

great egret *Ardea alba*

Kingdom: Animalia

Division/Phylum: Chordata

Class: Aves

Order: Pelecaniformes

Family: Ardeidae

ILLINOIS STATUS common, native

FEATURES

An adult great egret is 38 to 40 inches in length. It is a tall bird with white feathers and very long legs. It has black legs and feet. The feathers on its body extend past the end of its tail when it is in breeding plumage. Its yellow bill is long and slender, and used as a spear for gathering food. This bird has a long neck. The male and female are similar in appearance.

BEHAVIORS

The great egret is a common migrant through Illinois and a summer resident along the state's major rivers. It winters in the southern United States south to central America. The great egret lives around marshes, ponds, shorelines of rivers and lakes, flooded fields and mudflats. This bird feeds mainly on crayfish, fishes, frogs and insects. It is usually seen wading at the water's edge. Like the other herons, its neck is held in an "S" formation during flight with its legs trailing straight out behind its body. This bird nests in trees near the nests of black-crowned night-herons and great blue herons. Nesting in Illinois occurs from April through June. Four to five pale blue eggs are laid in the nest. The birds move north after nesting. The great egret's call is "cuk, cuk, cuk." Migration occurs during the day with the birds flying in a "V" formation.

HABITATS

Aquatic Habitats

lakes, ponds and reservoirs; rivers and streams; swamps; temporary water supplies; marshes

Woodland Habitats

southern Illinois lowlands

Prairie and Edge Habitats

none

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