



SNOW

ANIMALS OF THE EVERGLADES

Snow falling gently outside, logs roasting merrily on a fire, and rosy red cheeks tell us the holiday season is here again...here in Florida, news of faraway snow storms, temperatures plunging below 70°F, and Christmas lights on palm trees will have to suffice.

***FORTUNATELY, ONE SPECIES HERE CAN KINDLE WINTER CHEER:
THE FESTIVE, ALL WHITE, SNOWY EGRET.***

SNOW— WHITE ADORNMENT

Warm descriptions for these little egrets abound: elegant, lovely, beautiful, graceful, dainty and exquisite. Snowy egrets have fluffy, white feathers resembling messy hairdos in the wind that could melt even the coldest heart. These long wispy plumes are grown during the breeding season to attract mates. But beauty comes with a price, and these lovely embellishments also caught the attention of a more sinister source: plume traders. In the late 1800s, decorating women's hats with feathers and even whole stuffed birds was the fashion craze. The breeding plumes of snowy and great egrets were particularly prized and incredibly valuable, worth twice their weight in gold. Hunters, motivated by the lure of easy riches, descended upon wading bird rookeries in the Everglades. Millions of birds were slaughtered each year, and once the parents were killed, the chicks were left to a grisly fate, starvation or death from predation. The snowy egret suffered cruelly from this vogue, nearly vanishing entirely. Other species of wading birds followed in their footsteps, and their numbers plummeted to fulfill the fickle whims of fashion.

Fortunately, a pair of women pioneered the movement to end the plume trade. Boston socialites, they organized tea parties where they urged women to boycott feathers. Hundreds of women agreed to join them, and their efforts lead to the formation of the Audubon Society. In 1913, the Weeks-McLean Act was passed, eventually becoming the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and this legislation stopped the plume trade once and for all. Luckily, these little delightful egrets have bounced back, and are no longer imperiled. However, they still face threats that plague many other species, eye-catching or not, such as habitat loss and degradation, pollution, human disturbance, alterations in hydrology, and potentially climate change.

BEARING GIFTS AND OTHER GOODIES

Dutiful parents, both males and females incubate their eggs and feed their young. Snowy egrets start to breed in the springtime, around March or April in Florida. When one parent takes over from the other on the nest, they present each other a stick as a way of signaling it's their turn to babysit. Not quite the same as lighting a yule time log, but it is charming nonetheless.

To their offspring, they bring a feast of baby bird treats: fish, frogs, small reptiles, mice, insects and other invertebrates. But beware of strangers bearing gifts, during the breeding season, sometimes alligators will place sticks on top of their heads. Wading birds looking for nest building materials may not have such a merry ending -- in the alligator's stomach. But it is a remarkable display of intelligence for a reptile: tool use.

Just a few decades ago, we thought the only animals clever enough to use tools were humans.

THEY LIKE FESTIVITIES AND MERRYMAKING GIFTS AND OTHER GOODIES

Snowy egrets are the social butterflies of the wading bird world. While they nest in isolated places like barrier islands, salt marsh islands, swamps, and marshes, they bring along all their friends, forming big, raucous colonies of fellow wading birds. You'll find snowy egrets in the middle of all the action, nesting in the very heart of the colony. These large, mixed-species nurseries make parenting a little easier, together they can better spot and chase away predators. Never the recluse, their gregarious nature permeates to all aspects of life. They don't like to dine alone, preferring to forage in the company of other birds, and also travel with companions.





They will even hybridize with other species like the tricolored herons, little blue herons, and cattle egrets. But it would be amiss to characterize these egrets as perpetually jolly, they have their moments too, and can be aggressive during feeding or nesting times.

THEY WEAR BOOTS



Okay not really, but a good way to identify snowy egrets is by bright yellow feet that contrast with jet black legs. Affectionately described as wearing golden slippers, these captivating egrets are a favorite subject for photographers, birders and nonbirders alike. These stylish traits, along with their black bills, distinguish them from another white-plumed species, cattle egrets. Cattle egrets, somewhat lacking in size and charisma in comparison, have yellow bills and legs. If you've ever seen a video of white birds riding on a cow's back, yes this is the same species. Large animals like cows stir up insects during grazing, which the cattle egrets then eat. In turn, snowy egrets are much smaller than another white species, the Great egret, also highly praised for its beauty. Finally, if you come upon a small, white bird with an odd looking, long bill, that's an white ibis. Decked out with a red bill, legs, and white feathers, it is another picture perfect creature for the holiday season.

