

WHITE HERONS IN INDIANA

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When I was a lad at Brookville, Indiana, I was much attracted by the splotches of white appearing in the late summer among the green leaves of the trees—elms, cottonwoods, and sycamores—along the White Water River. In the late summer and early fall the white American Egret is wandering over our state, sometimes thirty to forty in a flock, found the valley of that beautiful river attractive. Its waters furnished food and trees along its quiet banks, ideal resting places. Their striking whiteness among the green foliage could not but attract any artist or nature lover.¹

Later, when their plumage became fashionable for ladies' wear—as year after year their bodies were offered as a sacrifice to the god of fashion—they lessened in numbers and then disappeared. It was thought that the demand for plumes and feathers would cause their extermination.

There are three species of herons found in Indiana that are white. The American Egret, *Casmerodius albus egretta* (Gm.), which stands more than three feet high, the Snowy Egret, *Egretta thula thula* (Molina), about two feet long, and the young of the Little Blue Heron, *Florida caerulea caerulea* (L.), about the size of the last, which in its immature stage is white, or nearly so. All three of these forms are reported as formerly breeding in Indiana.

In 1897 the American Egret was recorded: "Breeds northward to northern Indiana. Regular migrant and summer resident, formerly tolerably common, becoming rare. Breeds in some numbers locally in the northern part of the state and in the lower Wabash Valley, in situations similar to those occupied by the last mentioned species (Great Blue Heron, *Ardea herodias*) and sometimes associated in the same colony with them." For many years it had been known to breed in Knox and Gibson counties (Ridgway). We know that it still (1897) bred in some, and did very recently in all, of at least six or eight of the counties of northern Indiana. E. J. Chansler reported they had bred at Swan and Grassy Ponds, Daviess County. That summer he visited those ponds and learned that those egrets had been very scarce that year. At Swan Pond, where formerly a thousand could be seen in one flock, none were found.

In northern Indiana they were reported as nesting in the following counties: DeKalb (Hine, H. W. McBride²); Golden Lake, Steuben, Wolf Lake, Noble (H. W. McBride); Jasper (Trouslet), at "Crane Heaven," on the Kankakee River, twenty miles above Water Valley (C. E. Aiken); Porter (Woodruff, Parker); Starke, at Kouts, 1885, 1895 (Woodruff,

¹ A catalogue of the Birds of Indiana by Alembert W. Brayton, M. D. Trans. Ind. Hort. Soc., 1879, p. 146.

² Butler. Trans. Ind. Hort. Soc., 1890, p. 30.

Parker). At some of these places they associated in the same "heronry" with the Great Blue Heron³.

The Snowy Egret in 1897 was recorded as breeding north to southern Indiana. Robert Ridgway reported it breeding in Knox and Gibson counties. Migrant and summer resident in southern part of the state; not common; breeding locally in the lower Wabash Valley. Occurs in summer about Swan and Grassy Ponds, Daviess County; think it breeds (E. J. Chansler). Quite common summer residents in Knox County (J. A. Balmer, 1890). Dr. F. Stein reported them from lower Wabash Valley. After breeding they wander northward over Indiana and to Michigan and Wisconsin. It has been reported from the following Indiana counties: Lake, Allen, Franklin, Jefferson, Knox, Gibson. Some of these may have been the next species.

Little Blue Heron. Dr. F. Stein first noted it in the Wabash Valley perhaps about 1874. Robert Ridgway noted it in Knox and Gibson counties where he reported it breeding and said it was abundant along the Wabash River every summer. E. J. Chansler of Knox County has more recently informed me of its breeding there. In 1896 he noted it as early as April 18; the latest fall record is September 24, 1895.

About that time the use of birds' plumage for ornament was at its height. That, with draining of swamps and lakes, the straightening of the Kankakee River, and extensive fires in that region, combined as causes for the lessening in numbers, in Indiana particularly, of the White Herons. There was a notable reduction in their numbers in 1895 and 1896. Thereafter they dwindled until the time came when few or none were seen.

With the enactment of protective legislation, in which this Academy took an active part, the creation by the federal government of bird reservations in their winter quarters, the emphasis placed on conservation, and the passage of the migratory bird law, their numbers began to increase. In the last few years their re-appearance in late summer and early fall has been generally observed in Indiana and neighboring states. In the last ten years they have increased notably. That is especially true of American Egrets. They usually arrive in July, generally the last of that month, and remain through most, or all, of August; occasionally some are noted in September. From single individuals they have more recently increased to small flocks, ranging from ten to forty. We have no positive evidence that any of the three species now breed in Indiana but it is not improbable that with proper protection the American Egret at least will be found gradually returning, where conditions are favorable, to their old breeding grounds.

The Little Blue Herons have returned, too, probably in greater numbers than before and most of them in the white or immature plumage. Most of the small white herons seen are of that species.

Occasionally the Snowy Egret is reported (sight records) usually singly or in very small groups. Most of these may be Little Blue Herons. They may easily be confused especially by one who is not well acquainted with both forms. However, Mr. S. E. Perkins III was able

³ Butler, *Birds of Indiana*, 1897, p. 659.

to secure a specimen of each at Bass Lake, Starke County, August 17, 1934 (now in my collection). So the verification of their return is at hand. He saw other specimens of both forms August 18, and of the Snowy Egret, August 3.

In 1930. Sidney R. Esten recorded the American Egret as occurring that summer in twenty-two Indiana counties and the Little Blue Herons, white phase, in thirty-six counties. They were noted from July 10 to September 10⁴. In addition, Prof. L. E. Hicks, Ohio State University, found both species in Dearborn County, Indiana, in August of that year.

In the summer of 1933. American Egrets were reported from twenty-six Indiana counties: Bartholomew, Boone, Porter, Daviess, Franklin, Kosciusko, Brown, Montgomery, Knox, Starke, Lake, Elkhart, Switzerland, Marion, Greene, Jefferson, Pulaski, Wayne, Marshall, Huntington, Fulton, Madison, Clinton, Posey, Wabash, Jackson. The earliest record was June 26, Pendleton, Indiana (Mrs. W. M. Swain); the latest date reported was September 25 at Plymouth (Mrs. H. T. Bolinger) and same date by Mrs. Swain at Pendleton. Smaller White Herons were reported from three Indiana counties: Jefferson, Switzerland, and Franklin. Because no specimens were taken for verification these were listed as the immature white phase of the Little Blue Heron.

In 1934. Only part of the reports are in for 1934, but they are from twenty-one counties. Eighteen of these report American Egrets, some say by "hundreds." Nineteen of them record the white phase of the Little Blue Heron. Specimens of all three white herons were identified by S. E. Perkins III at Bass Lake, Starke County, and verified as noted before. Prof. L. E. Hicks reports a snowy Heron taken by Mr. Trautman at Buckeye Lake, Ohio, August 27, 1930. Colin C. Sanborn, Field Museum of Natural History, says three were reported from the neighborhood of Belvidere, Illinois, August 31, 1934.

Breeding. The American Egret formerly bred from southern Wisconsin, northern Illinois, and northern Indiana southward. They nested in considerable numbers in the Kankakee region. In recent years its breeding range has been considerably restricted, in this longitude from Gulf of Mexico north to Kentucky. It is a common summer resident at Reelfoot Lake, Tennessee.

Little Blue Heron formerly bred as far north at Illinois, Indiana (lower Wabash Valley), and New Jersey. Now none reported breeding north of Tennessee (Reelfoot Lake), where the nests of a small colony with young were found by A. F. Garnier.

Snowy Egret formerly bred from southern Indiana (Knox and Gibson counties⁵) and Illinois south. Now its northern breeding limit is given as North Carolina and Texas⁶.

It is probable that with the protection now given them and the growing interest in conservation some interesting developments regarding these beautiful birds are not far off.

⁴ Indiana Audubon Year Book, 1931, p. 50.

⁵ Butler, Notes on Indiana Heronries. Proc. Ind. Acad. Sci., 1897, p. 198.

⁶ Check List of North American Birds. A. U. O., 1931.