

WONDERS OF NATURE

# A visit to Sundown Island

## Colonial water birds nest at Audubon refuge off Texas Coast

By GARY CLARK

Sundown Island off the Texas Coast is home to more than 18,000 pairs of the most beautifully plumaged nesting birds in North America. From silky white snowy egrets to flashy pink roseate spoonbills, the birds on the 60-acre island create a kaleidoscopic seascape.

Situated three miles from Port O'Connor in Matagorda Bay, the island is appropriately nicknamed "Bird Island." The National Audubon Society maintains it as a preserve for breeding colonial water birds.

Its water birds include 18 species of herons, egrets, pelicans, ibises, gulls, skimmers and terns. They're called "colonial" because they prefer to nest in large colonies in shrubs, grasses and sand.

The birds have more than aesthetic value. Feeding at the top of the estuarine food chain, water birds are good indicators of the ecological health of bays and wetlands. Put simply, they signal the health of the fishing industry.

Kathy and I visited Sundown Island recently with its warden, Chester Smith. Long since retired from ExxonMobil, Smith is a Texas legend in the conservation of colonial water birds. His tireless work in maintaining the island and in eliciting community and industry support has made Sundown Island Texas' premier colonial water bird nesting ground.

The island was created in 1962 as a bank of sand called "dredge spoil" pulled up from the bottom of Matagorda Bay to create the Matagorda Ship Channel. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which performed the dredging operation, continues to supply dredge spoil to the island from other nearby operations.

In Smith's 15-year tenure as the island's warden, he has planted shrubs and trees such as lantana, hackberry, salt cedar and mesquite as nesting havens. He has installed three freshwater ponds in addition to the three already on the island.

In addition, Smith has con-



Kathy Adams Clark

The great egret is among the colonial water birds that nest on Sundown Island.

structed wooden nesting platforms and worked with the Army Corps of Engineers to topple two former navigation towers for use as nesting structures.

His efforts have paid off. Nearly every bush, tree and physical structure on the island harbors multiple pairs of nesting herons, egrets and brown pelicans. The island is a bird nursery.

We walked gently among the parent birds sitting on their nests or feeding their chicks, and came almost eyeball-to-eyeball with brown pelicans that were brooding eggs on Smith's platforms.

"I actually built the nesting platforms for reddish egrets, but brown pelicans have begun taking them over," Smith said. "The pelicans came in 1988, and last year we had 1,500 nesting pairs."

Easily, the most stunning sights decorating the island are

roseate spoonbills. In one stretch of trees and bushes were 50 nesting pairs of the birds with long spatula-shaped bills and shimmering pink and red plumes.

During our visit, nearly all the bushes held snowy and great egrets, their wispy plumes waving in the sea breeze like strands of white silk. We humans, for all our creative talent, cannot weave fabric of finer beauty.

Nor can we decorate Easter eggs quite like the pastel blue-green eggs of herons and egrets.

Birds such as terns, gulls and skimmers lay their eggs in scrapes on the open sand. We saw hundreds of royal and sandwich terns, the only two terns that nest on the island. We noticed that black skimmers had started moving in to nest on the bare sand.

Large numbers of laughing gulls also nest on the island and

pose a menace to other water birds because they often prey on eggs and chicks. But the best defense against the gulls is to keep the island undisturbed by humans so that birds like terns, herons and egrets can guard their nests.

Smith said he rarely has a problem with people creating havoc on the island. He asks anglers fishing off the shoreline not to walk on the island because that would disturb the nesting colony, and he said the anglers are happy to cooperate.

"The biggest problem is the fire ants," Smith said. "They gather up on the queen in little golf-ball-size clusters and float to the island. They propagate quickly, so I keep a tractor on the island to keep the grass mowed so I can find the fire ant mounds and spread pesticide."

Otherwise, the island is isolated from predators of the mainland like coyotes and raccoons. Seclusion is what makes all dredge spoil or natural islands along the coast critical to the breeding success of colonial water birds.

The birds of Sundown Island certainly have a relatively safe, peaceful and well-vegetated nesting ground, thanks to Smith.

When I watched a huge flock of white ibises glide overhead like a formation of glistening white sailplanes, I thought they might be saluting Smith. I'll surely salute him every time I see a white ibis, a brown pelican, a roseate spoonbill or a snowy egret.

Sundown Island is closed to the general public to protect the breeding water bird colony, but people may volunteer for workdays on the island during the non-breeding season.

You can see examples of the colonial water birds of Sundown Island at a rookery in Houston Audubon's Smith Oaks Sanctuary in High Island.

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