

Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*)

NMPIF level: Biodiversity Conservation Concern, Level 2 (BC2)

NMPIF assessment score: 14

North American Waterbird Conservation Plan Status: High Concern

New Mexico BCRs: 35, (16), (18)

Primary breeding habitat(s): Emergent Wetlands

Other habitats used: Mid-elevation Riparian

Summary of Concern

Snowy Egret is a colonial waterbird with a widespread distribution in North America. *Egretta thula brewsteri* is the recognized subspecies in New Mexico and is considered by New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to be a species of concern in the state. There is a dearth of information regarding historic or current breeding of this species and other colonial waterbirds in New Mexico. Snowy Egret probably breeds in small numbers in New Mexico, although statewide surveys are needed to confirm their breeding status and numbers. Surveys conducted in the Lower Rio Grande during 1975 and 1999 reported numbers of nesting Snowy Egrets near 200 birds (Stahlecker 2008). Surveys of the same area in 2007 failed to document any active nests, although birds were observed. This apparent reduction in nesting in this region perhaps indicates recent changes in local habitat conditions.

Associated Species

Double-crested Cormorant (BC2), Neotropic Cormorant (BC2), Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Little Blue Heron, Cattle Egret, Black-crowned Night-Heron

Distribution

Snowy Egret has an irregular breeding distribution in the interior of North America, including portions of the Great Basin and Intermountain West, the southern plains, and the Gulf states. It breeds and winters along portions of the Pacific, Atlantic, and Gulf coasts to Central America and throughout the Caribbean, and winters in interior wetlands in Mexico and Central America. There are also records of Snowy Egrets nesting in the Rio Colorado Delta in Mexico (Mellink et al. 2002).

In New Mexico, Snowy Egrets are summer residents in marsh areas statewide, but are most common in the southern Rio Grande and lower Pecos valleys (Parsons and Master 2000, Parmeter et al. 2002), or more permanent wetland complexes such as Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge. Snowy Egrets have been observed in small numbers at the Rio Grande Valley State Park (Stahlecker and Cox 1997). Surveys of the Middle Rio Grande in 2007 reported a small number of Snowy Egrets nesting at Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge near the San Acacia Diversion Dam in Socorro County (Stahlecker 2008).

Ecology and Habitat Requirements

Snowy Egrets prefer shallow estuaries and coastal wetlands throughout their range. In the interior west, their preferred habitats include emergent wetlands and marshes, shorelines, and riparian areas along large rivers. Snowy Egrets require shallow water for foraging, and they nest colonially in low shrubs or trees in marsh or riparian areas. The species arrives in New Mexico in mid to late May and remains through October (Parsons and Master 2000).

Conservation Status

Species Assessment

DISTRIBUTION	4
THREATS	4
GLOBAL POPULATION SIZE	3
LOCAL POPULATION TREND	2
IMPORTANCE OF NEW MEXICO TO BREEDING	1
COMBINED SCORE	14

Snowy Egret is a Biodiversity Conservation Concern, Level 2 species for New Mexico, with a combined vulnerability score of 14. It is also a species of high concern in the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan, where it receives high vulnerability scores of 4 for population trend, threats to breeding areas, and limited non-breeding distribution.

Population Size

The North American Waterbird Conservation Plan estimates >143,000 breeders in North America. The size of the New Mexico breeding population is unknown, but likely small.

Population Trend

Snowy Egrets were decimated by the feather trade in the late 19th century, but subsequently populations recovered and expanded with adequate management and law enforcement. Since the 1980s, populations have again declined, particularly in the Atlantic coastal region.

The New Mexico population is small and could be stable, but there is little evidence that it has increased. Stahlecker (2008) reported substantial Snowy Egret declines in comparison with previous survey efforts going back to 1975. Although comparisons with previous surveys may not be statistically valid, the apparent trend might indicate that changes in water conditions have not been favorable to nesting Snowy Egrets.

Threats

The main potential threat is loss or alteration of suitable wetland breeding habitat. This species is not considered to be highly threatened in New Mexico.

Management Issues and Recommendations

No special management is needed, beyond a focus on maintaining wetland habitat. As with all colonial waterbirds in New Mexico, breeding surveys are needed to determine reproductive status and success.

NMPIF Recommendations

- No draining or disturbing of wetland areas where colonial waterbirds are nesting.

Species Conservation Objectives

NMPIF Objectives

- Maintain or increase the current breeding population.
- Identify colony locations, and seek to protect these areas from disturbance as needed.

Sources of Information

Mellink, E., J. A. Castillo-Guerrero, and A. De al Cerdá. 2002. Noteworthy waterbird records in the delta of the Rio Colorado, Mexico, 2002. *Western Birds* 33:249-253.

Parmeter, J., B. Neville, and D. Emkalns. 2002. New Mexico bird finding guide. New Mexico Ornithological Society, Albuquerque, NM.

Parsons, K. C., and T. L. Master. 2000. Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 489 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.

Stahlecker, D. W. 2008. Growth and decline in nesting waterbird populations in New Mexico's Rio Grande Valley: 1975-2007. Report submitted to the Share with Wildlife program, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, Santa Fe, NM.

Stahlecker, D. W., and N. S. Cox. 1997. Bosque biological monitoring program: bird populations in Rio Grande Valley State Park. Eagle Environmental, Inc., Santa Fe, NM.