

Natural South Marysburgh

The Great Egret, Lord of the Wetlands

-By Terry Sprague

The great egret has been a now and again visitor to Prince Edward County since the first one was documented at Wellers Bay in 1932. Its rare occurrence was to be expected as the great egret was essentially a southern bird, more at home in the tropics with only a few scattered colonies springing up in southern Ontario and elsewhere north of its normal range. However, these pure white heron-like birds soon experienced wanderlust, accompanied by an uncontrollable urge to estab-



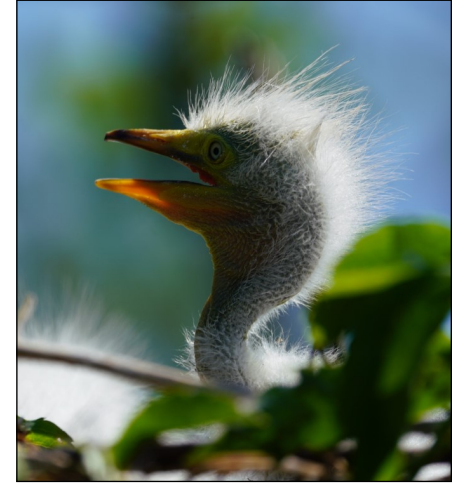
A lone great egret perches on a branch near its nest site. Photo by Cathy Caley

lish new breeding colonies in uncharted territory.

As decades went by, Prince Edward County started seeing an increasing number of great egrets, all believed to be individuals that had wandered from a new breeding colony that became established at nearby Presqu'île Provincial Park in 1998. By 2018, that colony had expanded to over 20 nests, all located on High Bluff Island. Like many heron and egret species, great egrets nest in colonies or rookeries, comprising many pairs. During the breeding season, both male and female egrets get delicate breeding plumage and their faces take on a fluorescent green color along the beak. Early in the

20th century, great egret populations came close to extinction due to excessive market hunting as their feather plumes were in great demand for use in women's apparel.

The sightings of great egrets in Prince Edward County continued to increase in number, but there was no indication that any of them had come from a new colony here. That is, until June of last year when West Lake resident Cathy Caley found them nesting on Swetman Island, just out from Prince Edward Point. Many refer to this island as False Duck Island, but technically, it is Swetman Island, part of the False Ducks which includes both Swetman and Timber Islands. So, South Marysburgh hosted the very first breeding colony of great egrets in Prince Edward County. To date, no other colonies have been found in the County.



A young great egret in its nest at Swetman Island. Photo by Cathy Caley

As it turns out, Cathy had been on an exploratory trip, eager to photograph the notorious cormorant breeding colony, and came upon the egret nests, tucked in with a small colony of nesting black-crowned night-herons – a double thrill as neither had there been any documentation of night-herons nesting in the County, although I am convinced that a colony of deserted nests on Yorkshire Island, beside Main Duck Island, that I found in 2002, had belonged to night-herons.

In conversation with retired CWS biologist Chip Weseloh, I learned that he had actually found the great egrets nesting on Swetman Island a year earlier. Those 16 nests that he found may very well have constituted the first year in which they nested since no visitors to the island had seen them in previous years.

The growing number of egrets now in our area, especially in September, can be attributed to another factor, too. They love each other's company. The species goes through what is known in bird speak as a post breeding season dispersal. When nesting worries are over for the year, they will disperse and join up with others and wander the countryside looking for suitable places to roost overnight. These egrets at this time of the year may have come from other colonies in southern Ontario and even New York State. In past years, there have been sizable roosts on Indian Island in the Bay of Quinte at Carrying Place, the Hamilton Wetland west of Demorestville, and at the Slab Creek Wetland at Hillier. Here, they settled deep into the flooded swamp, often out of sight, and only appeared as they left for feeding grounds, often before it was fully light, and returned again at dusk. I watched them in past years and it was truly a daz-

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