

Stalking the Slough at the Ecology Study Area

by William Lenarz

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Dr. Lenarz is conducting a year-long study of birds at the College of Marin Ecology Study Area.

Many fish-eating birds were actively pursuing their prey in the slough during late October and early November. Up to 12 beautiful hooded mergansers and several not so beautiful but very effective fish predators— double crested cormorants—were often seen diving for prey in the middle of the slough. Snowy and great egrets were common along the shallow edges up and down the slough.

The snowy egrets displayed several types of behavior in their pursuit of delicacies fresh from the bay. They were often perched in ambush mode waiting for just the right kind of sushi to be served.

Almost as often they slowly walked along the edge probably hoping to startle a prey and seize it before it was out of capture range. Occasionally they used their yellow galoshes to stir up the sediments with the same idea in mind. During one visit I watched a snowy egret follow a pair of mallards that was swimming along the edge about a meter offshore. This went on for a while and it was obvious that the egret was attempting to stay a fixed distance behind the ducks. I concluded that the egret was probably calculating that ignorant fish would swim towards the shore to avoid the non-fish-eating mallards. Both species of egrets were also



A black-crowned night heron in the slough

seen perched in surrounding trees, mostly Bailey's acacia, the most common tree along the edge. The perches were usually very close to the edge and often overhanging the water. These birds appeared to be alert and some perches were low enough for a bird to easily drop into the water and capture a prey. One group of snowy and great egrets was perched at the top of a 10 meter coastal live oak away from the edge. These birds also appeared to be alert, and may have been using this vantage point to watch for successful feeding activity by other birds.

While the egrets were the most common wading birds, I also saw an occasional great blue heron or black-crowned heron fishing during this time. Green herons are fairly well camouflaged and I saw a couple of them only after they had been flushed. A chattering belted kingfisher was often seen along the slough.

All feasts eventually end and in later weeks the actively feeding birds have been replaced by resting black-crowned night herons. These birds are usually seen slouched in gangster fashion with their heads tucked under their feathers on perches above or close to the water. Some of the birds seem to use the same perches for a period of several weeks. It seems as though they never leave between my visits. Occasionally a bird is seen lazily preening its somewhat somber plumage, which a pair of binoculars reveals to be a quite attractive outfit

Conditions will change again and the birds and their behavior will change accordingly. While its fishy inhabitants may not appreciate it, the slough provides an excellent setting for we humans to observe these fascinating predators. Hopefully it will be possible to replace the aggressive non-native trees with native species that will thrive in this environment and provide the birds with the structures that they need.

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