

WISCONSIN ENDANGERED RESOURCES REPORT 39

WISCONSIN GREAT EGRET RECOVERY PLAN

By Kathleen J. Fruth

SUMMARY

The great egret (Casmerodius albus) is a threatened species in Wisconsin. This document provides information on life history, status and distribution and limiting factors, and proposes investigative and administrative activities necessary for recovering the great egret in Wisconsin. A recovery goal will be determined following an evaluation of potential nesting and feeding habitat in Wisconsin.

Great egrets were hunted on a massive scale on their nesting grounds throughout their breeding range in the late 1800s and early 1900s, particularly in the southern U.S. where large concentration of the birds could be found. Great egrets, along with numerous other large colonial wading bird species, were hunted almost to extinction for their plumes which were in great demand by the millinery trade. Protection did come through the establishment of sanctuaries and the enactment of legislation that outlawed the hunting practices that nearly caused the extinction of numerous species.

Following protection, great egret numbers recovered rapidly from the devastating effects of hunting. More recently though, habitat loss and degradation has been linked to loss of colonies and to limited expansion of populations. In Wisconsin much research regarding this species is still needed. This plan recommends research that includes activities intended to provide potential management solutions, it includes recommendations to establish a long-term monitoring program, and to develop a policy for addressing great egret nesting rookeries on private lands. Information and education of the public is an essential factor in the recovery of this species.

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THE WISCONSIN GREAT EGRET RECOVERY PLAN

by

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June 1988



DATE: June 29, 1988

TO: James Addis - AD/5
 Administrator, Resource Management

FROM: Ronald F. Nicotera - ER/4

Please review and approve the attached recovery plan. The Executive Summary delineates the objectives of the plan.

This plan has been reviewed by experts from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Minnesota DNR, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the University of Wisconsin, and the private sector.

This plan is a dynamic document that will be revised as necessary to incorporate new techniques and modified objectives.

Copies of the plan will be available upon request.

APPROVED:

James Addis
 James Addis

7/5/88
 Date

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Executive Summary

The great egret is a threatened species in Wisconsin. Only 7 egret colonies were known to be active in Wisconsin in 1978; 5 of which were located along the Mississippi River. Historical problems such as over-hunting and the subsequent problems of habitat loss and degradation, are factors that have affected great egrets populations in Wisconsin as they have great egrets and other colonial wading birds throughout temperate and tropical America.

Due to the lack of research and management information necessary on which to base recovery regarding requirements for great egret recovery in Wisconsin, no numerical goal will be set at this time. The long-range goal is to maintain a viable population of great egrets in colonies distributed throughout the state. The short-term goal will be to obtain the research and habitat inventory results needed to determine the minimum viable great egret population level for Wisconsin.

This plan contains three main sections. Part I provides background information on status and distribution, biology, life history and other information pertinent to the understanding of this species. Part II describes the location and histories of great egret colonies in Wisconsin. Part III describes the activities recommended for achieving the objectives of this recovery plan.

Activities recommended for achieving the objectives of this plan include:

1. Conduct research and investigations including nesting and feeding habitat inventories, population surveys, a management technique study at a selected site and other biological monitoring.
2. Develop a long-term monitoring and management program for the state, and in particular for the Upper Mississippi River Region. This program will involve Wis., Minn., Ill., Iowa, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Corps of Engineers.
3. Recommendations for developing a policy for great egret rookeries on private lands. Specific guidelines are suggested, but complete policy development will entail input from various WDNR bureaus and the public. A spirit of positive cooperation and involvement by landowners is a primary goal.

4. Implement information and education programs to increase awareness and understanding of great egrets as well as other large colonial waterbirds in Wisconsin. Specific informational and educational efforts should be directed at landowners with great egret nesting or feeding habitat.

This plan has been reviewed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources bureaus of Endangered Resources, Wildlife Management and Research, and the Resource Management Administrator, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and outside experts.

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Additional copies of this document may be obtained from:

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I. BACKGROUND

A. Introduction

The great egret (Casmerodius albus) was placed on Wisconsin's endangered and threatened species list in 1979. In the late 1800s to early 1900s this species was hunted almost to extinction throughout its breeding range due to the fashion industry's demand for the elegant plumes. Populations recovered from the lows of that era, but since then wetland alteration and drainage have reduced and/or degraded the habitat available to this species. Pesticides and other chemical contaminants may pose additional problems.

Surveys along the Upper Mississippi River (UMR) in the past 10 years have indicated the most drastic population declines to be occurring in the southern part of the UMR where development and water quality are believed to be the main factors influencing the decline (Thompson 1978); declines have also been noted in the Wisconsin UMR colonies (Mossman and Thompson 1985).

This document provides natural history information on the great egret and recommends research and management actions to guide efforts to remove the great egret from the Wisconsin threatened species list. The long-range goal is to maintain a viable population of great egrets in colonies distributed throughout the state. This plan will not prescribe a numerical goal based on this species' past population levels in Wisconsin. A comprehensive statewide inventory and an evaluation of potential suitable habitat for this species have not been conducted and this should be considered a priority objective to be completed by December 1989. It may then be possible to determine a statewide recovery level.

The identification, protection, and management of nesting and feeding habitat for great egrets will also benefit other colonial waterbirds as well as other species using the wetland ecosystem. Great blue heron (Ardea herodias), black-crowned night heron (Nycticorax nycticorax), and double-crested cormorant (Phalacrocorax auritus) are often found nesting and feeding in association with great egrets in Wisconsin.

Although this recovery plan addresses Wisconsin recovery efforts, recommendations are made for regional cooperation between the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Corps of Engineers, as well as with the states which contain active great egret colonies along the UMR within their borders--Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois (Appendix A). The status of the great egret along the UMR should be pursued as a regional effort. An accurate perception of the great egret's population in this important region can only be achieved through coordinated efforts of the agencies concerned. It is necessary, for example, to know

