

Reddish Egret

Egretta rufescens



The reddish egret, a beautiful wading bird, is a permanent resident of the Texas coast. Although recognized as one species, reddish egrets may be either white (white phase) or gray with a reddish or rusty colored head and neck (dark phase). It is currently listed in Texas as a threatened species.

Coastal Wetlands

Reddish Egret

Egretta rufescens



APPEARANCE

Height: 27 to 32 inches (68 to 82 cm)

Wingspan: 46 to 49 inches (116 to 124 cm)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Two distinctly different color phases:
 - Dark phase
 - Gray with reddish head and neck feathers
 - Bluish legs
 - Pink bill with a dark tip
 - White phase
 - White feathers
 - Bluish legs
 - Pink bill with dark tip
- Long shaggy plumes on their heads and necks during breeding season

LIFE HISTORY

Range: Along the Gulf Coast of Texas and some parts of Louisiana; also found in Southern Florida. Rare along the Gulf Coast of Mexico, West Indies and Baja California.

Diet: Small fish, frogs, tadpoles and crustaceans

Predators: Raccoons, coyotes and great-tailed grackles destroy eggs and eat young.

Sexual maturity: At three to four years

Mating season: Early March through late July

Nests: Made of sticks either on the ground or in a bush or tree up to 20 feet (6 m) high. In Texas, nests are built mostly on the ground near a bush or prickly pear cactus or on an oyster shell beach. The nest may be up to 10 inches (25.4 cm) thick with a diameter of 12 to 26 inches (30 to 66 cm).

Eggs: Three to four; smooth and pale blue-green in color with no markings

Incubation: Unknown, but estimated to be 25-26 days

Life span: Up to 12 years

HABITAT

Reddish egrets are most often found in salt and brackish water wetlands.

BEHAVIOR

Both parents build the nest, and sticks are continuously added to the nest during incubation. Reddish egrets sometimes nest alongside other birds such as herons, egrets, cormorants and spoonbills. The reddish egret is *crepuscular* (it is most active at dawn and dusk). When feeding, reddish egrets will spread their wings to create shade and reduce glare so that they can see their prey more easily in the water. When chasing fish, they also run in circles. Reddish egrets use their long, spear-like bills to stab their prey. After feeding, reddish egrets regurgitate all the inedible parts of their prey, such as bones, much like owls do. Parents feed their young by regurgitating into the chicks' mouths.

NOW YOU KNOW!

- Two dark phase birds can have white phase chicks, but two white phase birds can never have dark phase chicks. When a dark phase bird and a white phase bird mate, their chicks are almost always dark phase. The white phase of the reddish egret was once thought to be a completely different species.
- In Texas, only 10 to 20 percent of the reddish egret population is white phase. In the 1950s, just four percent of the whole United States' population was white phase.

REDDISH EGRETS AND PEOPLE

Until the late 1800s, reddish egrets were hunted for their feathers, which were used to decorate ladies' hats and clothing. The entire United States population of reddish egrets was nearly exterminated by hunters. The reddish egret completely disappeared from Florida. In 1918, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act was passed, finally protecting reddish egrets and other birds from plumage hunters. Although their populations are still recovering, it is a slow process. There are only 1,500 to 2,000 nesting pairs of reddish egrets in the United States—and most of these are in Texas. Intrusion of habitat by recreationists, pesticide runoff and land development all harm the reddish egret's habitat.