

GROUND-NESTING SNOWY EGRETS IN MAINE— A NEW NORTHERNMOST BREEDING RECORD

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Photos by Robert S. Bowman

During the summer of 1989, while conducting seabird tours along the coast of Maine on board the 42-foot *Island Queen*, we observed a number of Snowy Egrets (*Egretta thula*), on Marblehead Island, just southeast of Rockland, Maine, in Penobscot Bay.

Marblehead Island is a small, rocky, treeless island typical of many seabird nesting islands along this coast. It is less than one acre in size, and rises to a height of approximately 40 feet. Great Black-backed Gulls (*Larus marinus*), Herring Gulls (*L. argentatus*), Double-crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*), Black Guillemots (*Cephus grylle*), and Common Eiders (*Somateria mollissima*) all breed on the island.

While drifting off the island on the morning of June 30, 1989, we observed an adult Snowy Egret fly into and land on the steep east side of the



Adult Snowy Egrets and chick on Marblehead Island, Maine. The small colony appears to be unique.

island. Upon closer observation, we saw a total of six adult egrets and two chicks in a small cave formed by a rockfall in a crevice. At least two nests could be clearly seen inside the crevice. We subsequently visited the island on 15 more days in July of that year, and observed egrets in the same spot each time. The highest number of adults seen was six, the highest number of chicks seen was eight.

Snowy Egrets were observed nesting on the island in 1990 and 1991. As in 1989, we estimated 3–5 nests on the island. We did not visit the site in 1992.

On June 18, 1993, we again visited the island in the late afternoon and saw three adult egrets in the same place. Owing to poor light and a low tide, it was difficult to see into the crevice where nests had previously been seen, but we strongly suspect the birds were still breeding on the island, as there would be little other reason for their presence.

This steep-sided island is more than one mile offshore, and offers no feeding habitat typically used by wading birds, such as mudflats or tidal pools. However, approximately three miles west of Marblehead Island is the mouth of the Weskeag River, an estuary with extensive tidal flats. We believe this is the likeliest feeding ground for this group of egrets.

This species is known to be aggressive on the breeding territory (Hancock and Kushlan 1984). We observed evidence of this on one morning when an adult egret stole nesting material from under an incubating Great Black-backed Gull, an exploit few, if any, waterbirds along this coast would attempt.

Snowy Egrets are reported for only four other sites in Maine, all well to the southwest of Penobscot Bay. These are Appledore Island near the New Hampshire border, Wood and Stratton Islands in Saco Bay, and Mark Island in western Casco Bay (Erwin and Korschgen 1979; Osborn and Custer 1978; Kress, pers. comm.; Tyler, pers. comm.). The largest of these colonies is Stratton Island, where the population has hovered around 100 nests for the past six years.

Since their protection from plume hunting earlier in this century, Snowy Egrets have expanded their breeding range northward beyond the known pre-hunting limits. This handful of small colonies on the Maine coast currently comprise the northern edge of the species' breeding range.

Two aspects of the small colony at Marblehead Island make it unique: It is the northernmost colony we know of, and it is the only site we are aware of where Snowy Egrets are nesting directly on the ground. Bent (1926) reported several colonies in Texas marshes where nests were built in the rushes only inches above the ground.

Acknowledgments

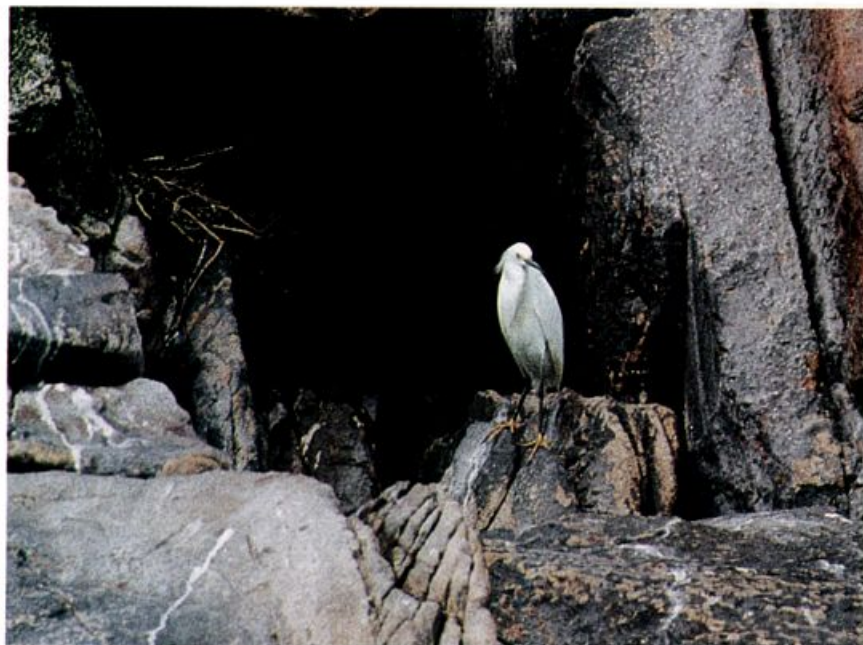
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Adult Snowy Egret, with nest in background, on Marblehead Island off Maine coast.

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