

The Legs Have It

Many of Florida's large white wading birds are easily confused. This is how it goes:

Yellow Legs, Yellow Bill

Great Blue Heron

(Yes, these birds can be white, too)

Greenish-yellow Legs, incomplete Black Bill

Little Blue Heron, young

Black Legs, Black Bill

Snowy Egret

Black Legs, Yellow Bill

Great Egret

QUESTION POSED TO AUDUBON SOCIETY REGARDING NAMING OF HERON vs. EGRET

RESPONSE A) There is no definitive characteristic that distinguishes the two. Birds in the genera *Butorides*, *Ardeola*, and *Ardea* are mostly called heron in English, while those in *Egretta* are either herons or egrets. The Great Egret is now *Ardea alba*, which makes it the only egret in *Ardea*, but it has been placed in *Egretta* (and *Casmerodius*) before. Color, size, habits, etc. differ just as much within as between the two groups.

More important are the differences between herons and egrets on the one hand, and bitterns, tiger-herons, and night-herons. But even there it gets complicated in that some taxonomists place the night-herons in the subfamily *Ardeinae* (which also includes the typical herons and egrets), while others consider them to be a subfamily of their own (*Nycticoracinae*). In short, there is a lot we don't know yet and the whole family gets shuffled around quite a bit.

Both words have similar roots, so that doesn't help either.

RESPONSE B) During the plume-hunting era, the most sought-after feathers were the nuptial plumes known as "aigrettes." The birds that carried them, namely those species of herons with the most ornate plumes, became known as egrets. But earlier, for a time, the Snowy Egret was known as the Snowy Heron, and the Reddish Egret as the Purple Heron. So the convention took a while to form. If you think about the back (or "scapular") plumes of the various North American herons, you wouldn't pick out the Great Blue Heron, Little Blue Heron, or even the Tri-colored Heron as having ornate plumes. Actually they have the same plumes that the Great, Reddish, Snowy and Cattle Egrets have, but they aren't as prominent. And they didn't bring the same high prices, either, during the plume trade.

So all egrets are herons, but all herons are not egrets. Egrets are those species with the most ornate and beautiful nuptial plumes, particularly the scapular plumes which were known as aigrettes.

And since the Reddish Egret occurs in a dark morph as well as a white morph, it would not be correct to distinguish egrets as only white herons. Note also the immature Little Blue Heron, which is white but not considered an egret.

RESPONSE C) As you know, the herons and egrets belong to the family *Ardeidae*. There is a number of genera in the family. However, the names heron and egret are common names with no taxonomic status or definition. They are just part of a common name which does not have to have a taxonomic rationale. I called two birder friends and put your question to them. Pause - what? Oh, they are just common names with no definition.