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Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

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Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*

This small, yellow-toed egret is abundantly adorned with aigrettes when it breeds. At the turn of this century, these feathers were much sought after by the millinery trade to adorn women's clothing. Hunters slaughtered the adult birds for these feathers, leaving unhatched eggs to spoil and young Snowy Egrets in the nest to starve, greatly decimating the species' population. Snowy Egrets breed from northern California east to South Dakota and south to Florida, Chile, Argentina, and the Greater Antilles. They winter in southern California and Arizona, the southeastern United States, and south to the limits of their breeding range (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

Habitat. The Snowy Egret usually nests in colonies with other species of waders in swamps and mangroves on islands or in emergent vegetation over water. The Snowy Egret forages in both freshwater and saltwater habitats, where it often actively pursues its prey, usually in flocks with other wading birds. Its diet is chiefly small fish, but it will take shrimp and small vertebrates.

The nest is a platform of sticks in trees or bushes, usually less than 9 m (30 ft) above the ground or water. Three to 5 blue-green eggs hatch in about 18 days, and the young fledge at about 25 days of age.

Seasonal Occurrence. The Snowy Egret breeds in Florida from January through August (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). Florida is host to wintering birds from more northern states, and large numbers of migratory birds swell the winter ranks of residents in the Everglades (Hoffman et al. 1990) and other southerly locations.

Status. The Snowy Egret is designated as a Species of Special Concern by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission [editor: now Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission] (Wood 1991). The species breeds in colonies mostly in the central and southern peninsula; colonies are few and scattered in north Florida and the Panhandle, west to Okaloosa County.

Today, this species occupies much of its historic range and previously unreported colonies have been found in Hamilton County and in the Panhandle, west of Leon County, since the late 1970s. However, Snowy Egrets appear to be declining dramatically as a breeding bird. Between statewide surveys in 1976-78 and 1986-89, there was reduction from more than 51,000 breeding birds to < 14,000, a 73% decline (Nesbitt et al. 1982; Runde et al. 1991). Probable causes of this decline are the loss and degradation of wetlands statewide, particularly in the coastal zone and the southern half of the state.

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Snowy Egret

