



Oregon Sea Grant Extension
Sustainable Tourism &
Outdoor Recreation Program

Interpretative Fact Sheet

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*)



The following short article is from the [Oregon Coast 101 Species](#) collection used by the Guide and Outfitter Recognized Professional (GORP) training program. These articles are intended to provide interesting facts you can share with your clientele and add value to your services.

An Interpretive Fact Sheet has been written about each species. We are currently uploading these blogs and creating the links.

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Great Egret (*Ardea alba*)

 tourism.oregonstate.edu/great-egret-ardea-alba/

By colliek2

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Royalty-free Photo by David Clode on Unsplash

White wader of quiet waters

Do you frequent the Coos Bay area? If so, you most likely have seen Great Egrets slowly combing the marine wetland or slowly flying over the water in search of food.

The Great Egret is a regular local breeder around Coos Bay. Great Egrets are widely distributed from Canada, well into South America. They have also been introduced to several locations in North America, Central America, South America, Africa, Asia, Europe, Australia, and surrounding islands.

Habitat

Great Egrets live in colonies and use migration stopover sites that are near lakes, ponds, marshes, estuaries, and islands. These habitats are common to the southern Oregon coast where the birds seem to be expanding their territory. They are also present year-long in the Klamath basin.

Identification

The Great Egret, like other egrets, have white ('alba') feathers. Unlike other egrets, this bird stands well over three feet tall and often in length, with a wingspan that is potentially over five feet. Great Egrets are the largest egret species, but not as large as a Great Blue Heron.

Both males and females look similar in plumage and color. During breeding season, breeding adults get a bit more dressed up with a neon green face patch, darker bill, lighter lower legs. They also grow spectacular long delicate ornamental plumes on their backs. These feathers (called *aigrettes*) are used in courtship displays and almost drove these birds to extinction in the early 1900's.

Food

Great Egrets are opportunistic carnivorous birds and will eat just about anything they can swallow. They consume primarily small fish but will also eat amphibians, crayfish, reptiles, birds, small mammals, bugs, prawns, shrimp, and worms.

While they typically hunt while wading, they will occasionally swim or somewhat laboriously hover over water and dip for fish. They are strong flyers with just two wingbeats per second that will propel them up to around 25 miles per hour. When flying, the neck is retracted. Other herons and related species (such as storks, cranes, spoonbills) extend their necks in flight.

Hunting

Their hunting style shows eminent patience as they slowly hunt or stand still waiting for prey to approach them. They can be seen hunting in marshes, swamps, ponds, canals, ditches, streams, lakes, flooded farm fields, etc. Great Egrets use their long, sharp bill to rapidly stab their prey and are known to sometimes steal food from smaller birds.

Migration

Only partial migratory, Great Egrets will move to warmer areas in winter where the waters remain unfrozen and commute to breeding/nesting sites.

Great Egrets congregate into massive breeding colonies and typically nest high in large

trees. They will sometimes choose tall shrubs, artificial platforms, or even ground-level locations.

Males arrive early at the breeding and nesting location. They begin building a cup-shaped nest using long sticks and twigs that eventually measures nearly three feet across and a foot deep. Once paired up, the pair may collaborate to finish the nest, though the male sometimes finishes it himself.

Status



Royalty-free Photo by David Clode on Unsplash

In the late 19th and early 20th century, hunters killed approximately 95 percent of the Great Egrets in North America for their breeding plumes. The plumes were prized for ladies' hats.

Plume-hunting was banned around 1910 and populations began to recover. Populations have increased from 1966 to 2014 across the range, except in Canada. It has been estimated that there are now over 180,000 breeding birds on the North American continent.

Challenges to recovery and stable populations include wetland habitat loss and degradation, threats such as contaminated farm runoff, and invasion by exotic plants. Great Egrets seem to be adapting to nearby human habitation in urban and suburban areas. Not all egret species are so lucky and some are on near threatened and vulnerable watch lists.

REFERENCES

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–Audubon Society, Great Egret (<https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/great-egret>)

–Wikipedia, Great Egret (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_egret)