

Conservation Corner

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Thanks to our recent record rainfall, north central Iowa's prairie pothole region is living up to its name. Last week we looked at the Longtail Tadpole Shrimp, living fossils that have once again come to life in area cornfields. This week let's take a closer look at a much more visible summer visitor to area field ponds, the Great Egret, and this week's encounter with the bird world.

Perhaps you, like me, have stopped to view the pair of Great Egrets as they stalk the prairie potholes along Highway 7. Also known as the Common or American Egret, *Casmerodius albus* is a large, white, showy heron with a heavy yellow bill and black legs and feet. While slightly smaller and slender than the Great Blue Heron, the Great Egret still spreads an impressive wingspan at 51 inches while standing 36-42 inches tall. They are slow but strong fliers, and at two wing beats per second their top speed is 25 mph. Egret breeding plumage is especially striking with a neon green skin patch on their faces and long plumes trailing from their backs. Did you know the males continue to strut their stuff when taking their turn sitting on the nest?

Great Egrets are summer residents here in Iowa, although some nesting pairs may be found along the Mississippi River. The male first builds a treetop platform of large sticks and twigs, often 100 feet off the ground. He then attracts a mate who helps finish the large grass-lined stick nest. The female lays 1-6 smooth, greenish blue eggs with an incubation period of 23-27 days and nestling period of 21-25 days. Egret nestlings are often fierce competitors capable of defending themselves against intruders, and stronger chicks may even stab their siblings to death.

Great Egrets hunt in classic heron fashion – quietly, slowly stalking their prey before the noisy, quick spearing of said prey. They are not fussy eaters, catching amphibians, reptiles, birds, small mammals, and large invertebrates including tadpole shrimp. They may also swim if the water is deep enough or hover over the water surface to dip for fish.

Currently Great Egret populations are holding steady, but that hasn't always been true. During the late 1800s they nearly became extinct as plume hunters raided their nesting colonies for the latest accessory on woman's hats. At their peak market, ounce for ounce egret plumes were worth 2 times their weight in gold. By 1910, over 95% of the Great Egrets had been killed.

Thanks to efforts by early conservationists, commercial feather trade was outlawed in the early 1900s. Leading the fight was the Audubon Society, which was founded in 1905 with the express purpose of protecting birds from being killed for their feathers. They chose the Great Egret, one of their success stories, for the symbol of their ongoing mission to give birds a fighting chance in a changing world.

Have you seen a Great Egret silently stalking a prairie pothole this summer?

