



American Great Egret by Carol Ellis

I had to do a double take, was this standing bird a new variety of plastic yard art in the genre of the pink flamingo? Then it moved, revealing a real live egret preying on lizards in the hedge.

To prey or to pray.... That is the question.

English is a very confusing language. Both words sound the same, yet present very different meanings, depending on the context in which they are used. There is preying and praying in a photograph of a Great Egret fishing beside a makeshift cross. An egret preys on sea critters, where locals pray on Sunday morning.

About 23 years ago... a restaurant and watering hole existed in Rock Harbor, called the Mandalay. A casual spot with cold beer, peel-and-eat shrimp and views of the ocean and boat moorings.

A cross erected at the point becomes the focus of worshippers who sit at those same tables and chairs during Sunday morning open air church services.

The Great Egret (*Ardea alba egretta*) is a three-foot-tall, long-legged wading bird that is often confused with a similar looking white bird the 'Great White Heron' (the white form of Great Blue Heron.) Though both birds are herons, a simple way of differentiating between the two big white birds is the Great Egret has black legs, and the Great White Heron's legs are yellow. The male Great Egret also sports



A Great Egret preys on sea critters, while locals come here to pray. About 23 years ago The Mandalay had food, drinks and views of the ocean and boat moorings. A cross erected at the point was the focal point for Sunday morning open air church services.

delicate ornamental feathers down its back when in mating plumage.

Those beautiful feathers not only attract female mates, but nearly led to a human-driven extinction of the species. Around the turn of the 20th century, a ton and a half of Great Egret plumes, known as "aigrettes" were sold in London to decorate women's hats. In terms of birds slaughtered, 200,000 adult birds, multiplied by 2-3 times, counting the eggs abandoned in the nest, became prey to the millinery industry.

In 1902 John James Audubon worried that "the long plumes of this bird being in request for ornamental purposes, they are shot in great numbers while sitting on their eggs, or soon after the appearance of the young."

It is hard to imagine a time when birds were so plentiful, they could be sacrificed for vanity and decoration, rather than be admired for their beauty and role in the natural world. The modern day National Audubon Society's logo is of a Great Egret in



"The long plumes of this bird being in request for ornamental purposes, they are shot in great numbers " In 1902 a ton and a half of Great Egret plumes were sold in London to decorate women's hats, or in terms of birds slaughtered, 200,000 adult birds, multiplied by 2-3 times, counting the eggs abandoned in the nest. Photo by Ken B. White

American Great Egret... CONTINUED - Photos by Carol Ellis except as noted.



The Great Egret can be found in fresh or salt water habitat. Here a flock of egrets and other long-legged wading birds, hunt for fish, frogs and other small fare.

flight, representing the organization's role in enacting conservation laws to protect the species and ensure its return.

Great Egret are equally at home in fresh or salt water environments. They have also been successful at adapting to life in an increasingly developed world. Egrets can often be seen foraging in roadside ditches, or along suburban roads. They typically stand motionless, and with keen eyesight that can look straight ahead as well as downward, patiently wait until unsuspecting prey comes their way. Then with lightning fast reflexes, the long-necked egret strikes with a jab of its sharp bill.

To quote Winnie the Pooh ... "Which is more important, the voyage or the destination?" Piglet replied "The company."

For me the voyage and the company are of equal importance, especially in the Florida Keys when wildlife appears.

Sometimes the voyage is the destination, such as the day I photographed an egret



The Great Egret walks with its neck extended and wings held close.



(Above) A Great Egret hunts in the tall shrubs and grasses. They can often be seen in roadside ditches, or along suburban roads. Suddenly the egret darts into the foliage and emerges with his lizard prize.



(Left) The Great Egret by John James Audubon is shown in the marshes, preying on crayfish.

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hunting beside the road. I stopped and silently observed; luckily I was in a golf cart and not worried about traffic. I watched the scene unfold through the lens, because that is what photographers do. And bam! The once motionless egret produced a nice lizard snack from within the foot-high greenery. If I hadn't stopped, I wouldn't have known. The voyage and the company of the egret became the experience.

So how about the people that don't venture out in nature, or never pay attention to wildlife? That is part of why I write, to pique the interest of the unknowing or unaware. You cannot fault someone for doing the wrong thing if they do not have the facts or the understanding.

According to the prevailing view in 1900, a man could kill a bird for its feathers in order to put food on the table. The context of his preying was to feed his family, and there were plenty of birds.

How does that relate in the year 2026? There is an unrelenting population influx to Florida. It is the wild west in many respects, where every man has a right to do what he wants with his property. But will those decisions be morally right? The people of the State of Florida should enact a state-wide comprehensive plan encompassing development, roads, housing, and quality of life, before adding more people to the mix. A healthy environment means better quality of life, and happier people. Prior environmental commitments such as "Florida Forever" should be funded, and projects completed.

Is that too much to ask? Maybe it is time to pray for something greater.