

Part 2 of our look into Winter Waterbirds inspects the Waders, those long-legged & long-billed hunters of fish & other aquatic creatures. We'll begin with the familiar.



Herons and egrets are very long-legged waterbirds with dagger bills for spearing fish and other aquatic life. Most herons are more/less dark, not white like most egrets. These adult Great Blue Herons are very handsome and well ornamented, even in fall and winter. This one is at San Luis Pass, but they are common and widely distributed.



This is a less colorful great blue with a mullet it stabbed at Anahuac NWR.



Really young great blues are pretty homely, but have potential.



Outside of the name, Little Blue Herons are very different from great blues. They are also largely freshwater, being pretty uncommon along the Coast. Their two-toned beak & legs kinda greenish eliminate any doubt about their identification. They are very common at Brazos Bend, often pulling up non-fish items like snakes, frogs, tadpoles and crayfish.



Many years ago, at FeatherFest, I had lunch with David Sibley, down on the Strand. As I was taking a bite, David looked at me curiously and said, “Jim, have you ever noticed the little blues often hold their necks at a 45-degree angle?” Truthfully, I hadn’t, & admitted it to “god.” But this is what he was talking about. [Their young have all-white plumage.]



Tri-colored Herons are about the same size, but are more slender, & active when feeding. Their most obvious field mark is the white belly, but some beige in the back and purplish on the neck add beauty to their elegant shape. This species not only passes on most items which aren't fish, they narrow their diet to surface-feeding minnows, largely.

Green Herons are not normally a winter bird.



Many people struggle with Great and (white) Reddish Egrets. Greats (left) are larger, of course, and have a yellow bill. But 15% of the reddish are white, so a quick glance at the dark beak is helpful. This Official Island Bird of Galveston has a black beak all fall and winter, though its legs at that time are about the same as the Great Egret's.



Same species; different birds. Notice the thick, dull bill on the always-active REEG (left).



Even in winter, with black legs, feet and bill, an adult Reddish Egret is lovely. This is the species which is famous for running after fishes, but this one must be digesting breakfast. The predators of the World, especially, need to rest while meat digests. The shaggy neck and back indicates an adult. We're about as far north as this tropical species gets.



I dunno; I just attract birds! The diminutive Snowy Egret is easy to identify, so long as it shows off its golden slippers. They are widespread and adaptable, though car hoods are not frequent roosts. Look for the yellow cere at the base of the beak, perfect complement to the feet! These are common and widespread, but mostly piscivorous.



On rare occasions, a Snowy Egret or Tri-colored Heron will feed actively, like a Reddish Egret is famous for. The canopy feed lures a fish into the shade, which is always in close proximity to the hunter. If that fails, they take off after surface-feeding fish, just like the Reddish Egrets so often do. Yellow on the back of the legs denotes an immature.

Cattle Egrets are scarce in the North American winter.



This is an adult, sorry looking Black-crowned Night-Heron, perhaps not a very healthy bird. To see them on the Island in winter, turn off Stewart Road like you're going to the Laffite's Cove, but take the first road to the left, instead. As it curves to the right, you'll see a pond on your right and trees on the far right edge. It's the best place I know for the BCNHs, who spend winter days sleeping in thick trees near water.



An awfully reddish brown immature Black-crowned Night-Heron is feeding on a dark & dreary day. Note the short legs and yellow on the bill, both excellent field marks for that species. In fact, in flight, only the feet stick out past the tail. This species is found all the way around the middle of the Earth, a characteristic we call circum-Equatorial.



The salt marsh a quarter mile north of the big bridge over to Follet's Island at Surfside on the east side of the road, houses quite a few roosting Yellow-crowned Night-Herons like this one. There are also many other species feeding and hanging out there, like ibis, pink spoonbills, Greater Yellowlegs, heron & egrets and White Ibis. It's a great place!



Juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-Herons are told from young black-crowns by the longer legs, smaller light spots and totally black bills. Both species have eye color ranging from red to orange to yellow, aiding their night vision. This species will often roost in the salt water itself, as it has longer legs than BCNH. So how do they look changing plumage?



Yellow-crowned Night-Heron beginning to change to adult plumage, with a Mud Turtle.



Bitterns are built essentially like herons and egrets, but are various shades of brown to be hidden in the vegetation. American Bitterns are winter residents, and our Refuges and BB State Park are the best areas for them. They are like snipe in that they may be extremely tame, since they rely on “hiding.” At Brazos Bend they can become ridiculously abiding.

Least Bitterns are generally not seen in winter.



White Ibis are plenty common in winter, but their offseason color of the soft parts is less red than in spring. Ibis seem to eat fewer fish and more food like crayfish and worms than the previous birds with dagger bills. These appear to be all white but they have four black tipped flight feathers to reduce wear. Here, I'll show you...



I wonder what mud hole this one has been probing into.



Immature White Ibis are brown with white bellies, and these two are in different stages of development. They are heavy enough that when they fly, you might have noticed on the preceding picture that they extend their neck for balance. This is also true of spoonbills, flamingoes, storks and cranes. The lightweight birds (herons, egrets and bitterns) fly with their head and neck pulled in for better balance.



The winter White-faced Ibis is in the typical all-dark plumage like Glossy Ibis to the East. In better light you can see its red eye, perhaps its best delineation with glossies. Despite coming from the south, they are more common here in winter. This species prefers fresh water and marshy areas are their top choice. Look for them at Anahuac NWR.



Note what a difference the direct sun makes on the iridescence of this ibis.

Below are White-faced Ibis and Sandhill Cranes on HW 36, just south of the speed trap of Jones Creek.



Wood Storks are not around our area in winter.



Roseate Spoonbills are pink, and in the absence of flamingoes, that's all you need for an identification. The lamellate bill is used for sifting small shrimp and other invertebrates out of the water, with many of those creatures lending their carotene pigment to making spoonbills even pinker. Have you seen the immatures with the white (feathered) head?

Flamingoes are tropical birds, very seldom found naturally in our area.



Sandhill Cranes inspired our Crane Festival, which Julia Ann and the GINTC sponsors so impressively. This pair of cranes is special, as they have successfully raised two chicks, a real accomplishment! There're usually 200-300 cranes on the Island throughout a winter, and in the absence of former hunting, they have become quite tame.



An early-morning trio of sandies comes clattering past my skydeck.

For our purposes, we're including the rail family (Rallidae) with previous waders.



Clapper Rails are our commonest rail, though their habitat is confined to salt marshes. It calls early and often in spring and summer, and by May becomes very abiding. The long bill protects them from the fiddler crabs they crave, and their coloration allows them to blend in with the brown marsh grass. Rails are also very thin (compressed) so they can sneak through the grass without creating movement above.

Buckle up for the next one...



Recently at Brazoria NWR I was able to patiently lure out this King Rail, the freshwater counterpart to the salty clapper. They are barely larger than a clapper, but the rich colors on this “full” King Rail scream his species. In places where salt and fresh meet, they can be quite difficult, as hybridization readily takes place, causing really mixed-up birds. It’s a beautiful bird, eh?



Colored much like the larger King Rail, the secretive Virginia Rail is even less obtrusive, sad due to its color. Out West, they are much grayer, like so many pairs of species found in both the east and West. Note the eyes, bill and legs are red, an interesting color match. Rails are sadly game birds, with dark, gamey meat, but thankfully not often hunted.



Much smaller is the Sora, a common rail that sometimes ventures out and allows the good look that leads to decent pictures. [Not that this one is!] The gray barring and yellow legs & bill seal the identification. The scarce Virginia Rail has a long bill & is much browner. Soras are known for their high-pitched, *eeek* call note, and descending *eeek-eeek-eeek* song.

Yellow and Black Rails are extremely wary and unobtrusive. Good luck seeing one!



American Coots are winter residents, often numbering in the hundreds in places such as Anahuac NWR. The gray body, black head & neck and white bill are diagnostic, putting along through the water at .000000251 miles and hour. They prefer fresh water and are common in most public areas like refuges and parks. They are a game bird, where hunters boil them in vegetables, throw away the coot and eat the veggies. ;)



Common Gallinules are abundant at Anahuac NWR and common in other parks & refuge locations. The candy corn bill is unmistakable, but subadults lack that color. Still, they're browner than coots with an equally low IQ. Their feet are not webbed, so they swim well, but do so in the same place too long. Like coots, they are mostly vegetarians, but will eat various small animals like insects, an adequate protein supplement.



Purple Gallinules are scarce in winter, but there is one at Anahuac NWR. These are birds that walk on lily pads while Common Gallinules usually swim or walk on land. Of course you can't miss this bird's colors! Generally, immatures of this species stay longer – well into the fall – but this adult is outlasting them. Note the bill has lost its color.