

Great Egret

Ardea alba

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



A Great Egret in non-breeding plumage – note the very long neck, flat head, yellow bill and yellow face mask, and the lower mask extends beyond the eye (photo: Rebecca Citroni)

General Comments

This is our largest egret, and it also has the longest neck. In principle, that's enough information to differentiate it from all the other all-white plumage egrets that occur in Australia. In practice though, appearances can sometimes be deceptive, especially if the bird is hunched up, and you should look at some other ID features, just to be sure. For example, in breeding plumage the Great Egret's bill is black – the only other Australian egret species ever with a black bill is the far smaller Little Egret (NB only the adult birds). In non-breeding plumage, the potential confusion species is the Plumed Egret. Outside of the breeding period both species have yellow bills and yellow face masks, and dark legs. However, with Great Egrets the lower part of the mask extends considerably beyond the eye whereas with Plumed Egrets, the face mask stops at the eye. The head shapes are different too – the Plumed Egret's head having a more-rounded appearance.

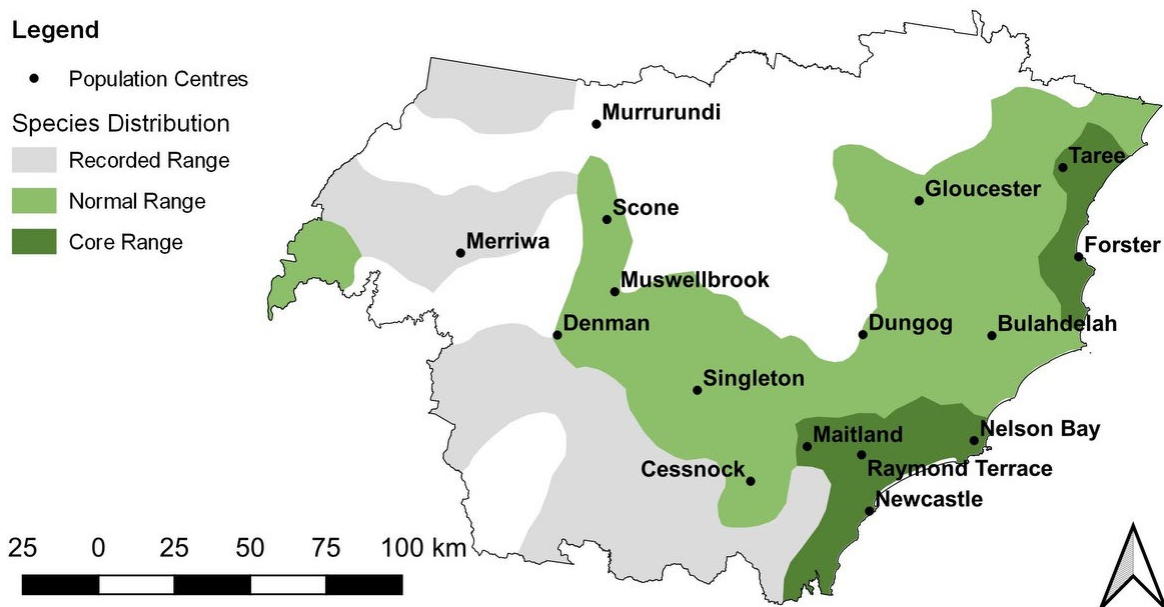
The Great Egret's face mask changes to blue-green when birds are in breeding plumage, and they also develop long filmy "nuptial plumes" on their back, which extend beyond the tail. Sometimes the legs develop a reddish flush. Males and females appear similar but males on average are larger. Both sexes incubate.



A Great Egret in breeding plumage – note the dark bill, blue-green mask, reddish legs and nuptial plumes (photo: Alan Stuart)

Regional Status

Great Egrets are common residents of the Hunter Region, found wherever there are sizable wetland areas. They breed colonially at some of those wetlands, usually in company with other breeding waterbird species (such as cormorants and other egret species). The known current breeding sites include Shortland (at the Wetlands Centre), Toronto, Cundletown and Rutherford (Heritage Parc).



Distribution of the Great Egret in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams).

Sub-species

Worldwide there are four sub-species of Great Egret. Sub-species *modesta* (the Eastern Great Egret) occurs in Oceania (including Australia) and parts of Asia. The three other sub-species are found in Africa, southern Europe/central Asia and the Americas respectively. The Eastern Great Egret is smaller than the other sub-species and at times it has been treated as a distinct species.

Plumes in fashion

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, it was considered fashionable for women to wear feather decorations (on hats and dresses). The fine nuptial plumes of egrets, including Great Egrets, were in high demand. As a result, millions of birds around the world were slaughtered for their feathers. In 1886, an American ornithologist, Frank Chapman, infamously observed on a walk in New York some 40 native bird species on women's hats!

Eventually though, people began to realise the conservation implications and to campaign against the practice. In the USA, the anti-feather movement led to the formation of the National Audubon Society. Two articles published side by side in the 1907 issue of the Australian journal *The Emu* are generally seen to have been the tipping point for the worldwide change in attitude. In the first article, Arthur Mattingley described a visit he made to a rookery on the Murray River in 1906. There was a thriving breeding colony. The second article, [*Plundered for their plumes*](#), described his return visit a few weeks later – there

was devastation: about one third of the adults gone (shot, for their feathers) and their nestlings slowly dying of starvation. Mattingley's article contained vivid photographs that caused quite a stir internationally.

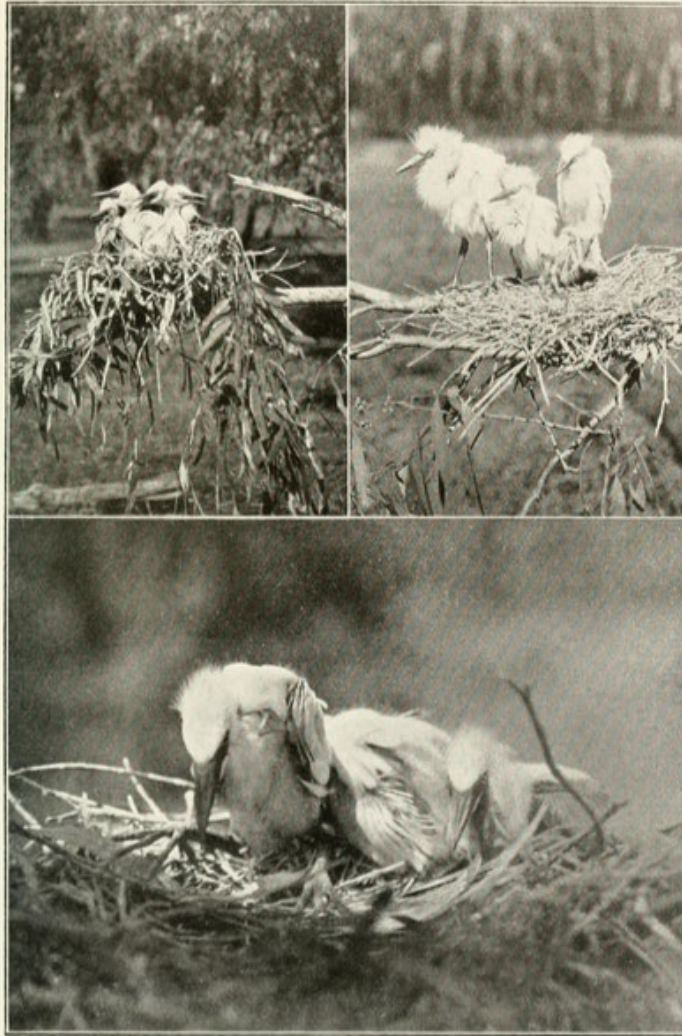
About the name

Great Egret

The classification of birds as herons or egrets is somewhat arbitrary, but herons which have white plumage tend to be called egrets and the rest of them mostly are called herons. The origins of “egret” and “heron” are ancient and obscure but they probably have a common etymological ancestor (or ancestors), arising from attempts at describing the call of the European version of this guild – the Grey Heron. Our bird is the largest of the egrets.

Ardea alba

Ardea is the Latin word for heron. The species name is from the Latin word *albus*, meaning white. All very straightforward!



Starveling Egrets (Parents Shot for their Plumes).
Young (*plumifera*) Calling to Passing Herons for Food. Waiting for the End.
Young (*timoriensis*) All But Dead.

FROM PHOTOS BY A. H. E. MATTINGLEY.

An excerpt from the Mattingley article [Plundered for their plumes](#), in 1907 issue of The Emu

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 Text by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series •

Volumes 1-7 of BirdLife Australia's HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Volumes 1-3 of the NSW Field Atlassers' Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide • Richard Schodde and Ian Mason (1999). A Directory of Australian Birds (Passerines) • James Jobling (2010). The Helm Dictionary of Scientific Names. Christopher Helm, London • No regrets: the story of fashion and feathers through books.

<https://blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2020/10/fashion-and-feathers-through-books.html>

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