2010) and at an easily observed location from the causeway on the east side of Shirley's Bay (a different location from 2010) and observations were carried out as described above. DVCW visited the Cornwall (2010 and 2011), Conroy Island (2011) and Shirley's Bay (2012) roost observation posts on selected occasions.

Most observations at the above sites were made in the evening during the last hour of daylight when either the total number of egrets at the roost was tallied or egret numbers were tallied as the birds flew into the roost. At Cornwall, the egrets could be observed easily flying and landing in medium-tall trees (5 – 8m) at the water's edge. At Conroy Island, the egrets were clearly visible as they flew to the west end of the island (usually from the west or southwest), where they landed in the treetops. Their final roosting location, however, was lower down in the vegetation and/or on the south side of the island, which was not directly visible

from the observation post on the north side of the river. The east end of the island also was not visible from the Gatineau observation post. However, very few egrets were ever observed coming to Conroy Island from the east. At Shirley's Bay in 2010, egrets could only be observed flying to and from (in the evening and morning, respectively) the unconfirmed roost farther to the west. In 2011, the roost location, in the shallow waters of the east side of Shirley's Bay (just west of the causeway), was easily visible.

Occasionally, observations were made in the morning during the first hour of daylight. In these instances, the most accurate counts were made by waiting for the egrets to disperse out of their roost and then counting them individually. On clear days, egrets usually start leaving their roost about 10–15 minutes before official sunrise (DVCW unpubl. obs.). When roosting in trees or shallow water, egrets may often be bunched together and it can be difficult to get a single accurate count.

All count data for egrets are presented as the greatest number of egrets recorded per week; weeks were defined by the following dates: week 1 = 1st-7th, week 2 = 8th-15th, week 3 = 16th-23rd, week 4 = 24th-31st of the month.

## Results

### *Cornwall*

The pattern of roost occupation and the number of egrets present at the Richmond Drive roost in Cornwall in 2010 and 2011 are plotted in Figure 3.

In 2010, observations for roosting egrets at the site were made on 12 dates between 17 July and 29 October (approximately once per week). The number of egrets using the roost ranged from zero to 34. Egret numbers increased fairly quickly beginning in the last week of July; no egrets were seen on 17 and 21 July, but 3, 16 and 21 egrets came in to the roost on 23, 26 and 28 July, respectively. Peak numbers were recorded from late August to mid-September. Unfortunately, there were no observations from mid-September until mid-October, by which time numbers had declined to only eight. The last egret was observed at the roost on 20 October.

In 2011, observations for roosting egrets (Figure 3) were made on 26 dates between 5 June and 4 November (slightly more than once per week). A single egret was observed at the Cornwall roost intermittently until 25 July when the

number increased to four. The numbers of roosting egrets increased sharply throughout August, reaching 51 at the end of the month, and through most of September and peaked at 73 in early October. Numbers decreased quickly during October; they declined 41% during the second week and a further 45% (of the peak) during the third week. The last two egrets at the roost were recorded during the first week of November.

At Cornwall, as far as is known, the egrets only roosted at this one location in 2010 and 2011 and they only roosted in medium-tall trees (5-8 m) on the shoreline of a wetland.

#### *Ottawa/Gatineau*

In 2010, egrets roosted sequentially at two locations in or near the Ottawa River: Conroy Island (at the Deschênes Rapids) and the unconfirmed location

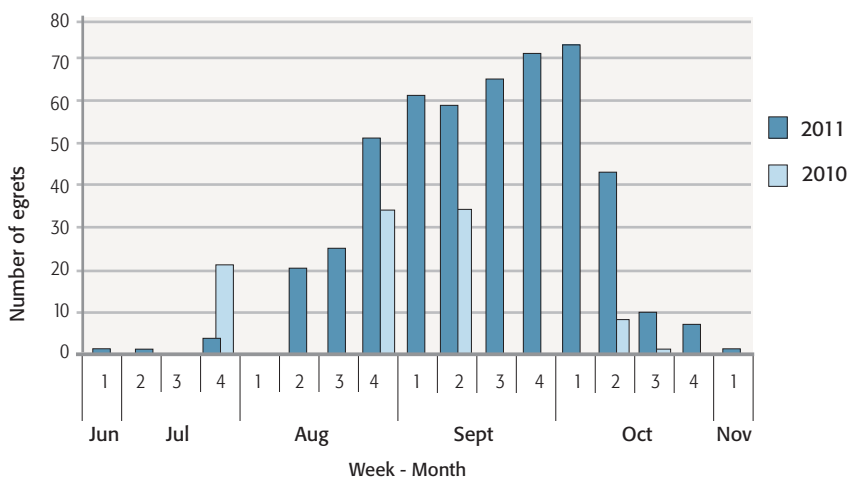


Figure 3. Number of egrets and periods of occupation at the Cornwall roost, 2010 and 2011.





Figure 4. Egrets in the Cornwall roost. *Photo: Jacques Bouvier*

in or near the west end of Shirley's Bay. Counts for roosting egrets at these two sites were made on 15 dates between 7 August and 23 September (approximately twice per week); the two roost sites are approximately 4 km apart. During the summer, through 7 August, up to three egrets were observed roosting on Conroy Island (2010 data not shown). During the second week of August, the number rose to 18 and by 21 August numbers peaked at 30 egrets. After that, numbers declined very quickly as the egrets abandoned this site, perhaps due to disturbance on the island from fisherman at dusk (RD, pers. obs.). During 22–25 August, numbers fluctuated between only one to five egrets roosting on Conroy Island. Observations at Conroy

Island gave no indication as to where the egrets had gone.

At sunrise on 28 August, more than a dozen egrets arrived at Shirley's Bay from the west; none came from the east, the direction of Conroy Island. This strongly suggested that the egrets had roosted at some location to the west of, or in the extreme west end of Shirley's Bay and not at Conroy Island to the east. During the rest of August and early September, 10–18 egrets were reported foraging in Shirley's Bay during midday. On an evening watch on 6 September at Shirley's Bay, small numbers of individual egrets, eventually totalling 33, were observed flying to the west, towards the back of the Bay approaching the Crown Game Preserve.



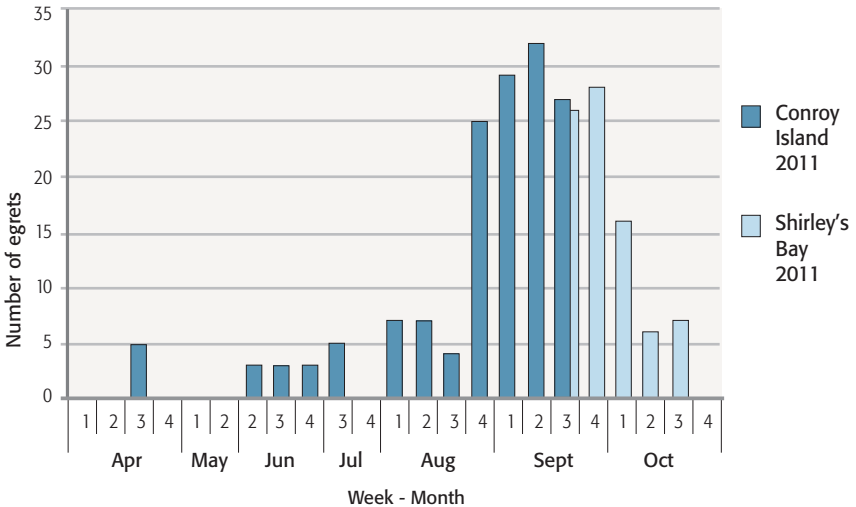


Figure 5. Number of egrets and periods of occupation at the Ottawa River roosts, 2011.

Unfortunately, this was the last observation that could be made from this area. During the third week of September, at dusk, a single egret was observed to fly over Conroy Island and continue flying off to the west (in the direction of Shirley's Bay and the Game Preserve). Thus, in 2010, the egrets using the Ottawa River appeared to switch roosts during the autumn period, first roosting on Conroy Island and then switching to an unknown specific location either at the extreme west end of Shirley's Bay or to the west of the Bay, perhaps in the Crown Game Preserve.

The pattern of roost occupation and the number of egrets roosting at Conroy Island and Shirley's Bay in 2011 are given on a weekly basis in Figure 4. Observations were initiated on 4 April, in hopes of documenting the use of these roosts in spring, a time of little reported or known

roosting activity away from the breeding colony. No egrets were observed in the area of the Conroy Island roost until 9 April when a single egret was seen foraging in the river. Three days later, a single egret was observed flying westward past Conroy Island at dusk and continued to the west. Finally, on the evening of 19 April, five egrets were observed to come in to roost on the island. At dusk/ dawn on 23/24 April, two egrets were observed roosting on the island. Three egrets were observed on the island in mid-morning on 3 May but it is not known if they roosted there or if they possibly bred there.

Regular observations were not made at the Conroy Island site during the rest of May through early July, although during 14–28 June up to three individuals were observed roosting there, including an egret with the red leg-band, 61J (see below). Starting in mid-July, regular and

intensive observations were resumed (28 days of observations during 18 July – 26 September, nearly three times a week) and the number of egrets using the roost on Conroy Island increased slowly from five to seven by early August (Figure 5). During the third week of August, increased numbers of egrets were observed on the Ottawa River during the day (11–16 egrets on 19 August, BD). By the first week of August, the number of egrets using the roost increased to 15 and then 25; 61J was reported present during this entire time period.

For the next month, observations were made on a nearly daily basis at Conroy Island and somewhat less frequently near Shirley's Bay. The number of egrets roosting on Conroy Island increased to a peak of 32 on 12 September; 61J was still present. During this time, egrets were observed foraging regularly during the day at Shirley's Bay

and Britannia Park, e.g. on both 7 and 14 September, more than 20 egrets arrived there first thing in the morning from the east, the direction of Conroy Island.

On the evening of 17 September, RD was at the usual observation post in Gatineau overlooking Conroy Island when 27 egrets came into the roost and settled into the trees. Suddenly, at 1942 hrs, 21 of the egrets flew off to the SW towards Shirley's Bay; six egrets remained at Conroy Island. The following night only a single egret came to Conroy Island but it, too, flew off in the direction of Shirley's Bay. On 22, 23, 24 and 26 September, no further egrets came to the Conroy Island roost. On 23 September, at 0730hrs, just after sunrise, BD observed 26 egrets foraging at the back (west end) of Shirley's Bay. The next morning, before sunrise, he observed 28 egrets, including 61J, roosting in shallow

### **A colour-banded Great Egret**

During the latter half of June 2011, when up to three egrets were observed intermittently at the Conroy Island roost, a colour-banded egret (61J) also was observed (RD pers. obs.). This bird had been banded as a flightless young on 17 July 2009 at Nottawasaga Island (near Collingwood, Ontario) by the Canadian Wildlife Service; hence, when it was observed near Conroy Island it was a two-year old bird. This egret was seen on 11 occasions between late June and 24 September 2011 (3.5 months). It was identified nine times coming in to roost on Conroy Island and twice at Shirley's Bay. It was foraging there on the morning of 11 September and it was roosting there on the evening of 24 September. It probably also was the banded individual observed roosting at Shirley's Bay on 18 October 2011 (BD pers. obs.). There were no other reports of this bird between 17 July 2009 and June 2011. This observation illustrates how long some egrets may stay in a given area during the post-breeding period.

Figure 6. Egrets roosting at the Shirley's Bay roost, 2011.

*Photo: Bruce M. Di Labio*

water on the eastern side of the Bay. Obviously, this had become their new roosting site and they had changed from roosting in trees/shrubs on Conroy Island to roosting here in shallow water.

During the period of 26 September to 11 October, the number of egrets roosting in the shallow water of Shirley's Bay declined from 28 individuals to 15 and then to six. Somewhat surprisingly, no egrets came into roost at Shirley's Bay on the evening of 12 or 13 October; it was assumed that the last few birds had migrated. More surprisingly was a posting on the ONTBIRDS listserv on 15 October reporting that seven egrets had been observed, that day, at a pond along Sarsaparilla Trail off Richmond Road. (B. McCrea pers. obs.). Based on the assumption that if there were still egrets in the immediate Ottawa area, they would roost at Shirley's Bay, BD went there that evening and as expected, he found seven egrets roosting at Shirley's Bay. Over the next three evenings, the numbers went from two to zero and six days later there were still no other egrets roosting at Shirley's Bay. It appeared the egrets had finally left the area for good.

### Discussion

This paper reports on the seasonal use of four roosting sites by two cohorts of



Great Egrets at two widely separated geographical locations and the switching from one roosting habitat (live trees on a riverine island) to another (shallow riverine water) by one of those cohorts. It also documents the use of two different roost sites in successive years by egrets from the same local area. To the best of our knowledge, these features of the Great Egret's post-breeding roosting behaviour have not been the main focus of any previous study of this species.





At Cornwall, the egrets did not appear to use their traditional autumn roost during their spring migratory period. Rather, they commenced using their only known Cornwall-area roost site (live trees adjacent to a marsh) in the mid-summer (June-July) and occupied it consistently throughout the post-breeding period until late October-early November. In southern Ontario, roost occupation in the autumn during the post-breeding period and not in the spring, is also

known to occur at the roost sites at River Canard (LaSalle, P. Pratt, pers. comm.) Metcalf, Ontario (J. Cooper and S. Godoy, pers. comm.) and at The Coves (London, A. Granger, pers. comm.). Locating active egret roosts in spring, away from the breeding colony, is very difficult. Occupation appears to be brief and sporadic and the number of birds involved is small. This spring (2012) at the Luther Marsh roost (Grand Valley) the number of egrets using the roost varied from zero to 11 on

16 dates from 13 April to 13 May; in the autumn, over 400 egrets roost at that site (L. McLaren, unpubl. data). With many bird species, the spring migration is often quite direct with birds spending little or no time at staging areas en route to their breeding areas. In the autumn, there is often a dispersal period prior to the actual southward migration, where movements are quite leisurely and temporary residence in local areas is common.

In the Ottawa River, on the other hand, egrets were observed to roost on Conroy Island in the spring of 2011. Up to five individuals were seen from 19 April to 3 May. Then, like at Cornwall, egrets began roosting on Conroy Island during the post-breeding period in June-July of both years only to switch to a site (approximately 4 km away) in or near the west end of Shirley's Bay (in 2010) and near the causeway at Shirley's Bay (in 2011).

### *Changing roosting sites and substrates*

There can be little doubt that the egrets which were roosting on Conroy Island in mid-September (on the 12th, 14th and 17th) were at least mostly the same ones that began, and continued, roosting at Shirley's Bay on 23, 24 and 26 September. Three observations support this conclusion; the number of egrets involved was approximately the same (27-32 vs 26-28), use of the two sites was mutually exclusive, i.e. they were not occupied simultaneously, and the colour-banded individual, 61J, was observed roosting at both sites. Though not reported from other locations in the literature, the

changing of local roosting sites/substrates has been observed elsewhere in Ontario. Egrets roosting at Oshawa Second Marsh (Oshawa, T. Hoar, pers. comm.), the mouth of the Rouge River (Scarborough, A. Brokelman and K. Fawthrop, pers. comm.), Carroll's Point (Hamilton, C. Hodder, pers. comm.) and the Hespeler Mill Pond (Hespeler/Cambridge, R. MacIver, pers. comm. and DVCW, pers. obs.) have been observed to change roost sites from treed shoreline areas to shallow water/mudflats (or vice versa), as observed at Ottawa/ Gatineau. In contrast, there was no indication of roost/substrate switching at Cornwall nor has there been at some other Ontario roost sites: Lynde Creek (Ajax, DVCW, pers. obs) or Wildwood Lake (St. Marys, H. Veenendaal, pers. comm.).

Although identifying the factors which may control the selection of roost sites by Great Egrets is beyond the scope of this study, a major contributing factor appears to be the presence of water and water levels. Of 42 roost sites identified to date in the area of southern Ontario, all have been in or very close to water; 26 were in trees in, or immediately adjacent to water; 12 were in very shallow water or on mudflats; and four were in low bushes or fallen trees in water (DVCW, unpubl. data).

Concerning water levels, in the extreme, if a wetland that was used previously as a roost site dries up or is drawn down to dryness, egrets have not returned to that site. For example, Mays Point at Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge and Mohawk Pond at Iroquois National

Wildlife Refuge (both in western New York) both had egret roosts in the autumn of 2011. In 2012, they were drawn down to dryness and neither one was used as a roost (J. Graves, B. Watson and C. Morien, pers. comm.). There also seems to be a tendency for egrets to move from a tree roost, earlier in the season, to a water/mudflat roost, later in the season, e.g. at the Rouge River Park (Scarborough), Carroll's Point (Hamilton) and this study. Of the 12 known egret roosts in water in southern Ontario and western New York, all of them were in very shallow water, probably less than 10 cm (DVCW unpubl. data). These conditions probably tend to occur as the autumn season progresses. It remains to be seen if shallow water and mudflats may be the egrets' preferred roosting substrate but it is generally not available until later in the autumn period.

### *Temporary abandonment and reoccupation of the roost site*

Late in the post-breeding period, daily observations at the roost sites on the Ottawa River showed that no egrets roosted at either Shirley's Bay or Conroy Island on 12 and 13 October (2011). It appeared that the egrets had abandoned the site and probably migrated. However, as it turned out, egrets resumed roosting at Shirley's Bay on 16, 17 and 18 October with seven, two and two individuals, respectively. An obvious question is where did the egrets roost or where did they go for the evenings of the 12th and 13th? Given that the numbers of

egrets roosting at Shirley's Bay on 5, 6 and 11 October (six to seven) were identical to the number that was seen there on 16 October (seven), it was probably the same group of egrets that was involved in both roostings. Hence, we appear to have a situation where an entire roosting cohort of egrets abandoned their roost site for two nights, only to return for three nights and then migrate out of the area. The question remains, however, where did they go, and what prompted them to do so, when they were not at Shirley's Bay?

### **Conclusion**

Great Egrets show both great consistency and great flexibility in their roosting habits as exhibited by the two roosting situations discussed in this paper. On the one hand, they will roost consistently at the same site throughout the post-breeding period and between years (as at Cornwall). On the other hand, they show great flexibility in switching roost sites, and roosting substrate, during the post-breeding period as well as roosting at different locations, at a given locale, from one year to the next (as at Ottawa/Gatineau). Neither of these situations would have been uncovered had it not been for the dedicated and persistent roost observations by the authors and other volunteers. Roosting behaviour and habits of Great Egrets may or may not change during the bird's life cycle in southern Ontario but without the repeated observations at given sites, we will never know.



A practical application of these findings might suggest caution in using the presence of an egret roost as a selection criterion in designating Important Bird Areas (IBAs), especially with relatively small-sized roosts. There may be a relationship between the size of the roost, *i.e.* the number of birds using it, and its stability.

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*D.V. Chip Weseloh*, Canadian Wildlife Service, Environment Canada, 4905 Dufferin St., Toronto, ON M3H 5T4  
E-mail: chip.weseloh@ec.gc.ca

*Rod Dubois*, 50 Alexis-Rajotte, Gatineau, QC J9H 6Y8  
E-mail: Rod\_dubois@hotmail.fr

*Bruce Di Labio*, 400 Donald B. Munro Drive, P.O. Box 538, Carp, ON K0A 1L0  
E-mail: bruce.dilabio@sympatico.ca

*Bob Scranton*, 1716 Peter St., Cornwall, ON K6J 1W8  
E-mail: bob.scranton@sympatico.ca