

## LITTLE BLUE HERON

*Egretta caerulea*

**Order:** Pelecaniformes

**Family:** Ardeidae

**FNAI Ranks:** G5/S4

**U.S. Status:** none

**FL Status:** Threatened



**Description:** Medium-sized heron, with purplish to maroon-brown head and neck; small white patch on throat and upper neck; and slate-blue body. Bill is black towards tip, especially during breeding season, with the other exposed areas on the head appearing dark gray to cobalt blue. Legs are grayish to green, becoming black in breeding season. Immature birds are mostly white with pale slate-gray tips on primary wing feathers. Legs of young birds are yellowish-green. Immature birds move into adult plumage during first spring and may be boldly white/blue, looking like tie-dyed shirts. Immature birds retain yellowish legs during second year.

**Similar Species:** Plumage and eye of reddish egret (*Egretta rufescens*; see species account) are lighter in color, and base of bill is pinkish. Reddish egret has distinctive foraging behavior. Snowy egret (*E. thula*; see species account) and cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) may look like juvenile little blues, but little blue has dark primary tips. Bill of snowy egret (*E. thula*) is solid black; snowy may have yellowish stripe up back of leg.

**Habitat:** Feeds in shallow freshwater, brackish, and saltwater habitats. Largest nesting colonies occur in coastal areas, but prefers foraging in freshwater lakes, marshes, swamps, and streams. Nests in a variety of woody vegetation types, including cypress, willow, maple, black mangrove, and cabbage palm. Usually breeds in mixed-species colonies in flooded vegetation or on islands.

**Seasonal Occurrence:** Mostly resident throughout year, but numbers in north Florida in winter are lower than numbers during spring, summer, and fall; becoming less abundant in Florida Keys.

**Florida Distribution:** Colonies are found nearly statewide, except rare in western Panhandle and southern Florida Keys.

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**Range-wide Distribution:** Breeds from Kansas, Missouri, and Tennessee to coastal Maine and south to Peru and central Brazil; range extends west to southern California and Sonora; winter range includes these areas and north to coastal Virginia; may wander to Canada after breeding season.

**Conservation Status:** Because the little blue heron lacks the showy plumes found on many other herons and egrets, this species did not suffer as much during the plume-hunting trade a century ago. Primary threats are alteration of natural hydroperiods in wetlands used for foraging and exposure to pesticides and heavy metal contamination. Population trends are downward, and breeding colonies have become smaller and more numerous. Illegal killings may occur since this species regularly forages at commercial fish farms and hatcheries. Long-term studies are needed on the possible adverse effects of cattle egrets, environmental contamination, and other threats.

**Protection and Management:** Restore and maintain natural hydroperiods in degraded wetland areas. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the Department of Environmental Protection have developed setback distances around wading bird colonies of 330 ft. (100 m) to prevent human disturbance.

**References:** Poole and Gill (eds.) 1995, Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Rodgers and Smith 1995, Rodgers et al. (eds.) 1996, Runde et al. 1991, Stevenson and Anderson 1994.



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