

Egrets and herons make comeback

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Great egrets and great blue herons are making a dramatic comeback at the Elkhorn Slough, with dozens of the large elegant birds nesting in the tops of a grove of Monterey pine trees.

Andrew De Vogelaere, research coordinator for the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve, said that the great egrets began nesting there in 1987 and last year had expanded to 61 nests.

It is the only colony of great egrets nesting in Monterey County, he said.

Egrets, although not an endangered species, are listed by the state Department of Fish and Game as a "species of concern." Their historic population declined because they were once hunted for their plumage,

and because of exposure to the now-banned DDT.

The great blue herons, De Vogelaere said, have grown from a single nesting pair in 1985 to 27 pairs in 1993, making it the largest colony in Monterey County.

"It might be that it has something to do with this place being a reserve now as opposed to a dairy," De Vogelaere said. "We don't have tractors and plows; there's more access to food; and here people are going to stay on the trails."

The two species of birds are nesting in close proximity at Elkhorn Slough, with the gray heads of the great blue herons interspersed in among the same treetops as the white heads of the egrets. The herons, however, also nest in nearby eucalyptus trees, while the egrets build all their nests in pine

trees.

"They are right near the trail here," he said. "They are one of the big draws" for visitors to the reserve.

The nesting birds are clearly visible in the tops of the trees right near the pond off the South Marsh Loop Trail.

One management problem, De Vogelaere said, is that the longer the birds nest in the trees, the more of the trees die, possibly because of the guano or because the birds break off the branches.

"We have to make sure other trees are available that they can nest on," he said.

To count the nests and study the birds, researchers use a helium balloon with a camera mounted on it, to peer into the nests and take aerial pictures. Photographs are then studied with a magnifying glass and

small slivers of paper are glued on, each marked with an "e" for an egret nest or an "h" for a heron nest.

The nests are each about a yard across, De Vogelaere said, and the egrets make nests of flimsy sticks, while the heron nests are large and flat, made of sticks and lined with green needles.

Neither bird seems unduly upset by human visitors who keep to the path, he said, and they are accustomed to the rumble of passing Amtrak trains, which cross the slough property about half a mile away.

He said when he and others first started using the helium balloon to spy into the nests, they worried that the birds would be unduly disturbed, "so we came out at 4:30 in the morning, when it was still dark,

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and slowly moved the balloon up. By noon we were standing right next to the trees with the balloon and the birds didn't even care."

The same nests are used year after year, but he said it is not known whether they are used by the same pair of birds or not.

In 1983, the region between the nesting sites and the railroad tracks was reopened to tidal action after being used as pasture land for a dairy farm, and De Vogelaere said it may be that the proximity of the trees to the restored wetlands appealed to the birds because it allowed them to build their nests closer to their feeding area.

Another bird species that has been increasing its numbers at Elkhorn Slough is the Caspian tern.

More than 100 pairs of Caspian terns are nesting there now, De Vogelaere said, having gradually increased in the last few years. Also, he said, the harbor seal population is increasing and now numbers almost 200.

The great egrets and great blue herons in residence at the reserve are nearly done with the nest-building. Eggs take about 25 to 28 days to hatch and the egret chicks take 42 days to fledge, while the heron chicks take 58 days.

The slough reserve is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays.