

This resource is based on the following source:

Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

This resource can be cited as:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. 2003, January 6. Florida's breeding bird atlas: A collaborative study of Florida's birdlife. <http://www.myfwc.com/bba/> (Date accessed mm/dd/yyyy).

Reddish Egret *Egretta rufescens*

The Reddish Egret is the rarest heron species in North America and one of the most interesting. Renowned for its spectacularly active foraging behavior, the bird is almost entirely restricted to the coast, where it occurs in the mangrove-bordered estuaries and coastal lagoons of the southern half of the state. Two color morphs occur, with the white morph relatively common (up to 20% of the population) only in the lower Keys. Reddish Egrets breed on both coasts of Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, both coasts of Mexico including the Yucatan Peninsula, Belize, the Bahamas, Cuba, Hispaniola, and the northern coast and extralimital islands of Venezuela and Colombia, plus Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao.

Habitat. Reddish Egrets forage on shallow flats and sandbars, locating and then energetically pursuing schools of small fish. Particularly in deeper water (15 to 30 cm [6 to 12 in]), the birds may use aerial techniques. Other herons use active feeding methods, but none so habitually as the Reddish Egret. Very few birds, usually immatures, visit freshwater sites.

The Reddish Egret's diet includes a variety of fish species, including sheepshead minnow, sailfin molly, several species of killifish, and others (Paul 1996).

Reddish Egrets nest with other species in large mixed colonies, in small groups, or (rarely) as isolated pairs. Nests are woven of sticks, twigs, and finer materials and are placed below the canopy and, often, over water on mangrove keys or artificial dredged-material islands. The usual clutch size is 3 or 4 bluish-green eggs. Both parents share in incubation, which lasts about 26 days. Young birds are capable of flight at about 45 days of age but do not leave the colony until about 9 weeks of age.

Seasonal Occurrence. In Florida Bay and the Keys, most nesting occurs from November through May, though some activity may be found almost year-round. The latest set of eggs was found on Cowpens Key in August (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). Elsewhere in the state, nesting occurs between February and June, with late pairs fledging young in summer. Following the nesting season, small numbers of Reddish Egrets appear north of the breeding areas. These birds are believed to originate from both Florida and West Indian colonies (Robertson 1978c). Increasing numbers of "vagrants" are attributable, at least in part, to increasing Tampa Bay and Merritt Island populations.

Status. Reddish Egrets breed from St. Joseph Sound (Pinellas County) and Tampa Bay, on the Gulf coast, and Merritt Island, on the Atlantic Coast, south to the Keys. The species was possibly extirpated from the United States by plume hunting in the past century (Scott 1887, Paul 1991) and did not reappear as a breeder until 1938 in Florida Bay (Desmond 1939). Despite significant range expansion and population growth on both coast Florida Bay and the lower Keys remain the stronghold of the species in Florida, with approximately two-thirds of the state's breeding pairs occurring there. Powell et al. (1989) estimated 100 to 125 breeding pairs in Florida Bay during the late 1970s, but no comprehensive surveys have been attempted since. Approximately 80 pairs currently occur in the Tampa Bay region, and 50 to 60 pairs at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (R. T. Paul unpubl. data). Scattered pairs occur in the Indian River, Charlotte Harbor, Estero Bay and near Marco Island. The population is believed to be stable at about 350 to 400 pairs (Paul 1991).



Illustration © 1995 Diane Pierce, All Rights Reserved.

The Reddish Egret is listed by the state as a Species of Special Concern (Wood 1991).

Richard T. Paul

Sponsored by Mrs. Lawson P. Kiser

Reddish Egret

