

(Jarrett Wyant)



## Ardeidae the BITTERNS and HERONS

The family Ardeidae is comprised of 64 species of herons, egrets, bitterns, and night-herons that are distributed worldwide. In general, members of this family have long legs, long bills, and some have exquisite feather plumes present during breeding. Many are extraordinarily beautiful birds that have inspired artists and photographers around the globe. Most members of this family are wading birds found in various aquatic habitats, and all are carnivorous. Many nest in colonies. In flight, these birds have their necks withdrawn, not extended like the crane family, and their long legs trail behind.

Breeding colonies of herons and egrets on the East Coast were decimated by plume hunters around the turn of the twentieth century. Swift action by the Audubon Society and others led to laws that protected the remaining colonies. A “remarkable recovery” occurred between 1910 and 1935. Unfortunately, these birds soon confronted another major crisis beginning in the late 1950s. Rampant habitat destruction and habitat degradation left breeding colonies of wading birds facing annihilation once again. An urgent appeal for help was sent out across America:

If the present trend continues, the wading birds of North America may be facing the most critical situation that has confronted them since the days of the Plumage Trade. ...The key to this alarming situation lies in the rapidly growing human population and its spread to new areas, plus the tremendously increased demands for housing sites, croplands, industrial sites and recreation areas. With these demands has come additional drainage of wetlands for mosquito and sandfly control, and for real estate development, including farming and cattle raising. Spraying with insecticides is increasing in many areas. ...[W]ith the required shallow-water habitats disappearing on every hand, what will be the eventual fate of the waders?

A variety of state and federal agencies and conservation groups sprang into action. These groups have focused on colonial waterbird conservation efforts for the past 50 years, and their efforts have been somewhat successful. Today, nesting colonies in both Carolinas are tracked by state and federal biologists, and regular population surveys are conducted. A few species are expanding their breeding ranges, and numbers of some species of wading birds are trending upward. With continued emphasis on habitat protection and protection of active nest colonies, the future outlook for several of these species can now be considered “guardedly optimistic.”

In the Central Carolinas, the Southeast Region office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is actively involved with multiple habitat management activities at Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge which are designed to assist current and possible future breeding populations in the region. The following is an excerpt from their Conservation Plan:

Pee Dee NWR provides foraging and potential nesting habitat for a variety of colonial nesting wading birds. Primary species include the great blue heron, great egret, little blue heron, green heron, least bittern, and American bittern. Several of these are identified as priorities for conservation attention in national and regional waterbird plans due to declining trends, threats to habitats, etc. Colonial wading birds forage for small aquatic organisms in the open portions of freshwater marshes, creeks, and shallow lake habitats of the refuge. The impoundments offer the best opportunity for active management focused on wading birds.

Eleven members of the Ardeidae family—two species of bitterns, four herons, three egrets, and two species of night-herons—have been formally documented in the Central Carolinas. Several of these birds breed in this region. One additional species, the Reddish Egret, is discussed in detail in the Hypothetical Bird List.