

Great Egret

Casmerodius albus

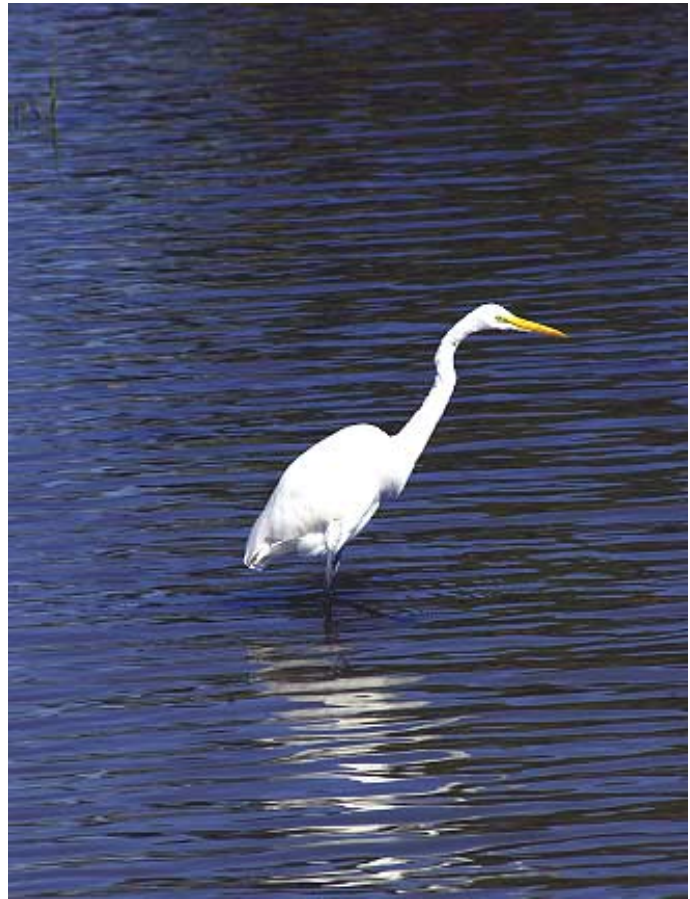
Within Ohio, breeding Great Egrets have been largely confined to the western Lake Erie basin. While the history of this population was briefly described by Peterjohn (1989a), a more complete summary is provided below.

In 1940 Ohio's first confirmed nesting pair of egrets was discovered within a Great Blue Heron colony along Sandusky Bay in Sandusky County (Hicks 1944). This attempt was probably successful as large young were observed in the nest on July 5. The status of nesting Great Egrets was not determined between 1940 and 1945. While breeding was suspected on West Sister Island in 1945, nesting was not confirmed there until 1946 (Campbell 1947). The initial size of this colony is the subject of contradictory information. Campbell (1947) reported only six nests, five with young and one with unknown contents. However, he later claimed there were 25 nests containing 10 young on June 16 (Campbell 1968). This colony reportedly consisted of 20 nests in 1947 and 30 in 1948 (Mayfield 1947, 1948). Its subsequent increases were poorly documented. As many as 125 nesting pairs were estimated in 1959 and similar numbers were believed to be present into the early 1970s (Campbell 1968, 1973). Elsewhere along western Lake Erie, nesting egrets were reported from a small colony at Winous Point (Ottawa County). Approximately 25 pairs nested there "prior to 1959", but only one pair remained in 1960 (Anderson 1960). After 1960, only single pairs infrequently nested at this site.

During the Atlas Project, West Sister Island remained the stronghold of breeding Great Egrets within Ohio. The current size of this population has not been precisely determined, but recent estimates of more than 200 pairs indicate their numbers are increasing. A second small colony of 20–30 pairs has become established on a small island in Sandusky Bay near Sandusky (Erie County). One pair of nesting Great Egrets was also reported within the Great Blue Heron colony at Winous Point during 1983; the status of breeding egrets within this colony was not determined during other years of the Atlas. However, only one or two pairs have sporadically nested there and a permanent breeding population does not appear to be established.

Ohio's nesting Great Egrets are part of a larger population occupying the entire western basin of Lake Erie. At least three colonies are known in the Ontario section of the lake, and there are two other nesting locations near Lake St. Clair (Cadman et al. 1987). This population is located near the northern edge of their range in eastern North America. However, Great Egrets appear to be expanding northward as isolated pairs have nested north to Georgian Bay in Ontario (Cadman et al. 1987).

The only other confirmed breeding record of Great Egrets within Ohio is from Lake St. Mary's. They reportedly nested there in the 1880s, but these reports were not adequately documented (Clark and Sipe 1970). Breeding was established in 1942 when a pair of egrets produced young within the Black-crowned Night-Heron colony at the southwest corner of the lake (Hicks 1944). One or two pairs occupied this colony through 1944.

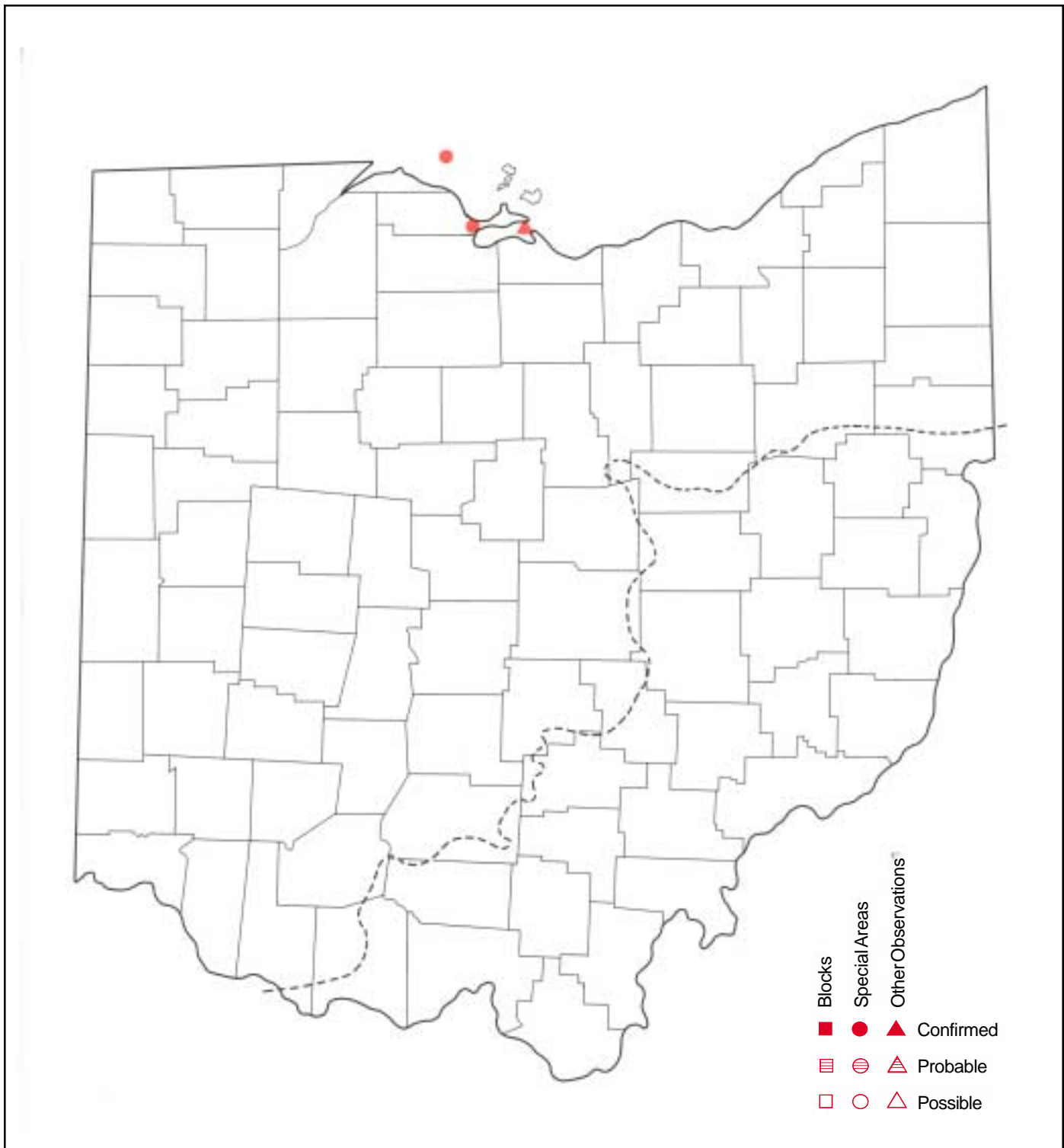


Mike Williams - ODNR Photographer

During the Atlas Project, single nonbreeding egrets were occasionally encountered at scattered locations away from western Lake Erie. As these egrets were not observed near known heronries or exhibit any indication of breeding behavior, the locations of these nonbreeders were not mapped.

Great Egrets normally nest in the tallest available vegetation. On West Sister Island, they occupy the tops of hackberry trees, usually at heights exceeding 20 feet. However, on islands where only shrubby vegetation is available, they have been found nesting on or near the ground (Andrle and Carroll 1988). Like many herons, egret nests are rather bulky stick platforms that may be used for several years with new material added prior to each nesting attempt.

Their breeding chronology has not been well established within Ohio, but is believed to begin two to three weeks later than the nesting activities of Great Blue Herons. The first clutches are probably laid during the second half of April with most laid by mid-May. Late pairs or renesting attempts may produce clutches into June; the latest reported egg dates in the Ontario colonies is June 24 (Peck and James 1983). The first young hatch during the second half of May and most nests will have young by early June. Nests with "large young" have been reported as early as July 5 (Hicks 1944), and the first young egrets may become independent by mid-July. The last young may not leave the colonies until mid-August.



Analysis of Block Data by Physiographic Region

Physiographic Region	Total Blocks Surveyed	Blocks with Data	% with Data	Regional % for Ohio	Ave. # Individ per BBS Route (1982–1987)
Lake Plain	95	–	–	–	0.4
Till Plain	271	–	–	–	–
Ill. Till Plain	46	–	–	–	–
Glaciated Plateau	140	–	–	–	–
Unglaciated Plateau	212	–	–	–	–

Summary of Breeding Status

No. of Blocks in Which Species Recorded		
Total	–	–
Confirmed	–	–
Probable	–	–
Possible	–	–