

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

A Ground Nesting Mixed Heronry in Suffolk County: One of the mysteries of Long Island ornithology has been the absence of mixed heronries in Suffolk County. There are no known mixed heronries either on the South Shore or in the Peconic/Gardiners Bay area between the Tobay, Oak and Gilgo Beach areas near the Nassau County line and Plum and Gardiners' Islands off the east end. This is a distance of well over fifty miles east to west. It includes a substantial portion of the remaining tidal wetlands in New York State.

Nevertheless, herons, egrets and ibis of several species regularly are seen feeding in the marshes throughout this area during the spring and summer. Many of these birds are in breeding plumage, suggesting that there must be overlooked colonies in the area. The alternate explanations—that these are non-breeding birds or that the birds fly distances of up to twenty and thirty miles to feed—always have seemed doubtful. Green-backed Herons (*Butorides striatus*) and the two night-herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax* and *N. violaceus*) do nest in this zone, but no mixed heronries have been found despite intensive searching, particularly during work on the Breeding Bird Atlas. Many likely locations, such as the Shinnecock Indian Reservation, have been searched without success. It is hard to see how conspicuous, tree-nesting colonial birds like the various egrets could be overlooked.

In at least one case, the answer is that they have been nesting on the ground. An island colony of several dozen nests of five species was found in 1983 in a dense stand of *Phragmites communis* in the middle of this area. Birds returned and nested successfully here in 1984 and 1985. The colony is virtually invisible from the outside. It consists of Black-crowned Night-Herons, Snowy Egrets (*Egretta thula*), Great Egrets (*Casmerodius albus*) and Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) with a few pairs of Green-backed Herons along the edges. The island also holds a conspicuous colony of Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls (*Larus argentatus* and *L. marinus*), which nest in the open on less vegetated ground. The presence of these large birds undoubtedly helps to keep potential predators away from the island and also makes it unpleasant for human visitors. American Oystercatchers (*Haematopus palliatus*) and Spotted Sandpipers (*Actitis macularia*) also breed successfully on the island.

The dense thickets of *Phragmites* harbor several vine species including Poison Ivy (*Rhus radicans*), Virginia Creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) and Bittersweet (*Celastrus* cf. *orbiculatus*). The nests of all five species are placed on the ground in the vines or they are set into the reeds a few inches off the ground. The colony is extremely difficult to enter without causing extreme damage to the plants. Because of this difficulty, the lack of outside vantage points, and the high degree of disturbance that any exploration would entail, it is impossible to determine the numbers and relative proportions of each species accurately. Somewhat surprisingly Great Egret seems to predomi-

nate, with Black-crowned Night-Heron, Snowy Egret, Glossy Ibis and Green-backed Heron ranked in decreasing order. The total number of nests probably is between four and six dozen. It is possible that other species are present but no evidence of this has been obtained so far.

Although the herons, egrets and ibis are commonly seen feeding in nearby marshes, there is very little external evidence of the colony itself during most of the nesting season. The approach and departure of adult birds is fairly cautious. There is no major exodus at dawn or influx at dusk. There is a total lack of roosting or perching sites for adults. However, fledgling birds, particularly egrets, roost on a row of low shrubs near the crest of the island for a few days before they are fully airborne. It was the presence of these birds on the skyline that led to the discovery of the colony.

Ground nesting and secretiveness undoubtedly are adaptations to difficult local conditions which include (1) a scarcity of isolated island sites, (2) a scarcity of trees and shrubs in shore, marsh and island areas, (3) increasing human activity and disturbance beginning earlier and earlier in the spring, and (4) the lack of predators on the island. There almost certainly is no disturbance at all from the gulls. Ground nesting has been reported for all five of these species before, and occurs in many if not most species of herons. In North America, ground nesting by herons is most prevalent in the Southwest. It seldom has been reported in the Northeast although it may be more widespread than generally is realized.

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[Editor's Note: The author is keeping the location of this colony secret. Access to it would be quite easy and, therefore, the possibility of disturbance is quite high should the location be publicized.]

Some Early Egg Dates for Cavity Nesting Ducks: For the past four years we have maintained a small waterfowl nest box project along Lake Champlain in northern Clinton County. In early spring of each year, we inspect each of the boxes for nesting activity. This year 10 of 17 boxes were occupied by cavity nesting ducks: three by Common Goldeneyes, four by Wood Ducks, and three by Hooded Mergansers.

Each year we have been checking the boxes earlier so as to determine the earliest initiation of egg laying. On 17 April of this year we canoed the Little Chazy River and inspected the four nesting boxes we have along this slow moving stream. At that time, only one of the boxes was occupied. We flushed a female Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) from the nesting box as we approached, and found eight eggs in the box. If we assume one egg was laid per day, the first egg would have been laid 10 April. This date is earlier than the one I reported for the 1984 breeding season (*The Kingbird* Vol. XXXIV, No. 3, p. 167; 1984). Considering that spring arrived late this year,