

Harbor Herons:



Great Egret (*Ardea alba*),



Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*),



Black-crowned Night-Heron
(*Nycticorax nycticorax*),



Glossy Ibis
(*Plegadis falcinellus*)

When you consider how busy, crowded and desirable space is around the New York/New Jersey Harbor Estuary, it's hard to imagine there is any place left without people, but there are. Surrounded by the lights and noise of one of the largest urban centers in the world are small, uninhabited islands that dot the Harbor Estuary and many of them in the last 30 years or so, have become home to birds, most notably herons, egrets and ibis.

These long-legged wading birds, known collectively as Harbor Herons, were first discovered nesting on several small islands in the Arthur Kill off the western shore of Staten Island in the mid to late 1970's. Although they no longer use these sites today, they now consistently nest on at least seventeen other Harbor Estuary islands.

Vacant of people today, these islands are not without human history. In the 19th and early 20th Century, some housed mental institutions, prisons or quarantine hospitals. Mary Mallon, better known as Typhoid Mary, was twice quarantined on North Brother Island in what would become Riverside Hospital which was originally called Smallpox Hospital. She died there in 1938 and the hospital closed shortly thereafter. Now North Brother is home to an on again off again small colony of Black-crowned Night Herons while South Brother is host to dense colonies of herons and egrets. Others, like Hoffman Island, were created from landfill or trash. Hoffman Island now provides nesting space for six types of wading birds, including the Harbor Herons plus the Little Blue Heron and Yellow-crowned Night Heron.

Many of these birds were at the brink of extinction by the end of the 1800's. They were killed in great quantities for their feathers which were used to decorate ladies hats. The Migratory Bird Act of 1914 brought protection to what was left of these and other endangered birds. Slowly herons and egrets recovered, spreading well beyond their historic southern range. By the 1960s they were found as far north as New Hampshire, however no colonies had settled yet in or around New York City. It is generally agreed that The Clean Water Act of 1972 made settlement by herons and egrets possible in the Harbor Estuary. It improved water quality enough to support small fish and other prey species that could, in turn, be eaten by the birds. Since their discovery in the '70s,

populations surged from about 250 nesting pairs in 1982 to about 2000 in '93. Colonies then leveled off to around 1800 pairs with some species declining while others increased. Counts, as well as research, continue on these birds that, in general, appear to be prospering.

The status of the Harbor Herons can be seen as an indicator of environmental conditions in the Harbor Estuary due to their top predator position in the estuarine food web. Like the canary in the coal mine, these birds provide early warning of changes in the environment and biological conditions that could prove harmful to other living things including people. The success of the Harbor Herons depends on the security of coastal wetlands, including the remaining wooded, shrubby and sandy dune areas now used for nesting and roosting, and grassy marshes and shallow freshwater areas where food is found, or, in our case, the continued existence of the Harbor Estuary's uninhabited islands for nesting and various wetland and shallow water areas such as those in the Navesink and Shrewsbury rivers and Raritan Bay for foraging.

The Great Egret is a large white wading bird with long black legs and feet, and a yellow bill that is long, stout, and straight. It flies with its neck pulled back in S-curve which is typical of most herons. Like other herons, it is characterized by having four toes. Three face forward and one faces back. The Great Egret is found across much of the world. It requires two distinct habitat types for survival; foraging habitat in unpolluted wetland situations and, nesting habitat, usually near foraging habitat that contains either trees or shrubs that offer enough support and building materials (twigs) for the nest. Egrets nest on estuarine and barrier islands and in swamp forests, usually with other wading birds. They build nests in the upper canopy of trees or shrubs, but may also choose sites in low shrubs and grasses. Conservation status on the Great and Snowy Egret is considered of "least concern" or "common" which means these birds are generally very successful with their population continuing to grow or holding stable including those in our area.

The Snowy Egret is a small white heron two feet in length with a wing span of three feet with a slim black bill and long black legs with yellow feet. The Snowy Egret is found in small ponds as well as along the ocean coast from the lower Great Lakes to Southwestern United States and into South America. Winter migration takes them into Central America and the West Indies. Snowy Egrets require wetlands either along the coast or inland including along major rivers and lakes. They prefer undeveloped natural areas, not bulkheads or jetty rocks or docks.

The Black Crowned Night Heron is gray with a distinctive black cap with a fallen crest of two to three narrow white plumes at the back of the head. This heron has a black back and the face, throat, fore neck and a belly that is white. Wings and tails are blue-gray and legs and feet are usually yellow. Night herons receive full adult plumage in the third year. During the breeding season, the black feathers from the head and back emit a bluish-green gloss and the legs become red. The Black Crowned Night Heron is the most widespread heron in the world. Found over much of North and South America it is also found in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Hawaii. It requires habitat in fresh or salt-water wetlands. In New Jersey this Heron is listed as threatened due to habitat destruction and contamination

combined with disturbance to nesting colonies due to continued development of coastal areas and maritime dune forests.

The Glossy Ibis is a medium-sized wading bird, iridescent bronze and red-brown overall, with a very thin band of white feathers around a dark blue face with a long, down-curved gray bill. Eyes are dark and legs are yellow-gray. Sexes are similar. Winter adult and juvenile show less red tones and iridescence and can be browner in color. Glossy Ibis are most common in marshes and wetlands along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts.

Glossy Ibis is listed as “species of conservation concern” because of lost of habitat to development in New Jersey.



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