

Reddish Egret

By Kenlynn Volz

Nesting season is in full swing here on the Gulf Coast! This season, I have joined Gulf Coast Bird Observatory's coastal biologist Taylor Bennett in monitoring Matagorda Beach and Sargent Beach for nesting Wilson's Plovers and least terns. During a recent survey of Colorado River Mouth Flats along Matagorda Beach, Taylor and I encountered another amazing bird -a reddish egret!

Dancing, leaping, and sprinting through shallow waters, the reddish egret is a joyful bird to watch! This long-legged dance is a hunting strategy employed to capture small fish, frogs, and crabs. Reddish egrets forage actively, chasing after prey and casting shadows over the water to better spot their meals which they then speared with their sharp bills.

Despite their name, reddish egrets come in two color types, or morphs. There's the dark morph, which is characterized by a rusty-brown head and neck feathers with gray to red feathers on their body, and the white morph, which is characterized by fully white feathers.

White morph reddish egrets are often mistaken for snowy egrets, great egrets, and juvenile little blue herons, which all have similar plumage coloration. White morph reddish egrets can be differentiated from snowy egrets due to their smaller size in comparison. To most easily decipher a white morph reddish egret from a snowy egret, reddish egrets lack the iconic yellow feet of the snowy egret and instead have legs and feet that are a uniform dark gray.

Observing the larger size and thicker build of the reddish egret is one way to tell the difference between a juvenile little blue heron and a white morph reddish egret. Overall, the easiest way to tell that you're looking at a white morph reddish egret is by observing its foraging behavior. Reddish egrets will forage by zig-zagging, jumping, and spinning through the water after their prey. This active foraging strategy sets them apart from similar species which have a more patient approach.

Reddish egrets are tied to coastal habitats such as saltwater marshes. Their range extends from northern South America up through the Gulf of Mexico and Baja California. Here in Texas, reddish egrets are present year-round, making Texas coastal ecosystems important habitats for this species.

Reddish egrets are regarded as some of the rarest egrets in North America. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, reddish egrets were overhunted for their feathers, which were often used in hats. With the passing of the Migratory Bird Treaty act in 1918, reddish egrets were offered protection against plumage hunters, allowing the species to survive. Currently, reddish egrets are state-listed as threatened, protecting them from direct take.

Unfortunately, today reddish egret populations are in decline. Habitat loss, often the result of human activities, is among the greatest threats to the survival of reddish egret populations. The survival of this amazing species relies on the conservation of their habitat, much of which lies here in Texas.



Image: Dark morph reddish egret. by Taylor Bennett