
Snowy Egret

Egretta thula

Aves — Ciconiiformes — Ardeidae

CONSERVATION STATUS / CLASSIFICATION

Rangewide: Secure (G5)
Statewide: Imperiled breeding (S2B)
ESA: No status
USFS: Region 1: No status; Region 4: No status
BLM: No status
IDFG: Protected nongame species

BASIS FOR INCLUSION

Low breeding population and declining population trend in Idaho.

TAXONOMY

Two subspecies are currently recognized in the U.S., *E. t. thula* and *E. t. brewsteri*. The separation of these 2 subspecies is based entirely on slight size differences, with *brewsteri* being the larger of the 2, although snowy egrets west of the Rocky Mountains are all generally considered to be of the *brewsteri* subspecies (Parsons and Master 2000). This species has been known to hybridize with tricolored herons, little blue herons, and cattle egrets.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

Snowy egrets breed at inland wetlands from southeast Oregon to western Colorado, south to central Utah and east to eastern California, as well as several additional scattered locations throughout the U.S. Coastal populations breed from southern Maine to South America. The global population size of this species is unknown (Parson and Master 2000), although the North American breeding population is estimated to be 143,000 birds (Kushlan et al. 2002). In the Great Basin, there are approximately 1661 breeding pairs (Ivey and Herziger 2005). Of these, approximately 326 pairs breed in Idaho (Trost and Gerstell 1994) at 9–10 sites in the southern half of the state, including American Falls Reservoir, Duck Valley Indian Reservation, Market Lake Wildlife Management Area, and Mud Lake Wildlife Management Area.

POPULATION TREND

After sharp declines during the plume hunting boon, snowy egrets have increased dramatically since the early 1900s. In the U.S., Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data indicate increases during periods 1966–2004 (+4.9% per year), 1966–1979 (+20.3% per year; not statistically significant), and 1980–2004 (+4.4% per year; Sauer et al. 2005). However, BBS data indicate sharp declines in the physiographic region Basin and Range and in Idaho during the period 1966–2004 (–14.9% and –5.5% per year, respectively; Idaho data not statistically significant) and 1980–2004 (–7.2% and –10.5% per year, respectively; not statistically significant; Sauer et al. 2005). BBS trend data are not available at either survey level for the period 1966–1979.

HABITAT AND ECOLOGY

In Idaho, snowy egrets generally breed in mixed–species colonies in willows along rivers and creeks, in large shrubs on reservoir islands, and in bulrush/cattail marshes (Trost and Gerstell 1994; Parsons and Master 2000; C. Moulton, IDFG, pers. comm.). The nest of woven twigs and sticks (Parsons and Master 2000) may be built at ground/water level or up to heights of 10 m (Trost and Gerstell 1994). This species forages for a large variety of prey items (e.g., fish, snails, insects, earthworms, snakes, toads; Parsons and Master 2000) in shallow water of lakes, ponds, rivers, creeks, and wet meadows (Ivey and Herziger 2005).

ISSUES

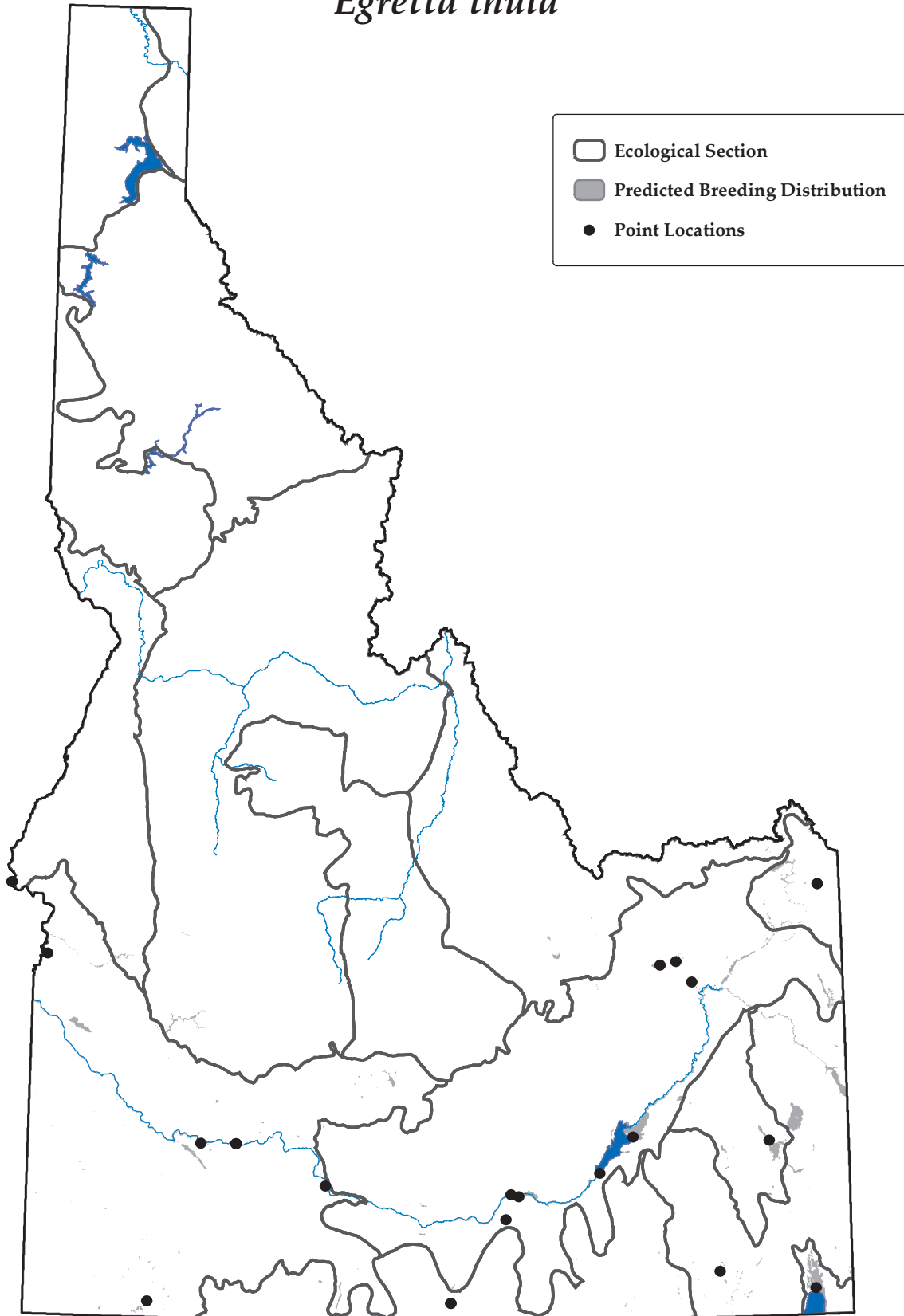
In 1979, 100% of eggs collected (19 eggs from 19 clutches) contained DDE (Findholt 1984). Presence of pesticides and other contaminants has been detected in snowy egret eggs and adults in various locations throughout the U.S. from the 1970s through 1990s (Parsons and Master 2000). Since Trost and Gerstell's (1994) study, no statewide assessment of breeding locations and colony sizes has been made.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Monitoring for any effects of pesticides on snowy egrets in Idaho should be implemented (Ivey and Herziger 2005). Historic nesting locations (Trost and Gerstell 1994) should be visited to determine if they are still being used by this species, and potential new nesting locations should be explored. In addition, consistent monitoring of the breeding colonies should be implemented, such as part of the Idaho Bird Inventory and Survey (IBIS) program, such that all colonies are surveyed every 3 years following the monitoring plan outlined in the Intermountain West Waterbird Conservation Plan (Ivey and Herziger 2005).

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Map created on September 21, 2005
and prepared by Idaho Conservation Data Center.
Sources: Point data are from Idaho Conservation Data Center,
Idaho Department of Fish and Game (2005). Predicted distribution
is from the Wildlife Habitat Relationships Models (WHR),
A Gap Analysis of Idaho: Final Report. Idaho Cooperative Fish
and Wildlife Research Unit, Moscow, ID (Scott et al. 2002).
Predicted distribution is approximate (for more information, go to
http://www.wildlife.uidaho.edu/idgap/idgap_report.asp).

