

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

### Unusual Hovering Behavior and Attempted Prey Theft by Snowy Egrets

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We often think of herons and egrets as wading birds, standing still with necks cocked for a strike. They stand in or at the edge of shallow water, and at other times, in a grassy field. Snowy Egrets (*Egretta thula*) are often more active hunters, walking and swishing their yellow feet to flush potential prey (Willard 1977, Kushlan 1978). Foraging Snowy Egrets exhibit the "[b]roadest behavioral repertoire" in the North American heron family, with 21 foraging strategies described (Kushlan 1978, Parsons and Master 2020). Stealing prey (kleptoparasitism) was not included in the list of Snowy Egret foraging behaviors, but Collins (2006) described them as stealing prey from Elegant Terns (*Thalasseus elegans*) in a manner similar to some of the behavior described here.

At a pond on the Bufferlands surrounding the EchoWater Facility (Sacramento Regional Wastewater Treatment Plant) in Sacramento County, California, I have seen multiple instances of Snowy Egrets hovering above foraging Double-crested Cormorants (*Nannopterum auritum*). The pond has two islands that are commonly used as roosting sites by waterfowl and other waterbirds. Dozens of cormorants regularly loaf on one of the islands, especially midday on sunny days in fall and winter. Up to 15 Snowy Egrets, plus a few Great Egrets (*Ardea alba*) and Great Blue Herons (*A. herodias*), gather near or among the roosting cormorants. The cormorants periodically swim off the island as a group, searching for fish by swimming at the surface with their heads under the water. When they find and pursue a school of fish, they dive and rush after them.

On several occasions, a group of roosting Snowy Egrets, along with an occasional Great Egret, has flown out, hovered over the cormorants, and struck at the water with their bills. I have not seen a Snowy Egret successfully catch a fish this way, but they are certainly trying to do so. On 30 December 2020, one of 85 roosting cormorants present walked into the water, bathed, and then began foraging by putting its head under water and slowly swimming away from the island. Snowy Egrets walked to the water's edge with apparent interest and then, as more cormorants joined the foraging

effort, some of the Snowy Egrets flew toward the swimming cormorants. The egrets hovered and awkwardly probed their bills into the water. A Great Egret landed in water among the cormorants, and only its head and part of its neck were above the surface. It appeared to capture and swallow a fish. A Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) flew in, creating a multispecies feeding frenzy. In another instance, on 12 December 2017, over 200 cormorants were joined by gulls, and as the cormorants drove fish near the surface, a roosting group of 26 Snowy Egrets left the island, hovered above the feeding activity, and stood briefly on the backs of the churning cormorants and gulls.

On 3 January 2021, after foraging with an attendant flock of Snowy Egrets hovering over them, the cormorants returned to the island and resumed roosting. A fish popped partway out of the bill of a cormorant that had been on shore for a few minutes. A Snowy Egret ran several meters, grabbed the fish with its bill and struggled with the cormorant, but the cormorant ultimately retained the fish. The same Snowy Egret then ran and probed at the bills of several nearby cormorants before settling to roost alongside the cormorant flock. I have seen Snowy Egrets pester roosting cormorants in a similar manner, but this is the closest to a successful theft that I have observed.

I have not seen successful feeding by the Snowy Egrets either from attempts to steal prey or from the energy-intensive hovering strategy. Collins (2006) suggests that the Snowies may attempt to steal fish from terns because those fish are far larger than those that Snowy Egrets normally capture. Although from my distant vantage point, it was difficult for me to see the type or size of the fish the cormorants are pursuing, the chance to steal a fish or capture fish driven to the surface by foraging cormorants was clearly enough to encourage the Snowy Egrets to try.

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