

THE ABSECON BAY HERON COLONY

By Bruce Adams and John Miller

North of Atlantic City, New Jersey, in Absecon Bay, at grid coordinates 392-0742, lies a large heron and ibis breeding colony which, in New Jersey, is probably second in size only to the famous Stone Harbor colony in Cape May County. The authors have been banding herons and ibis in this colony for 11 years, and some interesting statistics on populations and recoveries, have resulted. This paper will summarize some of the year-to-year population trends and recoveries resulting from our banding at the colony.

The breeding area is largely concentrated on two islands, each about 15 acres in area. The outer edges of the islands consist mainly of fields and mud flats, and the center portion, where the herons nest, is a dense, tangled mass of shrubbery and phragmites, with Bayberry, Morning Glory Vine, Mulberry, Pokeberry, and some Poison Ivy being the principal types of foliage. What is of particular significance regarding the foliage is the fact that there is virtually none more than seven feet in height. All of the herons of all species nest either on, or very close to the ground. This includes such species as the Black-crowned Night Heron which often nests high in trees. Also unusual is the fact that the different species nest in very close proximity to each other; i.e. a Louisiana Heron may nest only a few feet from a Little Blue Heron.

Banding the baby herons consists mainly of concentrating on those birds about three weeks old or older, which have left the nest but are not yet capable of sustained flight. This requires a somewhat strenuous and exhausting effort on the part of the bander as the birds can be difficult to catch when running through the thick underbrush. In some cases, however, they will remain quiet and in the immediate vicinity of the nest and can be picked up, banded, and put back where they were. Unlike gulls, terns and many other water birds, the adults make very little protest at our presence. They usually just fly off a short distance away, settle down, and return to the area when we have finished.

Identification of young herons and egrets can be quite tricky at first, as several species are similar in appearance, but once one is familiar with the basic field marks it poses little problem. For further information on identification of young herons see John Miller's article, appearing in EBBA News, 36(1); 1973.

The overall breeding season for the herons is quite extensive and in fact ranges throughout the whole summer. There is a great deal of staggering of time in the nesting and egg laying, both within different species and among individual pairs of the same species. Nest building begins in May and some individuals are ready to band in June; yet there are still birds to be banded by mid-August. It is possible that some pairs may raise two broods in one season.

There is also a certain amount of variation in numbers of each species banded each year, as summarized (Table 1). To a certain degree these totals may represent timing in our visits to the colony; i.e. if we happen to arrive

on a day when a large number of baby ibis may be ready to band, we will consequently have a large total of ibis; two weeks later, there may be a large number of Snowy Egrets ready to band, but bad weather may hamper banding operations on that particular day. One of the frustrations of this type of banding activity can be to drive all the way to the Absecon area, rent the boat, and then just as you get to the islands have a thunderstorm come up!

Recoveries of herons from the colony are summarized in Table II. As can be seen, a large number of these birds travel quite far and many spend the winter south of the U.S. It is interesting to compare these recoveries with those obtained by banders 40-50 years ago. In the 1930's, the National Geographic Society published a two-volume book on North American birds called, simply, "The Book of Birds", which has a chapter dealing with banding, listing a number of interesting recoveries of many species including herons. Two other sources of data on heron recoveries from earlier years are two articles from old issues of *Bird-Banding*: "Southward Migration of Herons", by Ben B. Coffee Jr., Vol. XIX (1) 1948; and "Returns from Banded Birds", by May Thatcher Cooke, Vol. XXI (1) 1950. These recoveries are from birds banded in a variety of areas in the U.S.; with none from the Absecon colony. (As far as we know we are the first banders to have worked at the Absecon colony). A notable difference in the selection of recoveries listed in these sources, and our recoveries from Absecon, is that virtually all of ours south of the U.S. are in the Caribbean area whereas the other lists of recoveries from past years and other colonies show a wide dispersal throughout the Caribbean area, Mexico, and Central America. Apparently for some reason the birds from the Absecon colony tend to winter in the West Indies in far greater numbers than in Mexico and Central America, although all of these species are known to winter in Mexico and Central America. One particularly interesting winter recovery we have is that of a Glossy Ibis in central New York state in January.

Table I, which shows the numbers of each species banded each year, illustrates one important difference between heron populations in New Jersey compared with previous decades: the presence of some of these species this far north, and in such numbers, is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Forty or even 20 years ago, there were virtually no Glossy Ibis nesting in New Jersey, and far fewer numbers of Snowy Egrets and Louisiana Herons. Of course the most recent addition is the Cattle Egret, which has been spreading northward over the past few years.

Although the Glossy Ibis is not a member of the heron family, its similarity in breeding habits and close association with the herons, at least at this colony, are such that they are included in this paper.

Several other birds nest in the immediate area, particularly gulls. Herring, Great Black-backed, and Laughing Gulls have also been banded by the authors but will be treated in a separate paper. Passerine species, whose nests and eggs have been found, include Red-winged Blackbird and Long-billed Marsh Wren. Other passerines observed are Boat-tailed Grackle, Barn and Tree Swallows, Yellow Warbler, Yellow-throat, Song, Seaside, and Sharp-tailed Sparrows. Numerous shorebirds of many species have been seen on the mud flats of the islands, especially in August.

Several banders and assistants have assisted in the banding activities at the colony throughout the years and the authors would like to extend particular thanks to Bob Miller, Tom Dougherty, Jess Grathman, Fred Mears, Ron French, Nelson Hoy, Grace McDermott, Judy Lorell, and Bert Murray. Space unfortunately does not permit a list of the names of all the persons who have assisted us throughout the years. We especially thank Bill Lang for the use of so many of his fine pictures taken at the colony.

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TABLE I

	1959	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	TOTAL
Great Blue Heron	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Common Egret	49	5	21	25	24	100	209	200	120	132	140	1025
Snowy Egret	10	28	35	28	225	209	319	315	74	113	239	1595
Louisiana Heron	7	16	11	9	40	45	43	71	33	25	78	378
Little Blue Heron	11	59	39	20	176	238	208	212	69	108	239	1379
Cattle Egret	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	17	0	3	22	51
Green Heron	17	13	11	13	23	11	10	19	6	0	13	136
Black-Crowned Night Heron	93	26	22	18	57	104	206	184	55	107	155	1027
Glossy Ibis	0	1	15	12	31	57	61	102	11	99	199	555
TOTAL	192	148	154	125	576	764	1065	1120	368	587	1052	6151

TABLE II

COMMON EGRET

BAND NO.	DATE BANNED	DATE RECOVERED	LOCATION OF RECOVERY
597-81908	07/27/68	10/08/68	Brigantine, N.J.
597-81924	07/18/70	07/24/70	Brigantine, N.J.
867-10334	06/09/72	12/06/72	Valverde, Dominican Republic
737-55094	06/11/68	10/04/68	Anguilla, W.I.
697-63857	07/06/65	09/ ?/65	Cedar Forked River, N.J.
737-55338	06/11/68	08/10/68	Absecon, N.J.
737-55176	06/13/67	01/25/68	Myrtle Beach, S.C.
737-55220	06/25/68	07/31/68	Leeds Point, N.J.
737-55351	06/11/68	09/01/68	Tinicum Wildlife Refuge, Phila. Pa.
735-55169	06/13/67	05/18/69	Atlantic City, N.J.
737-55112	07/10/66	02/ ?/69	Snead's Ferry, N.C.
737-55187	06/13/67	04/ ?/69	Bahamas, B.W.I.
737-55266	06/06/69	03/ ?/70	Jacksonville, N.C.

BAND NO.	DATE BANDED	DATE RECOVERED	LOCATION OF RECOVERY
737-55494	06/19/70	07/21/70	Iselin, N.J.
867-10157	06/19/70	11/20/70	Marie Galante, French W.I.
867-10013	06/04/71	05/11/72	Ridge, Md.
737-55060	06/11/68	12/05/70	Culbera Island, P.R.
867-10144	06/19/70	02/04/71	Setauket, N.Y.
867-10133	06/19/70	02/ ?/71	Greenville, N.C.
867-10156	06/19/70	01/24/71	Cuba
SNOWY EGRET			
606-04325	08/10/68	11/18/68	Caroni Swamp, Trinidad
726-82713	07/20/66	02/ ?/67	Bahamas (?)
726-82728	07/20/66	02/ ?/67	Bahamas (?)
746-35079	06/27/67	11/14/67	Brigantine, N.J.
746-35161	06/27/67	05/20/69	Atlantic City, N.J.
746-35299	07/25/67	10/27/68	Cuba (?)
746-47672	06/13/69	05/24/70	Nashawena Island, Mass.
LOUISIANA HERON			
746-57586	07/10/69	10/21/69	Morne a Jean, French W.I.
746-35228	07/25/67	11/20/67	Puerto Rico (?)
LITTLE BLUE HERON			
606-53247	07/25/67	03/12/68	Cerca Cenotillo, Yucatan, Mexico
606-53240	07/25/67	11/14/67	Brigantine, N.J.
626-40288	08/12/72	11/28/72	Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic
746-47502	06/06/69	06/18/69	Brigantine, N.J.
726-82540	07/10/66	08/22/67	Cape May, N.J.
746-35594	06/11/68	11/17/68	Fyzabad, Trinidad
746-35460	06/25/68	10/ ?/68	Gull Island, N.J.
746-57684	06/19/70	01/29/72	Poplar Branch, N.C.
746-47712	06/13/69	04/09/72	Stone Harbor, N.J.
786-99449	06/02/72	08/20/72	West End, N.J.
736-44648	06/09/72	11/25/72	Martinique, French W.I.
GREEN HERON			
655-59113	08/19/72	09/05/72	Ocean City, N.J.
BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON			
557-29229	08/18/68	12/ ?/69	Chincoteague, Va.
497-45797	07/13/68	02/15/69	N. Charleston, S.C.
647-46508	07/25/67	11/ ?/67	Cape May, N.J.
557-29258	06/26/71	01/30/72	Vazquez Oriente, Cuba
727-47626	07/20/66	09/02/66	Wecomecon, Md.
707-46945	06/16/64	06/30/65	Sea Isle City, N.J.
727-47801	06/11/68	01/ ?/69	Coral City, Fla.
727-47642	06/13/67	12/ ?/68	Absecon, N.J.
897-29558	06/20/69	04/02/70	Absecon, N.J.
727-47851	06/11/68	07/16/68	McGuire AFB, N.J.
727-47761	06/06/69	09/11/69	Union Beach, N.J.

BAND NO.	DATE BANDED	DATE RECOVERED	LOCATION OF RECOVERY
897-29531	06/13/69	02/01/70	Blackbeard NWR, Ga.
727-47799	06/06/69	11/13/69	Brigantine NWR, N.J.
737-55473	05/14/70	05/31/70	Brigantine, N.J.
727-47953	06/11/68	05/19/72	Sandy Hook, N.J.
897-29525	06/13/69	03/18/70	Cuba (?)
707-46990	06/10/65	11/02/68	Cuba (?)
727-47856	06/11/68	02/25/72	Blackwater NWR, Md.
947-79656	06/09/72	12/28/72	Tarboro, N.C.
947-79564	06/02/72	01/28/73	Thorofare, N.J.
GLOSSY IBIS			
726-82794	07/20/66	12/ ?/67	Lake Kissimmee, Fla.
746-35124	06/27/67	10/01/67	Black River, Jamaica
746-57905	06/04/71	10/14/71	Spanish Town, Jamaica
746-47784	06/20/69	07/08/71	Haiti (?)
726-82574	07/10/66	10/28/67	Cuba (?)
726-82628	07/10/66	01/31/71	Seneca Lake, N.Y.



LEFT: John Miller banding a young Snowy Egret.

RIGHT: Bruce Adams with young Black-crowned Night Heron.

TOP LEFT: John Miller with young Louisiana Heron.

MIDDLE LEFT: Young Glossy Ibis. The rings around the bill disappear after the first year.

RIGHT: (Top)-Little Blue Heron and (Bottom)-Snowy Egret. The difference in eye color is visible even without a color photograph. See John Miller's article on identification of young Herons and Ibis, EBBA News 36:39.

BOTTOM: Young Louisiana Heron.

(All photos by the authors)

