

# THIRTY-FIVE-YEAR SUMMARY OF THE STATUS OF HERON COLONY SITES IN ALABAMA

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Since Howell's 1928 publication and the beginning of our work in 1952, little information has been obtained, or published, on wading bird colonies in Alabama. With the advent of *Alabama Birdlife* in 1953, articles by W. H. Allen, Jr. (1954), J. L. Dusi (1958, 1968, 1983), J. L. Dusi and R. D. Dusi (1967), J. Dindo and K. Marion (1986), J. E. Keeler (1956), R. W. Skinner (1963), C. W. Summerour (1964), and D. F. Werschkul (1977) have contributed to our knowledge of colony sites. In addition to those articles in *Alabama Birdlife*, publications by D. L. Bateman (1970), D. J. Drennen, et al. (1982), J. L. Dusi (1979), J. L. Dusi and R. D. Dusi (1967, 1970, 1978, 1987), J. L. Dusi et al. (1971), J. M. Martin (1973), C. A. McDonald (1971), R. S. L. McKittrick (1975), B. Ortego et al. (1979) and C. W. Summerour (1964) have provided heron colony knowledge.

## METHODS

Finding new colony sites at first depended on help from friends like J. E. Keeler, who took us to some of the colony sites. Others were found by observing groups of Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) flying in the same general direction, and following them to the colony site. We found that we could do this much better from light aircraft. Now we fly along several transects which take us to most of the possible sites in the Coastal Plain. The number of sites in north Alabama were so few that we drove to them.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In our studies from 1952 to 1987, we have located about 60 colony sites (see Figure 1, p. 7). In addition, the number of Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) nesting sites with one to several nests was found to be too great to specifically designate and it was found that most swamps in the Coastal Plain have at least one Great Blue Heron nest.

For analysis, the colony sites were placed in seven geographically related groups: the Tuskegee, Opp-Floral, Pansey, Fort Gaines-Eufaula, Montgomery, Faunsdale-Uniontown, and Mobile groups.

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The **TUSKEGEE GROUP** consists of sites in and around Tuskegee, Macon and Lee counties.

The **Hog Wallow Ponds** site was located in shrubs in the upper end of two ponds known as the Hog Wallow Ponds, situated about 10 km south of Tuskegee. It was a pure Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*) colony that existed from 1952 until a group of "sportsmen", who fished in the pond, shot them in 1958. Banding data obtained from this colony are referred to in Dusi (1958).

The **Marvyn** colony site was located 1 km south of Marvyn, Lee Co. It was in an old impoundment that was overgrown with willows (*Salix nigra*). It was a Little Blue Heron colony and was there during 1958 and 1959.

The **Tuskegee Holiday Inn** colony site was adjacent to the Holiday Inn (now Tuskegee Inn) in eastern Tuskegee, adjacent to I-85 and Ala. 81. This was a mixed colony of Little Blue Herons and Cattle Egrets. The colony site was a grove of pine trees. The colony grew and remained at that site until the spring of 1977. The colony was gone for one year but returned in 1978, after which the site was abandoned.

The **Motley Road** site was located on the northwest side of Tuskegee about 1 km southwest of the **Tuskegee Holiday Inn** site. It was a wooded upland site and was occupied only in 1977.

The **Colbert Road** colony site was located in a wooded area between two streets with houses in the middle of Tuskegee. The colony occupied the site in 1979. On 12 July 1979, the Tuskegee Police shot 2,163 Cattle Egrets, 2 Little Blue Herons and 4 White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*) in an attempt to cause the colony to leave the site (Dusi, 1979). The egrets returned in 1980 but were harassed and left the site.

The **Seigrist** site was located about 16 km southwest of Tuskegee and 2 km west of Hardaway. It was a swampy pond with low vegetation in the center. The Cattle Egret colony occupied it in 1980.

The **Judkins** site was located about 1 km west of the **Colbert Road** site and was an upland wooded site. The egrets attempted to nest there in 1981 but were harassed and caused to leave. Since then there has been no heron colony in the Tuskegee Group area.

The **Hardaway** colony site is located in a large swamp south of Hardaway. It has been a Great Blue Heron colony site since 1968. It was also the site of an attempted Wood Stork (*Mycteria americana*) nesting in 1968 (Dusi and Dusi, 1968).

The **Union Springs** colony site was located in the trees in a small pond, 2 km northwest of Union Springs, Bullock Co. It was present only in 1984. The pond level was lowered to repair the dam in 1985 and the birds abandoned the site.

The **OPP-FLORALA GROUP** is in the Yellow River drainage in Covington Co., Alabama, and Walton Co., Florida.

The **Opp** colony site was in a small sinkhole-tupelo swamp surrounded by several kilometers of pine forests. It was about 16 km south of Opp, Covington Co. The colony contained Little Blue Herons and White Ibises until 1963, when C. W. Summerour found the first Cattle Egret nest for Alabama (Dusi and Dusi, 1963). The site was occupied until 1966.

The **Floralia Northwest** colonies were at several sites about 10 km northwest of Florala, all of which were swamps. Colonies were present in 1964 and 1965, then from 1978 to 1981, and again in 1984 and 1986.

The **Floralia South** colony site was a small sinkhole just south of Florala in Highway 331 and was occupied in 1970 and 1971 by a Cattle Egret colony.

The **Floralia East** site is in a small swamp. The first colony was there in 1979. It was seen again 1985, 1986 and 1987.

The **Onycha** site was at a small pond near Onycha, south of Opp. It had a colony in 1985, but not since.

The **Pansey Group** is found along the lower Chattahoochee River valley and extends west to Geneva Co.

The **Pansey** colony site is located just south of the community of Pansey, southeast of Dothan on Highway 84, in Houston Co. It is a tupelo swamp type and was an active composite colony from 1963 through 1969. Little Blue Heron, Cattle Egret, Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*), White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*), and one Scarlet Ibis (*E. ruber*) and Anhingas (*Anhinga anhinga*) were present. A number of research studies were done in this colony.

The **Bonfire Club** colony site was a swamp 1 km east of the Pansey site. It was a small mixed colony from 1970 through 1974.

The **Malone** colony site was 20 km southwest of Pansey and 5 km south of Cottonwood, Houston Co. It was a cypress-tupelo swamp with Little Blue Herons, Cattle Egrets and White Ibises. It was present in 1969.

The **Ashford** colony site was a pond adjacent to the Ashford High School, on Highway 84, 12 km southeast of Dothan. It was first seen in 1976 and abandoned in 1983. It was mostly Cattle Egrets.

The **Slocomb** colony site was in a swamp 1 km south of Slocomb, Geneva Co. It had a large colony when we first found it in 1984 but decreased to only a few birds in 1987, when drought lowered the swamp water level.

The **Cottonwood** colony site had a small Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax violaceus*) colony located on Spring Creek, 4 km

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southeast of Cottonwood, Houston Co. It was known to us from 1970 to 1984 (Drennen et al., 1982).

The **FORT GAINES-EUFAULA** Group is closely associated with the Chattahoochee River, north of the Pansey Group.

The **Fort Gaines (10 km N.)** colony site was in Georgia, about 400 m east of the Chattahoochee River and 10 km north of Ft. Gaines, Clay Co. It was a medium-sized mixed species colony. Wood Storks and Great Blue Herons often roosted there in the summer. We knew it from 1967 to 1982, when it was abandoned. McDonald (1971) did her doctoral research here.

The **Fort Gaines South** colony site was an overflow swamp, adjacent to the Chattahoochee River and Ft. Gaines. It started in 1983 and continues to be active. It also appears to be an important winter roosting site for Great Egrets.

The Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge has several associated colony sites. The **Bradley Unit** colony site had a small colony in the willows on the banks of a drainage ditch. It started in 1979 and was active for two years. The **Houston Unit** colony site was in a group of willows in a slough. It started in 1981 and was active until 1985. The **Molnar Unit** colony site is a beaver swamp with button bush-tupelo-pine. It started in 1985 and was a large, mixed-species colony. In 1987 and 1988 it had mostly Great Blue Herons and Great Egrets nesting there, since the water level became much lower.

The **Seale** colony site is a small beaver swamp just west of Seale, Russell Co. We first saw it in 1986 and it is currently active as a small mixed colony.

The **Clayton** colony site was a small pond 1 km north of Clayton, Barbour Co. In 1985 it was mostly Cattle Egrets and it continued through 1986.

The Montgomery Group is mostly associated with the vicinity of Montgomery, Alabama.

The **Pinedale** colony site was located in the Pinedale Community in southeastern Montgomery. It was an upland colony in pine and oak trees adjacent to several houses. It was a Little Blue Heron-Cattle Egret colony from 1964 to 1970. Tree cutting caused it to be abandoned.

The **Pintlala** colony site was a pine grove just west of Pintlala. A Cattle Egret-Little Blue Heron colony occupied it from 1970 to 1972.

The **Millbrook** colony site was an upland mixed forest at the edge of a gravel pit. It had an established colony of mixed species from 1973 until 1983.

The **U.S. 31 North, or Cooter's Pond** colony site, was established in 1984. It is about 2 km southwest of Millbrook. It has an upland colony

on an island and has about the same composition and size as the **Millbrook** colony had. It is currently functional.

The **Normandale** colony site was located in the subdivision of Normandale and the nests of about 30 Black-crowned Night-Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) were placed in large oak and pine trees dispersed through the neighborhood. The colony has occupied this site from at least 1983 to 1986. The present status is uncertain since some of the residents of the neighborhood objected to the birds' presence.

North of Montgomery, about 40 km, is a small town named Mountain Creek, Chilton Co. The **Mountain Creek** colony site was on its eastern edge on a small 0.5 ha pond. The colony was a typical (before the advent of the Cattle Egret) Little Blue Heron group of about 30 pairs. We knew of it from 1961 until 1967, when the site was abandoned.

The **McLemore** colony site was located about 8 km east of Montgomery in a small swamp on the McLemore Plantation. It was colonized by Cattle Egrets and Little Blue Herons just in 1972.

The **FAUNSDALE-UNIONTOWN GROUP** of sites has been situated around Uniontown, Perry Co., and Faunsdale, Hale Co.

The **Faunsdale** colony site was in a grove of trees just west of Faunsdale and south of U.S. 80. We saw it first in 1959 as a Little Blue Heron-Great Egret colony. The following year the trees were cut and the colony moved to a site about 5 km north of Faunsdale (**Faunsdale North colony site**) and increased with the addition of the Cattle Egret and White Ibises until 1971.

The **Uniontown South** colony appeared in 1964, possibly as part of the Faunsdale Colony. The site was in a grove of cedar and pine, about 3 km south of Uniontown, but in Marengo Co. It was an active colony until 1970 and again from 1976 - 1978. In 1983 a colony again appeared but in a site just across the Perry Co. line. They stayed until 1986.

The **Uniontown Northwest** colony site is situated about 8 km northwest of Uniontown. Its colony appeared in 1971 and it developed into a very large mixed colony, mostly Cattle Egrets. It was active through 1973. In 1978 it was again active until 1980. In 1980 the colony moved about 400 m southwest to a pine grove and was active there until 1982.

The **Faunsdale Northwest** colony site is located about 5 km northwest of Faunsdale in a large cedar-pine grove. The colony occupied this area in 1986 and it is still being used in 1988. It is a very large mixed-species colony.

Several small colonies have appeared north of Camden, in Dallas County. One, the **Camden** colony site, was on Hammermill Paper Company land, on a small swampy creek. It was active from 1971 to 1974.

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**LOCATION OF HERON COLONY SITES  
AND THEIR STATUS \***

**I. TUSKEGEE GROUP SITES**

1. Tuskegee Holiday Inn (I)  
Motley Road (I)  
Colbert Road (I)  
Judkins (I)
2. Hardaway (A)  
Seigrist (I)
3. Hog Wallow Ponds (I)
4. Marvyn (I)
5. Union Springs (I)

**II. OPP-FLORALA GROUP SITES**

6. Opp (I)
7. Florala East (A)
8. Florala South (I)
9. Florala Northwest (I)
10. Onycha (I)

**III. PANSEY GROUP SITES**

11. Pansey (I)  
Bonfire Club (I)
12. Ashford (I)
13. Slocomb (A)
14. Malone (I)
15. Cottonwood (I)

**IV. FORT GAINES-EUFAULA GROUP SITES**

16. Ft. Gaines South (A)
17. Ft. Gaines North (I)
18. Eufaula NWR-Bradley Unit (I)
19. Eufaula NWR-Houston and Molnar Units (I)
20. Clayton (I)
21. Seale (A)

**V. MONTGOMERY GROUP SITES**

22. Pinedale (I)  
Normandale (A)  
Pintlala (I)  
Pintlala GBH (A)  
McLemore (I)
23. Millbrook (I)  
U.S. 31 North, or  
Cooter's Pond (A)
24. Mountain Creek (I)

**VI. FAUNSDALE-UNIONTOWN GROUP SITE**

25. Faunsdale (I)  
Faunsdale North (I)  
Faunsdale Northwest(A)
26. Uniontown South (I)  
Uniontown Northwest(I)
35. Camden (I)  
Berlin (I)

**VII. MOBILE GROUP SITES**

27. Choctaw NWR (A)
28. Jackson (A)
29. Southfield Lake (I)
30. Spanish Fort (A)
31. Grand Bay (I)  
St. Elmo (I)
32. Cat Island (A)

**VIII. MISCELLANEOUS GROUP SITES**

33. Decatur Swan Creek (I)
34. Bellefonte (A)

\* (I) Inactive  
(A) Active

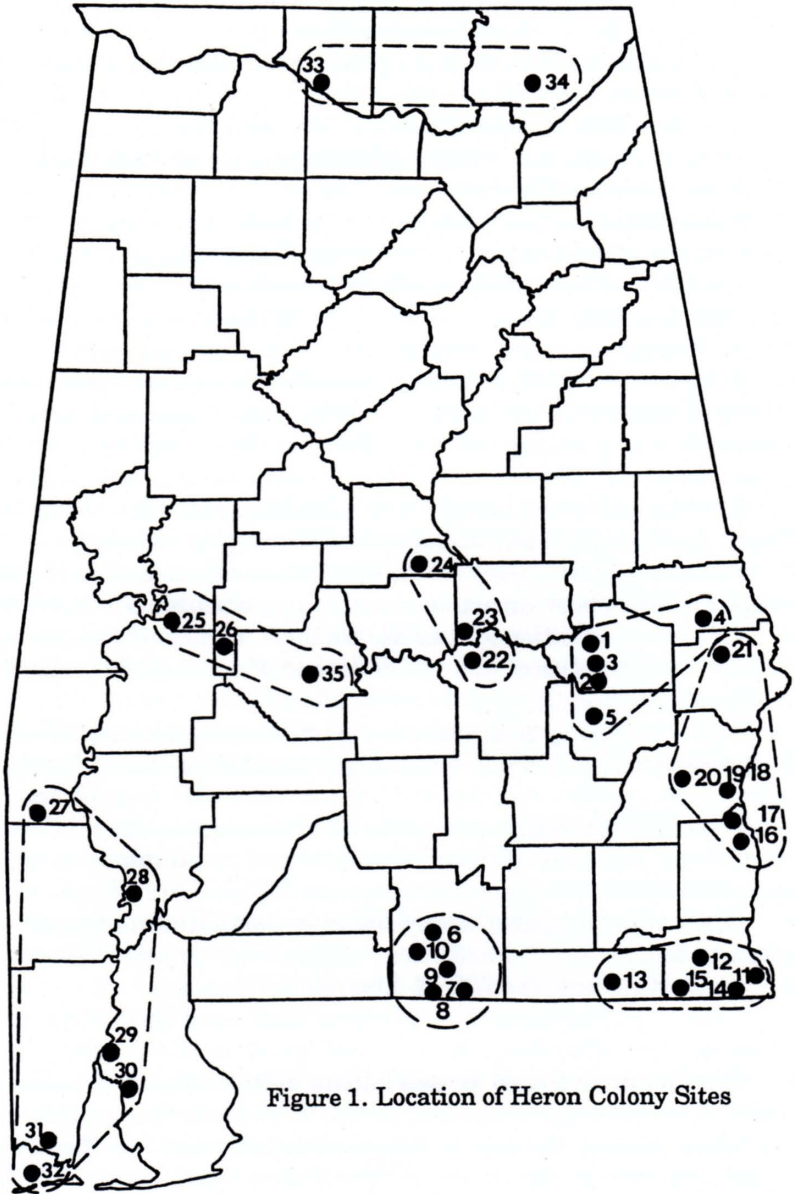


Figure 1. Location of Heron Colony Sites

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Another, the **Berlin** colony site, was on a small creek about 1 km west of the community of Berlin, in 1973. Other transitory colonies have appeared nearby for short periods of time.

The **MOBILE GROUP** is the group of colonies in the southwestern part of the state.

The **Choctaw Refuge** colony site was a small swamp on the refuge, located in Choctaw Co., along the Tombigbee River. This site has had a colony for a number of years, from 1966 to the present.

The **Jackson** colony sites have been located adjacent to and sometimes in the city of Jackson, Clarke Co. The Tombigbee River level at nesting has had an important effect on the exact location of the colony. We visited it from the ground in 1974, when it was sited on Bassett Creek. The colony was mixed species.

In the Mobile Delta an island in Southfield Lake (**Southfield Lake site**) had the first White Ibis colony to be reported for Alabama (Keeler, 1956). We saw a colony there in 1969 also. Flooding of the river often covers the site.

The **Spanish Fort** colony site is in the Boggy Branch of Bay Minette Creek. In 1986 and 1987 it had a small Cattle Egret colony.

The **Cat Island** colony site is situated on Cat Island in Mississippi Sound. This has been an active mixed colony site from before 1965 when M. W. Gaillard mentioned it to us. We have monitored the colony from the air for a number of years. Dindo and Marion (1986) reported the nesting of the Reddish Egret on Cat Island.

The **Grand Bay** colony site is a small swamp 4 km south of Grand Bay, Mobile Co. In 1986 it was a small Little Blue Heron-Cattle Egret colony.

The **St. Elmo** colony site was a small swamp on the southern edge of St. Elmo, just east of Grand Bay. It was a small colony in 1986 and reportedly had been there for five years.

The **Gaillard Island** colony site is on the southern edge of a dredge island in Mobile Bay. A small colony of Cattle Egrets nested there in 1987 (personal communication, J. M. Myers).

Several **MISCELLANEOUS** colony sites were present in northern Alabama.

The **Decatur Swan Creek** colony site was located on the Swan Creek Game Management Area on the Tennessee River north of Decatur, Limestone Co. It was a swampy wooded area that was flooded in the winter but dry in the summer. The colony was composed of Black-crowned Night-Herons, Little Blue Herons, Cattle Egrets, and Great Egrets. We banded herons there from 1963 until 1966, when it was abandoned.



The Bellefonte colony site is at the peninsula between the mouths of Town Creek and Mud Creek on the Bellefonte Plant site. Great Blue Herons have occupied this site for a long period of time. Current status is contained in T.V.A. heron status reports by Burline P. Pullin.

These baseline data indicate that heron colony sites have not been static, once occupied, but have been changed frequently and will probably continue to do so as long as the number of suitable colony sites remains available.

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