



A White Heron from which plumes have been torn

BIRD GOSSIP

A Series of Bird-life Sketches

BY

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Two Plume-bearing Birds

"OH, the bird died a long time ago!" That is the Florida Egret's obituary or what every woman says when spoken to about wearing the plumes of the Egret and Snowy Heron.

It seems incredible that to-day there should be in the United States any person able to read who is not aware of the fact that the "aigrette" is the nuptial plume worn by the egret and snowy heron at the nesting time of the year, by both parents, and that to procure them it is necessary to shoot the birds, which means that the young are left to slowly die of starvation.

The birds wearing these plumes are the White Egret and the Snowy Heron. The plume is known as the "aigrette" in America, the "osprey" in Europe, and by many in both countries as "The White

Badge of Cruelty" and "The Swamp Shroud."

Many women in Florida defend themselves by telling how they have bought the plumes from the "poor Indians." Would these same women give the Indians the exact amount of money in sweet charity? And do they realize that if they would stop buying and wearing the plumes the Indian would not have them for sale?

But it is not the Indian's sin: it is the women who demand the plumes, so that white men have hunted the birds in such numbers that after a few more years of such reckless slaughter during the breeding season the egret and the snowy heron will be classed among the extinct birds of the country.

And it is not so much the killing of the old birds as the misery left behind in

the nest; starving, crying, shivering baby birds, while the parents lie dead beneath the home tree with bleeding, torn backs. Yes, "it is only a bird, and it died long ago."

Here is an incident vouched for. A hunter tied a wounded egret in a tree on the edge of a marshy feeding ground to attract other birds, and this living decoy was kept there until it died of the wounds and the attacks of insects. The man who tells this says he actually found the big red ants eating out the eyes of the helpless mother bird.

"Is the bird of any particular service?" some will ask.

No, except for his great beauty. His food is mostly frogs, fish and snakes, so they cannot be regarded as of very great economic value as destroyers of obnoxious insects, but their value as a beautiful asset of our country is not doubted.

The long straight plumes are from the egret, and the short curved ones, known to the trade as "cross aigrette," come from the snowy heron. Formerly these birds bred from Oregon to New York. Their range, however, has been greatly restricted. One small colony has been reported in eastern Oregon, and there are said to be a few in California. But the large areas in Florida where, in years gone by, the birds were more abundant than elsewhere in the United States, are now almost devoid of either species. But if the colonies along the south Atlantic coast can be guarded, and the traffic in plumes suppressed, there seems to be every reason to believe that the birds will again extend their breeding range northward even to New York.

When the breeding period arrives, they retire to the swamps, and there, in company with the other herons, build their nests of a few sticks and twigs on

a limb of a cypress or mangrove tree. The eggs range from three to five in number and are light blue. The birds always build in colonies, and will stand by their homes as long as possible.

It has been and is claimed by some that the feathers are picked up near the rookeries; but that has been disproven, because the feathers thus procured are worthless. They have been discarded by the bird, and are soiled, frayed, and of



The Egret

little commercial value. They are known to the trade as "dead feathers," and are worth only three dollars an ounce, while the feathers taken from the live birds and known as "live feathers," are worth from fifteen to twenty dollars an ounce.

As for the imitations that so nearly resemble the blood-stained plumes, there is but one thing to be said; they are like all false things!

(Note.—Illustrations with this article are from a National Audubon Society leaflet.)