

HUDSON-MOHAWK COMMON EGRETS, 1937-1960

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"Where are the large white birds?" "Why don't we see them along the Hudson or Mohawk Rivers?" These two questions have been asked by amateur and professional ornithologists in 1960, while in 1937, my late husband, Dr. Dayton Stoner, State Zoologist at the New York State Museum, had inquirers who asked him to name this member of the Heron family which was more than common in the Capital City district during that late summer.

The Common (formerly called American) Egrets (*Casmerodius albus egretta*) have usually been seen along the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers in early or mid-July and throughout the summer to the first frosty night or to the first hunting season date in October. However a few earlier and later dates have been recorded in some years. Although we had observed some Egrets* before 1937, it was not until August 15, 1937 that Dr. Stoner and the writer began to make counts and to increase the number of our trips along these two rivers in the Capital City area. Our purpose was to try to find the extent to which this Egret appeared here each year and also whether these birds were becoming more numerous in this area in their post-breeding wanderings.

Eaton, in *Birds of New York* (New York State Museum Memoirs 12, Vol. 1, 1910) calls this Egret "an occasional visitant" in recording 26 records in the entire State 1856-1905. In the New York State Museum files, some 20 records were recorded for the State in the next 30 years. Of this number, one each in 1921, 1923, and 1925 were in the Capital City area and four were in Dutchess County and the balance was seen in other parts of the State. Then, in 1937, our counts as well as some others in Eastern New York began to show greater numbers of individual birds.

It was near 1900, when these beautiful large white birds became noticeably reduced in numbers in their southern breeding grounds, as countless individuals of both this and the Snowy Egret had been killed by plume hunters. Their activity was motivated by the millinery trade, as milliners bought the long aigrette plumes, as well as some other feathers and even some entire birds for hat decorations. Since these long feathers of the Herons are present and at their best during the breeding and nesting seasons, the hunters had to kill the adult birds to secure the plumes. This loss of avian life in the nesting areas meant not only the parent birds but also their young which were left to starve and die in the nests.

Both Egrets, the Common and Snowy, were saved from extinction in North America mainly through the efforts of the National Audubon Society (formerly called National Association of Audubon Societies). This organization in 1902 appointed game wardens for southern rookeries. Then, the sale of most wild-bird feathers was prohibited in New York State, when the Audubon Plumage bill was signed in 1910 in our State. Following this, and again through the work of the Audubon Society, importation of plumes

*The Common Egret termed Egret for brevity in this article.

was prohibited when the Federal Tariff Act was signed in 1913. All these measures did much to stop the slaughter of these Herons. The results of rigid law enforcement began to show up years later as Egrets were noticed in slowly increasing numbers in different localities.

In their post-breeding wanderings, the Egrets which come up the Atlantic flyway have usually nested in southern areas. Their breeding range in more recent years has extended north from Southern Florida through the Carolinas, Maryland, and Southwestern New Jersey. In Region 8, Long Island report in *Kingbird* Vol. III, No. 3, Oct. 1953, pg. 77, John J. Elliott says, "The American Egret nested for the first time in the Long Island area this summer (Fisher's Island)."

There are a few recently published records of Egrets nesting in Ontario, far north of Hudson-Mohawk area and there may be other nesting records along the Hudson River flyway which is part of the Atlantic flyway since our study began in 1937. We suspected the nesting of these birds along the Hudson River, 40 to 50 miles south of Albany, as the numbers increased and as earlier arrival dates were noted, but we recorded *no* direct evidence of nesting.

Our records from 1937 to 1940 were mainly taken on auto trips. Most of these were south of Albany, for 25 miles along the east side of the Hudson River to Stockport Railroad Station, which was located at the dead end of a side road, one mile from the main highway and seven miles north of Hudson, N. Y. This New York Central depot was later razed so that now there is a large parking area where bird observers (and hunters) get an excellent view of part of the River at high and low tides. Then other observation trips by auto were northwest of Albany, along the Mohawk River for a distance of about three miles East of Niskayuna.

From 1940 to 1948, to the auto field bird study we added day trips on the Hudson River Day Boat. The down trip (south) left Albany at 9:20 a. m. and arrived at Kingston Point at 1:20 p. m., a distance of 48 miles. After a short stopover at a small park, where other birds occasionally were seen, the return trip (north) was made on the up-coming passenger steamer from New York City which took from 2:20 p. m. to 6:20 p. m. This made a total of ten hours for bird observation for the day.

From the upper deck of these huge boats, which maintained a speed of about 12 miles per hour, Egrets could be seen along the shore line or at a short distance from it or in the adjoining wooded lands. When the tide was high, these large white birds were generally perched in the trees, occasionally in a small group or sometimes as many as 30 would be roosting in one tree with a few others in adjoining tree tops. This habitat was in the highly concentrated Hudson-Catskill district which is near the Rip Van Winkle Bridge. In this same area this picturesque scene was quite changed when the tide was going out or low as then the extensive muddy, reedy flats were exposed. Here, the Egrets were visible as they stood in shallow water which covered quite a wide area. At intervals they would probe down in the mud or quickly wade or fly a short distance in their search for food. Apparently, they were not especially disturbed by the passing steamer.

On 13 auto trips that we took between inclusive dates of August 1 and October 8, 1937, we saw 102 Egrets, with the greatest counts on August 15, 20, and October 3. On the first mentioned wate, $\frac{1}{4}$ mile north of Stockport R. R. Station, in a marsh 50 yards by 1600 feet and which was separated by railroad tracks from the Hudson River, 18 Egrets were seen. For the entire three hour south of Albany round trip of 50 miles we noted a total of 25 individuals. Then, five days later 18 Egrets were observed in the three miles distance along the Mohawk River; this Niskayuna locality is about 35 miles northwest of the preceding area. On October 3 we had a total of 17 of these large, white birds from both localities.

In published reports of records of ours and adjoining territory observers, Dr. Stoner concluded that not only were the Egrets here, in the Hudson River Valley in greater numbers in 1937, but that in the last several years, the species had become increasingly common. Of course, our counts could not include the many birds that may have been concealed in high, grassy marsh habitats, so our observations covered probably only a small portion of the birds that could be making their northern or southern journey.

A few more Hudson River birds were listed on 13 auto trips taken in each of the next two years as we saw 51 between August 10 and October 14, 1938. Then, our count numbered 58 between July 10 and September 16, 1939, 21 of which were observed on a two hour low tide period on August 7.

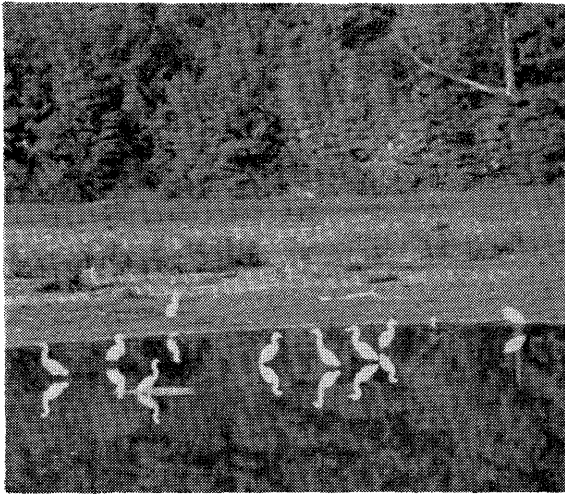
A greater number of 189 (most of these on Hudson River trips) was seen next year between July 19 and October 9, 1940. Ninety-three of these we listed on the August 27 north-bound steamer trip with mid-to-low tide. Our total was only 45 on south-bound trip, as water was slowly going down from high tide. This illustrates the advantage of observations from the River Steamer. Of interest in this year was our early July 19 count of 10 and a late big count of 35 birds on September 14.

We credited reliable observers who reported seeing a dozen Egrets on early date of June 14, 1941. Our earliest record for this year was 10 birds on July 14. In 1942, on August 6 and September 6, on two round trips by boat to Kingston Point, we had counts respectively of 49 and 18 on high tide south-bound trips and 69 and 93 on mid-low to low water northern journey.

Not much field work was done in 1943 and 1944 due to Dr. Stoner's illness and passing. Records of numbers of Egrets were kept by the writer on continued boat trips through 1948. A count of 29 Egrets was made on May 26, 1945, which was the first down trip of the Day Boat season. With the tide going out 16 individuals were standing in shallow water and 13 were roosting in one tree. But on the hot (as the weather had turned very warm) return trip, a total of only 12 birds could be seen all resting in the trees. No Egrets were noted on May 31 trip, but 25 were counted on down trip on June 9, 1945. These represent our largest early numbers of individual birds during this study. The numbers of these birds observed remained fairly good as illustrated by a list of 108 on September 10, 1946 and 101 on August 12, 1947.

It was reported that the Day Boat Excursions, which had usually started near Decoration Day and ended on Labor Day, were to be discontinued after the 1948 season. So during this summer, the writer took seven boat trips, two of which were to New York City. This meant two days of observation as the Hudson River steamer takes a day each way for the 150 mile voyage to and from Albany. However, unfavorable foggy weather developed so counts of birds were unsatisfactory on these longer trips.

There were very few Egrets noted on first three one day trips, as none was seen on May 27 and a total of only four on July 26 and 30. On the New York City trips of August 11 and 12 and August 23 and 24, 135 and 160 were counted respectively on the two all day down (south) trips and 162 and 219 on the return journeys. Only a small percentage of this number was found south of the Hudson-Catskill region. On August 30, 120 Egrets were observed as far as Kingston Point and 144 on northern trip, main concentration as usual in Hudson-Catskill district.



**Common Egrets — Watervliet Reservoir,
September 1948.**

Photo by Minnie B. Scotland

The Schenectady Bird Club members and their guests, the Hoffman Bird Club members, of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, took the last steamer round trip Albany to Kingston Point on September 12, 1948 and listed 239 Egrets. The 63 participants bear witness to this largest Egret count in our study.

The Hudson River Egret counts were continued in the subsequent years with the writer as leader of this annual field trip of the Schenectady Bird Club known as *The Stoner Bird Trip* in honor of Dr. Dayton Stoner. Transportation was by bus in 1950 and by private cars in other years. This 80 mile round trip route was south on the east side of the River, and after crossing the Rip VanWinkle Bridge near Castleton, N. Y., returning north on the west side of the Hudson. No great counts could again be made as the River and exposed grassy flat areas were visible in relatively few places from the highways as the numbers given in the following tabulation will illustrate:

- September 17, 1950 — 57 Egrets
- September 16, 1951 — 13 Egrets (2 weeks earlier, 30 Egrets seen)
- September 14, 1952 — 52 Egrets
- September 13, 1953 — 48 Egrets
- September 25, 1954 — 31 Egrets
- September 17, 1955 — 10 Egrets
- September 16, 1956 — No trip, due to bad weather.
- September 7, 1957 — 1 Egret (6 reported by a resident)
- September 13, 1958 — 15 Egrets
- September 12, 1959 — 7 Egrets
- September 10, 1960 — 13 Egrets

In our study, 1948 stands out as the year the greatest number of Egrets was counted in the Hudson-Mohawk River area. It is also evident that the number of individuals that could be observed declined sharply from that year to the present time. This conclusion was also shown in records kept by Schenectady Bird Club during 1937-1960 period. They have an annotation for 1949 of "numbers well below 1948", and another in 1950 of "numbers well below 1948". Then, south of our study area, there were other New York State district records of lesser numbers of Egrets in 1950 and 1951. These appeared in the *Kingbird* regional reports of R. F. Deed and J. J. Elliott respectively of Lower Hudson and Long Island areas.

Data kept by Schenectady Bird Club for the same years as our study show earlier and later dates for *some* of these years. Only their early April, May, and June, or late September, or other fall months records are tabulated on the next page:

<i>Early</i>	<i>Late</i>
—	1937, Nov. 14
1939, June 17	—
—	1944, Sept. 17
1945, June 30	1945, Sept. 30
—	1946, Nov. 14
—	1948, Nov. 28
1949, May 6	1949, Oct. 8
1950, June 4	1950, Oct. 10
—	1951, Oct. 19
1952, June 21	1952, Sept. 14
1953, May 9	1953, Oct. 11
1954, May 27	1954, Sept. 25 - Nov. 29
1955, May 14	1955, Sept. 18
—	1956, Sept. 16
—	1957, Sept. 21
—	1958, Sept. 25
1959, June 14	—
1960, April 7 - 10	1959, Oct. 9

As above records show, there were few birds seen each year after 1948. In 1960, our earliest area record was of one bird which was seen by several club members on April 7 - 10 on a small pond on Route #20, which is about 10 miles west from the Hudson River. In 1960, very few Egrets were reported in this district by members of either Schenectady Bird Club or Alan Devoe Bird Club. In fact, none or just a few individual birds could be found on any of the regular field trips. Some ornithologists saw none all summer. Our greatest report was 13 birds on September 10, 1960.

Between 1937-1960 several of us have made Egret counts on train trips to New York City. The New York Central Railroad tracks are often near small ponds or inlets which run into the Hudson River or near its shore. A number of these exposed marshes or bodies of water which are inaccessible to us in any other way, provide excellent feeding and retreat habitats for Herons, especially when the tide is low.

Some times different individual birds near the track would fly up and immediately settle nearby in shallow water or low shrubbery as we watched them from the fast moving train. On several of our train trips groups of five or six were seen resting precariously in frail bushes where their weight bent the branches almost down to the water. The best count on a one-way trip was made by Samuel Madison of 104 Egrets on September 13, 1948. This again emphasizes our year of greatest numbers of Egrets in our region. Of interest, since small numbers of these Herons were observed here this year, were the counts of eight Egrets made on train trips by Mr. and Mrs. Byron T. Hipple, Jr., respectively on July 11 and August 7, 1960.

At no time in our studies did Dr. Stoner or the writer note any intermingling of these large white birds with significant numbers of other birds of the Heron family, although occasionally one or two of the other large birds of this group were seen in the same locality.

As a general rule, our arrival dates of Egrets were later than those further south in the state. The picture of Egrets in the sky over New York City area in April 15, 1960 New York Times, with comments of Gilbert S. Raynor, supports this statement. Other early southern New York records could be cited. Then, even though Long Island numbers of Egrets are greater than those in our area, this southern region, too, reported *decreased* numbers of individuals in 1959 and 1960 seasons, which are our small count years.

Of interest is J. J. Elliott's Regional Report in Kingbird Vol. X, No. 3, October, 1960 issue of 25 pairs of Common Egrets nesting on July 16, 1960 at Jamaica Bay. Also noteworthy for a state record was the single Egret listed on December 26, 1959 Christmas Bird Count of Central Suffolk County, L. I., N. Y. in Audubon Field Notes, Vol. 14, No. 2, April, 1960.

These records are given to show that areas not too distant from our Hudson-Mohawk study region had not only quite a few of these birds, but they had increasing numbers of nesting records of them. Will this mean greater post-breeding wanderings of these beautiful large white birds up Hudson River Section of Atlantic flyway for visitors and ornithologists to note in our scenic Hudson River Valley? This is a question that will be answered in future years.

Summary

Numbers of Common Egrets increased every year in Hudson-Mohawk area in the inclusive years 1937-1948. Then the numbers of birds observed in this district decreased until the smallest counts were reported in 1960.

The earliest and latest regional dates are April 7, 1960 and November 29, 1948, respectively.

The greatest and smallest counts of individual birds are respectively, 239 on September 12, 1948 and 7 on September 12, 1959.

This 1937-1960 study was made on trips taken by cars, bus, steamers, and trains along or near the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers, to say nothing of distances covered by foot in this 24 year period.

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