

## RETURN OF REDDISH EGRETS AS BREEDING BIRDS IN TAMPA BAY, FLORIDA

Richard T. Paul, Andrew J. Meyerriecks, and Frank M. Dunstan

One hundred years ago the Reddish Egret (*Dichromanassa rufescens*) was an abundant breeding species along the west coast of Florida from the Anclote Keys to Florida Bay (Scott 1887). Its numbers were severely reduced in the 1880's by plume hunters, and by 1900 the species was rare in Florida (Bent 1926; Howell 1932). Since that time breeding has been confined largely to the eastern part of Florida Bay. When Meyerriecks first visited the Florida Keys in 1955, he found no signs of colonial nesting, but instead breeding pairs uncommonly scattered in the region of Cowpens Keys in the eastern part of Florida Bay (Meyerriecks, *in* Palmer 1962).

Recently the species has shown signs of a slow increase in numbers and a breeding range extension northward along the west coast of Florida. Egrets with brilliant soft-part coloration have been observed annually on Frank Key in the northwestern part of Florida Bay since 1968. Nests and newly fledged young were found there in both 1973 and 1974 (John C. Ogden, pers. comm.). On 13 March 1970, Bancroft, Harrison, and Meyerriecks discovered one Reddish Egret nest on Hemp Key, Pine Island Sound, near Fort Myers (Bancroft 1971).

Observations by Meyerriecks from 1961 through 1969 in the Tampa Bay area indicated that Reddish Egrets were uncommon in this region, with infrequent sightings of more than one bird per day. Most records were made in the vicinity of Mullet and Tarpon Keys, Boca Ciega Bay. No birds with brilliant soft-part coloration were seen (see Meyerriecks 1960, for details of soft-part coloration and behavioral indicators of early breeding season activity).

In May 1970, June 1971, and May 1972, Meyerriecks saw single dark-phase Reddish Egrets on Mullet Key in brilliant soft-part coloration, but no other indications of breeding were observed. On Mullet Key in May 1973, Meyerriecks saw 2 brilliantly colored dark-phase individuals but was unable to discover any signs of nesting. Ralph W. Schreiber (pers. comm.) saw single dark-phase egrets with brilliant soft-part coloration on Tarpon Key in each of the years 1970-74.

During autumn and winter 1973-74 Dunstan regularly saw up to 5 Reddish Egrets (including one white-phase bird) in the vicinity of Bird Island, a major heronry at the mouth of the Alafia River in the north-eastern part of Tampa Bay. In February and March egrets with breeding coloration were regularly seen in and around nesting areas on Bird Island. On 30 April and 2 May Dunstan saw copulation and nest-building. The nest was 2.5 m above the substrate in a White Mangrove (*Laguncularia racemosa*). Paul and Dunstan found a dark-phase adult incubating 3 eggs in the nest on 10 May; they found 2 downy young and one egg on a 7 June inspection. Dunstan and Meyerriecks photographed one of the downy young on 10 June. This nest failed: one egg did not hatch, and by 20 June both young had disappeared.

Additionally, a newly fledged, dark-phase Reddish Egret with down on the head was seen on 2 May in the Bird Island colony. Perhaps the same bird was seen on 10 May and again on 7 June, when it was photographed. Probably this bird was raised in the same heronry and not else-

where. Two more dark-phase fledglings were seen on 26 August. Thus we suspect that at least 2 pairs of Reddish Egrets nested successfully on Bird Island in 1974, and that this is not an isolated event but rather part of a sustained reoccupation of former breeding range.

#### Literature Cited

- Bancroft, G. 1971. Northern breeding record for Reddish Egret. *Auk*, 88: 429.
- Bent, A. C. 1926. Life Histories of North American Marsh Birds. U. S. Nat. Mus. Bull. 135. 392 pp.
- Howell, A. H. 1932. Florida Bird Life. Florida Dept. of Game and Fresh Water Fish, Tallahassee. 579 pp.
- Meyerriecks, A. J. 1960. Comparative Breeding Behavior of Four Species of North American Herons. Publ. Nuttall Ornithol. Club No. 2. 158 pp.
- Palmer, R. S. (Ed.). 1962. Handbook of North American Birds, vol. 1. Yale University Press, New Haven. 567 pp.
- Scott, W. E. D. 1887. The present condition of some of the bird rookeries of the Gulf Coast of Florida. *Auk*, 4: 135-144; 213-222; 273-284.
- Research Department, National Audubon Society, Tavernier, Florida 33070; Department of Biology, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida 33620; National Audubon Society, Tampa Bay Sanctuaries, Rt. 1, Box 205-U, Ruskin, Florida 33570.*