

parks & rec FUNFACT



Great Egret *Ardea alba*

Did you know...

Kraft Azalea Garden is home to a great egret rookery?

The great egret is the second largest (next to the great blue heron) wading bird that is common to the lakes of Winter Park. We do occasionally get visits from larger wood storks and sandhill cranes, but the great egret is a full-time resident year round.

Great egrets grow to a height of over three feet and have a wingspan that can exceed four feet. They have all white plumage, yellow bills and black legs. These birds normally feed in the shallow areas of lakes and streams, preying on small fish, frogs, crustaceans, snakes and even small birds. Recently, many great egrets have begun feeding on the increasing numbers of brown Caribbean anole lizards in central Florida. They can often be seen walking hedge-rows and other upland areas looking for these exotic reptiles.

Breeding occurs in the spring, with the birds often congregating into colonial nesting areas known as rookeries. These dense aggregations of nests are typically found in low trees near or over water. Winter Park is fortunate to have a rare urban rookery for this stately bird. Every year between late February and early June, up to 50 nesting pairs of great egrets gather at Kraft Azalea Garden to begin nesting rituals. The males develop large, showy feathers during the nesting season, females lay two to three eggs, and both parents share feeding duties as the young are fledged.

The rookery provides even casual bird watchers an up-close look at some of Florida's natural wonders, and excellent opportunities for every photographer. Anyone using the park during the nesting season will want to keep a few things in mind. First, do not disturb birds, nest, or nesting tree in any way, and never try to handle wildlife, even if they seem injured or in need of help. Wading birds have very sharp beaks and can inflict serious injury if handled. Second, there is always a certain percentage of mortality associated with bird fledglings, and young birds that have perished will sometimes be observed under the nest trees. Curious young birds sometimes fall from their nests and weak or sick ones are occasionally abandoned so the parents can concentrate on the survival of healthier offspring. Though it seems sad to us, this mortality is part of the natural process, and helps to keep the species strong and viable.

If you look carefully you may also see other species of birds nesting in the garden, including ospreys, pileated woodpeckers, and our state bird, the mockingbird.

So now you know!

