

Our Arroyo Ecosystem



Great Blue Heron *Ardea Herodias*

This stately bird with grey-blue plumage can be seen standing motionless in shallow water as it scans for prey, then striking with lightning-fast swiftness to snare a fish or small animal with its long blade-like beak. With a wing-span of up to 72 inches, it flies with slow deep wingbeats, its long neck curved into an S-shape and its long legs trailing behind. Because of hollow bones, it weighs an average of only 5 pounds.



Monogamous, this heron nests in colonies with other herons in secluded stands of riparian-type trees. They build their large nests usually near the top of trees on vertical branches.

They were nearly hunted to extinction in the late 1800's because of a fad for their plumes on women's hats. In the 1960's, their eggs became vulnerable to the effects of DDT, which thinned their shells. Today, the California Dept. of Fish and Game name them a "Special Animal" because of their close association with a declining habitat due to human encroachments, including the cutting of trees, water recreation, building and hi-way construction, and the clearing of wetlands.

See the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, "Stanislaus River Report," at

<http://www.dfg.ca.gov/delta/reports/stanriver/sr434.asp>

Also, http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Great_Blue_Heron/id

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Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*

The snowy egret is widespread in California along coastal estuaries, marshes, slow-moving rivers, irrigation ditches and wet fields. It has a wingspan of 41 inches. A black bill, black legs and yellow feet contrast its white feathers. During mating season, it develops a handsome display of plumage on its head, neck and back, and its feet turn a bright orange.



Using its feet to stir up its prey, its diet consists of mostly aquatic species – fish, snails, amphibians and crayfish – but it occasionally eats small rodents, lizards and insects. It nests in rookeries in low-growing marsh plants and trees, usually 5 to 10 feet off the ground and as high as 30 feet. Its preferred nesting areas tend to be isolated tall stands of willow.

The snowy egret has been designated by the California Department of Fish and Game as a “Special Animal” because of its close association with a habitat in decline. At the turn of the last century its numbers were greatly decreased because it was hunted for its plumage. Its population has stabilized today, but concern for its rookery habitat still exists.

For more information, go to http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/snowy_egret/id