

Natural South Marysburgh

Great Egrets Nesting in County

There often is some dispute as to the correct name for the island that lies off Prince Edward Point. Is it False Duck Island or is it Swetman Island? Technically, it is correctly Swetman Island, reflecting the surname of the first two lighthouse keepers to serve there, but almost everyone refers to the island as False Duck Island. Swetman Island is really part of the False Duck group of islands, which also includes nearby Timber Island. Together they make up The False Ducks.

Whatever you choose to call it, there are new residents now on the island. Nestled in a grove of trees to escape the writhing mass of Double-crested Cormorants, is a handful of nesting Great Egrets. They have joined a small colony of Black-crowned Night-herons that also call the island their home, equally perturbed by the expanding population of cormorants.

The Great Egrets were found by photographer Cathy Caley and her husband, Eric, of West Lake, four years ago during one of their boat excursions to the island. On June 20th of that year, Cathy and Eric were watching the small colony of Black-crowned Night-herons



when they spotted three Great Egret pairs nesting, each of the nests containing three or four baby egrets.

This sighting became the very first confirmed nesting record for Prince Edward County of this once southern species, although adult individuals have appeared in the County since 1949, likely overshooting their destination during their spring migration.

The bird has experienced a rather challenging existence in its history. In the southern United States where this bird commonly occurred, sadly it was reduced in numbers in the early 1900s by hunters who killed it for its long plumes for the millinery trade. When this trade became illegal, the egrets recovered and started expanding their breeding range north—much like the Northern Cardinal, Carolina Wren and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher have done in more recent years.

Great Egrets began nesting at Presqu'île Provincial Park in 1999 and have nested yearly although the number of nests has declined from the initial 32 nests to only 11 in 2015 or so. Due to the colony's proximity to Prince Edward County,



- Photos by Cathy Caley

sightings of egrets commenced increasing due to their penchant for wandering in their daily search for feeding areas.

In more recent years—at least, since 2012—Great Egrets have been turning up in astonishing numbers in the early fall. When nesting worries are over for the year, Great Egrets begin gathering in what is commonly referred to as “roosts”. These post breeding roosts will involve many dozens of birds that have nested across Ontario and even the United States and have come together for one last hurrah before heading south for the winter. It's like a convention of sorts. The first such roost

was noted 11 years ago on Indian Island in the Bay of Quinte at Trenton, but collapsed a few years later, allegedly due to the presence of cormorants. Other roosts numbering well over 100 egrets have occurred at the Hamilton Wetland (near Demorestville), Slab Creek (Hillier), and at the Ducks Unlimited impoundment at Charwell Point along the County's South Shore.

It is not clear where the egrets are roosting these days as they seem to move around a lot. However, to finally have Great Egrets in our County as a nesting species, is a real treat. Let's hope the cormorants of the False Ducks give them some peace.

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