

Notes on a Heronry in MainlandHarrison County, Mississippi

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Harrison County's first mainland heronry came to our attention in early July 1986. The discovery of this heronry has provided opportunity to document the first nestings of the Cattle Egret (Bubulcus ibis) and Little Blue Heron (Egretta caerulea) in the coastal counties. Additionally, it is the second recorded nesting locality of the Anhinga (Anhinga anhinga) in coastal Mississippi.

The heronry was located in rural Harrison County, approximately 25 km northwest of Gulfport. The herons were nesting in a very dense stand of dead or dying tupelo trees (Nyssa sp.) in a one-hectare farm pond. The area of the pond expanded when beavers (Castor canadensis) dammed the spillway of the pond. The pond is in pasture sparsely wooded in young pines (Pinus sp.) and 50 m north of a fairly well-traveled secondary road.

Approximately 1500 Cattle Egret nests, 10 Little Blue Heron nests, and 5 Anhinga nests were visible. Nests were placed from 0.3 to 10 m above water, with as many as 10 nests per tree. Nests of the two minority species were amidst those of Cattle Egrets.

Our first visit to the heronry was on 3 July, in late evening. At that time most nests were occupied by from one to three nestlings of differing sizes, from those recently hatched to many which were near fledging. Few nests held eggs. No young were judged to have left the colony, although many were climbing through the branches of nest trees. At least one adult was at each of the active nests. At dusk, many other adults flew in to the heronry.

Several other species were near the heronry: Great Blue Heron (Ardea herodias), Great Egret (Casmerodius albus), Green-backed Heron (Butorides striatus), and White Ibis (Eudocimus albus). The Green-backed Heron was nesting away from the main heronry, in dense vegetation on the other side of the pond dam. The other species were apparently not breeding.

We next visited the heronry at mid-morning on 6 July. A few juvenile Cattle Egrets were in the pasture adjacent to the heronry, and at least two juvenile Little Blue Herons were standing in shallow water in the center of the pond.

On 7 and 8 July, we found that substantially more juvenile Cattle Egrets had moved to the crowns of trees adjacent to the heronry. The density of birds within the heronry was diminished, although many nests still contained one or two downy chicks.

This appeared to be a successful heronry; we noted very little mortality among nestlings. The property owners recalled seeing small numbers of "white herons" throughout the summer of 1985, but could not say whether the birds had nested.

Photographs documenting the nesting of Anhinga, Little Blue Heron, and Cattle Egret are on file at the Department of Biological Sciences, Mississippi State University.

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