

Watchable Wildlife -- Great Blue Herons and Great Egrets

by Bob Garrison

If you've spent any time along California's coastal estuaries or interior lakes and marshes, you have seen these striking wading birds. Great blue herons and great egrets are most often seen in their classic hunting stance: standing in shallow water quietly watching for fish, frogs, or crayfish to swim by. If you are patient enough to watch them feed, you will be amazed at their lightning-fast response and accuracy when they plunge their head underwater to nab a quivering fish. Though well suited for hunting in water, herons and egrets can often be seen in open fields stalking mice and voles driven from their burrows by winter rains. These birds are voracious hunters and will eat about any animal big enough to see and small enough to swallow.

Egrets and herons vigorously defend their feeding territories from other members of the same species. Between the two, the heron generally drives off the egret. However during breeding season, it is very common to see colonies of great egrets and great blue herons nesting side by side in the same tree. It is hard to believe, but these long-legged birds actually nest in the tops of tall trees on the California mainland. Nesting in trees is a good strategy for protection against predators, but a challenge for large, top-heavy birds with very long legs. They build a nest platform from large sticks and generally lay three to four eggs in early spring. The herons begin nesting in mid-February and the egrets start about a month later.

Herons and egrets are great birds to watch if you are a beginning birder. Their large size, abundance and interesting behaviors will provide you with many hours of enjoyable viewing. In urban areas, these birds have acclimated to people so you can get a close view of them hunting without disturbing them. However, nesting is a different matter. Because of their sensitivity to people during the breeding season, egrets no longer nest along the Southern California coast where human densities and habitat destruction are so great. There are a few places around California where you can observe nesting egrets and herons, but only from a distance with binoculars and spotting scopes. Go out and enjoy watching these magnificent birds, but remember, you are a guest in their home and any disturbance you cause may force them to abandon their nests.

Viewing TIPS

- use high-powered binoculars or spotting scopes
- stay at least 1/4 mile away from the colony
- move away if your presence disturbs the birds
- follow area regulations and closures to protect colonies
- share viewing tips with other birders

Where to Watch Nesting Herons and Egrets

Follow wildlife viewing road signs or check the **California Wildlife Viewing Guide** for directions to these areas:

- Audubon Canyon Ranch -- Marin County
- Elkhorn Slough Ecological Reserve -- Monterey County
- Pescadero Marsh Natural Preserve -- San Mateo County
- Gray Lodge Wildlife Area -- Butte County
- Morro Bay State Park -- San Luis Obispo County

You can purchase a *California Wildlife Viewing Guide* which provides detailed wildlife viewing information and directions to these and over 190 other wildlife viewing sites by visiting www.CAWatchableWildlife.org.

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