

No other place in Texas allows for such an intimate view of the home life of colonial waterbirds.

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Birds of the Rookery

Colonial waterbirds like to nest in areas safe from mammalian predators, so the island in the middle of Claybottom Pond at Smith Oaks Sanctuary makes a perfect bird nursery. Smith Oaks Rookery is a favored nesting and roosting place for thousands of waterbirds. These birds raise chicks each year at the rookery during the breeding season March through May and roost here year round, to be close to marshes where they feed.

Prior to Houston Audubon's ownership, birds, turtles, and alligators were often used for target practice. In 1994, Amoco generously donated Claybottom Pond and adjacent acreage to Houston Audubon. Once the organization took ownership and implemented a "no hunting" policy, almost immediately birds began nesting on the island. In 1995, 50 heron nests were found and birds were flying in to roost every night. By 1997, 332 pairs of birds nested on the island and the first pair of Roseate Spoonbills arrived. The number of pairs grew to 1,083 in 2003, and now it is quite a show.

In an average year, nesting activity starts in March when Great Egrets begin displaying their gorgeous plumes to attract mates. Snowy and Cattle Egrets, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, White Ibis, Neotropic Cormorants and Spoonbills soon arrive, making the island active and noisy. The Herons and Egrets make gargling sounds and the Neotropic Cormorants oink to attract mates. By mid-April, eggs are hatching and nest building and displaying are in full swing.

There are many nesting activities to observe. All birds participate in the "stick hunt." Tricolors hover over the pond retrieving sticks from the water, Great Egrets search the trails, and everybody steals sticks from their neighbors. Eggs must be turned regularly for proper development; for some the turning is easy, for others, it is a larger production. Chick feeding, flight training, and sibling rivalry are fun to watch. Predation can also be observed, but may not be enjoyed by onlookers. Night-herons regularly visit neighboring nests and grab unwatched chicks. The birds also fall prey to the many alligators at the island.

The sunset show should not be missed. Year round thousands of birds arrive at dusk to spend the night on the island. This begins about an hour before sunset when the first birds trickle in, soon developing into large flocks that pour in from all directions. The most birds observed in one evening was 13,069!

Houston Audubon staff and volunteers maintain this extraordinary place throughout the year.

Your entrance fee and a Houston Audubon membership allows us to protect important nesting areas for resident and migratory birds.

Please join today!

Smith Oaks Rookery Contributors:

George and Mary Josephine Hamman Foundation
Houston Endowment
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Kathrine G. McGovern
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William A. and Madeline Welder Smith Foundation
Susan Vaughan Foundation, Inc.



Bird	Breeding Plumage	Breeding Lore (Facial) Color	High Breeding Leg/Bill Color	Eggs: Color and Average Number	Incubation	Age at Fledging Average Life Span	
	Roseate Spoonbill	Very bright pink orange tail and scarlet shoulders	Orange ring around eyes	Dark red legs White/grey bill	3-4 cream or pale greenish blue spotted eggs	22 days – hatch in order laid - bill spatulates at 9 days	Fly at 42 days - still fed until 2 months - breeding age 3 years Average life span 7 years
	Great Egret	Very long white plumes on back	Lime green	Orange-yellow bill	3 pale greenish blue, smooth, non-glossy eggs	23 - 27 days	Fly at 21 days, independent at 62 -67 days - breeding age 2 years Life span around 20 years
	Snowy Egret "Yellow Slippers"	Longer white plumes on head and neck - males make gargling sound.	Yellow	Yellow feet Black legs	3 -5 elliptical shaped greenish blue eggs	25 days	Fly at 20-25 days Life span at least 16 years
	Cattle Egret "Cowbird"	Orange-buff plumes on crown, breast and back	Yellow-green and briefly purple-pink	Red-orange bill Dusky red legs	3 sky blue eggs	21 - 25 days	Fly at 14-21-days - leave nest at 45 days - completely feathered at 7 weeks - life span 7-17 years
	Tricolored Heron	White crest plumes. Violet neck feathers	Cobalt	Pinkish legs Magenta iris Turquoise/cobalt bill	3-5 pale greenish blue elliptical oval eggs	22 days - takes 24-36 hours for egg to hatch	Fly at 17 days - at 24 days young return only to be fed - depart from parents and colony at 59 days Life span up to 17 years
	Little Blue Heron	Mostly slate-blue body and wings - black tipped bill	Turquoise/cobalt	Legs become black - bill base is cobalt blue with black tip	3-4 up to 5 pale bluish green non-glossy eggs	22 days	Fly at 35 days - Breed at 1 year Life span more than 7 years
	White Ibis	White	Orange-red	Orange-red	2-3 pale brown splotches over blue green base color	6 weeks – chicks use egg tooth to break through eggshell - tooth disappears at 5-9 days	Fly greater distances at 7 weeks Leave colony at 2 years Life span 16 years
	Neotropic Cormorant	White filoplumes on sides of head and neck	Greyish black	Black legs Bill has orange base and black tip	1-6 (average 3) light sky blue eggs	2 day hatching interval	Chicks begin swimming and diving near colony by 8 weeks of age. Life span 12 years.
	Anhinga "Water Turkey" "Snake Bird"	Sparse white feathering on sides of head and neck	Turquoise/cobalt	Black legs Orange bill	Average 2.8 eggs laid 1-4 days apart	27 days, hatch 1-3 day intervals	14 days can climb back in nest First flight at 6 weeks - mature at 2 years. Life span 9-12 years.
	Black-crowned Night Heron	Long white streamers extend from crown	Greyish black	Eye color is red Yellow legs	3-5 eggs and 1 brood per	24-26 days	Fly at 42-49 days