

FIRST NESTING RECORD FOR GREAT EGRET ON OUTER CAPE COD

by Jennifer Lynn Megyesi

Although the Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) has been considered a common migrant and visitor to Massachusetts since the early 1920s, nesting was not documented in the state until 1954, when three or four nests were observed in Hanson Swamp, Plymouth County. Breeding efforts in the state have remained sparse, with no nests observed from 1974-1984 (Andrews 1990, Veit and Petersen 1993). Since a coastwide survey conducted in 1984, the number of nesting pairs in the state has increased to a high of sixty-five pairs at five coastal sites in 1994-1995 (B. Blodget, Mass. Div. Fisheries and Wildlife, pers. comm.). Kettle Island, Gloucester, is the state's largest colony, established in 1989 by fifteen pairs and growing to forty-two nesting pairs in 1994. Great Egrets also nest on Middle Brewster Island, Boston (8 pairs), Sarah or Sailor Island, Hingham (1 pair), at Coatue in Nantucket (11 pairs), and on Dead Neck-Sampsons Island, Cotuit (7 pairs in 1994, 0 pairs in 1995) (Blodget and Livingston 1996). Great Egrets are also increasing in Rhode Island (Chris Raithel, R.I. Div. of Fish and Wildlife, pers. comm.).

In 1996, Great Egrets bred for the first time on outer Cape Cod, specifically South Monomoy Island, Chatham. South Monomoy is part of Monomoy



Photo by Brian Tague



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National Wildlife Refuge, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The refuge, located below the “elbow” of Cape Cod, consists of 2750 acres of wood scrub, fresh and saltwater marsh, barrier beach, and dune habitat.

The Great Egret nest on South Monomoy was found during the annual heron census conducted by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel in June 1996. The nest was located on the west side of South Monomoy, south of Hospital Pond, in the main heronry. A flat platform was built from sticks and grasses, approximately 0.5 m from the ground in a clump of rugosa rose. The nest was slightly larger in circumference than a Black-crowned Night Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) nest. Both Black-crowned Night Herons and Snowy Egrets (*Egretta thula*) nested within six meters of the Great Egret nest. The nest was similar in construction and location to other Great Egret nests in Massachusetts; further south, the species apparently nests slightly higher, typically between two and ten meters above the ground (B. Blodget, pers. comm.; Bent 1926).

The South Monomoy pair hatched at least one chick from three eggs laid, but Tropical Storm Bertha destroyed the eggs and young of all herons nesting in this area in mid-July. From May to August, four adult Great Egrets were regularly observed feeding in estuarine flats and marshes on North and South Monomoy and Chatham.

As in much of their range, Great Egrets nest coastally in Massachusetts, usually in mixed heronries containing Snowy Egrets, Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis flacinellus*), and Black-crowned Night Herons. The species is increasing in the state, but it is uncertain whether the Momonoy pair originated from an existing colony or arrived from outside the state. In any case, South Monomoy is a protected site and one of just two established heronries on the Outer Cape, so it may prove to be a key location if this species attempts to extend its range on Cape Cod.

Addendum: The June 1997 Fish and Wildlife heron census found a pair of Great Egrets nesting on North Monomoy island in a patch of poison ivy and rugosa rose. As of June 18, two young had recently hatched and the third egg in the nest was pipping. No Great Egret nests were found on South Monomoy on the 1997 survey.

References

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