

Snowy Egret: A New Breeding Species for Ontario and Canada

by
Robert Curry and George D. Bryant

James *et al.* (1976) described the Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*) as an occasional rare visitor to southern Ontario. The first for Hamilton, Regional Municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth, was found by John B. Miles on 20 May 1957 in the Dundas Marsh (North 1957). In recent years the Snowy Egret has become a regular visitor to the province, with 2-18 birds recorded annually (Weir 1983a, 1983b, 1984, 1985). Prior to 1986 the largest single group reported in Ontario was seven, by John Miles *et al.* in the Dundas Marsh on 6 June 1965 (North 1965). Six Snowy Egrets spent most of August 1980 in Hamilton Harbour (North 1980). The species has been gradually expanding its nesting range, perhaps still recovering from plume hunting, although Terres (1980) points out that it now breeds farther north than before its persecution. In 1985 Snowy Egrets nested in Maine (Tingley 1985) and Wisconsin (Tessen 1985) at latitudes slightly to the north of Hamilton. The closest nesting site to Ontario is at West Sister Island National Wildlife Refuge, Ohio where the first breeding record for the state was of two nests found in the summer of 1982 (Shieldcastle 1984). West Sister Island is situated in the southwest corner of



Figure 1: Three young Snowy Egrets (about eight days old) in the nest, Hamilton Harbour, Regional Municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth, 6 July 1986. Photo by Robert Curry.

Robert Curry, 92 Hostein Drive, Ancaster, Ontario L9G 2S7
George D. Bryant, 58 Fairmeadow Ave., Willowdale, Ontario M2P 1W7

Lake Erie approximately 35 km west of Pelee Island, Essex County, Ontario and approximately 325 km WSW of Hamilton.

On 24 May 1986 Kevin McLaughlin observed a pair of Snowy Egrets in nuptial display at Hamilton Harbour. The next day he saw a single bird carrying sticks into a grove of Carolina poplar (*Populus X canadensis* Moench) on the shore of an enclosed man-made pond, known locally as the Toll Gate Ponds, where Black-crowned Night-Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) and Double-

crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) were nesting. The egrets were seen regularly by several observers during June, although often only one bird could be seen around the pond, leading observers to speculate that the mate was on a nest.

From the west service road of the Queen Elizabeth Highway, about 400 m distant, the egrets were seen to habituate one particular section of the heronry. Consequently, when we entered the heronry on 6 July we examined all nests in the frequented area. The egret nest was discovered



Figure 2: Young Snowy Egret (about 16 days old) in the nest tree, Hamilton Harbour, Regional Municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth, 14 July 1986. Photo by D.V. Chip Weseloh.

when Bryant spotted some white feathers protruding just above the rim of a stick nest about 3 m high in a poplar sapling. Curry climbed an adjacent tree and found three young birds lying together in the nest. They had patches of white down on their crowns and flanks and several pure white feathers on the scapulars and possibly also the inner wing coverts. As photography was attempted from a neighbouring swaying tree, one of the egrets, probably the oldest, stood up at the edge of the nest and the others raised their heads and necks (Figure 1). The standing bird already displayed the slender proportions and serpentine neck characteristic of this species. Their bills were pale pink with dark tips and the legs of the standing bird were greenish-yellow.

Based on the observation of unsheathed scapulars, we estimated that the young egrets ranged in age from about seven to nine days old. The incubation period of the Snowy Egret is estimated at approximately 22 days; this is not proven but see Palmer (1962) for a discussion of the incubation period of this and other small Ardeidae. This would place the laying of the first egg at about 5 June, a date which is consistent with the earlier observations of the adult egrets. Many young night-herons in the colony were much older (some had fledged) and the adult night-herons had undoubtedly started laying about the time the egrets were first observed.

On 14 July D.V. Weseloh and Curry returned to the nest. At this time all three young were standing and, upon our arrival, clambered nervously about the branches of the nest tree. They then settled and stood quietly while we took photographs. At this

stage their feet were slightly brighter greenish-yellow than their legs, their bills had grown longer and their ceres had turned yellowish. Their rectrices were just beginning to appear and their remiges extended almost to the tip of the tail. Their bodies were completely feathered but their heads still had just white down (Figure 2).

On 23 July Curry could find only one young, which stood about 6 m up in the nest tree. Presumably the other young had climbed into different trees but were hidden by dense foliage. At this time the height of the nest was measured and the top determined to be 3.2 m from the ground.

The fledged young were first seen flying and feeding along the edge of the pond on 1 August by Alan Wormington and Brian Wylie (pers. comm.). Curry again visited the area on 11 August and found six Snowy Egrets. The three fledged birds chased their parents, begged for food and also hunted on their own along the shore. At one point a young egret and a young night-heron squared off and threatened one another by puffing up their necks and thrusting their bills forward. The sixth egret appeared to be a second calendar-year bird, as it had reduced crown feathering and yellow extending up the back of the legs. The last Snowy Egret to be recorded at the site (a juvenile) was reported by McLaughlin on 5 October (Jennings 1986).

Observers should be aware that recently-fledged Snowy Egrets can appear strikingly like immature Little Blue Herons (*Egretta caerulea*). The egrets had two-toned bills, with the basal half pinkish and the distal half dark, legs that appeared greenish-yellow, and feet that seemed no brighter than the legs.

This observation represents the first nesting record for Snowy Egret in Ontario and Canada. It is possible that the six young Snowy Egrets seen at the Toll Gate Ponds in August 1980 were raised at this heronry. Snowy Egrets may in the future nest at any Black-crowned Night-Heron colony in Ontario. Similarly they should be watched for in heronries in southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan and in New Brunswick.

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