

The Herons, Egrets & Wading Birds of TGO

The Graceful Hunters of Our Wetlands

Few sights in The Great Outdoors are more peaceful than watching a heron slowly stalking the edge of a pond at sunrise or seeing white egrets glowing against the green marsh grasses. These beautiful wading birds are some of the most important and recognizable wildlife species living throughout our community. From shallow pond edges to marshes, canals, and wetlands, these birds spend their days hunting fish, frogs, insects, crustaceans, and other aquatic prey. Their presence is also a sign of healthy wetlands and clean water systems.

Each species has its own unique personality, hunting style, and beauty. Here are the most common birds you will spot in TGO. How many have you already seen? How many can you memorize?



Great Blue Heron

The Great Blue Heron is the giant of our local wading birds. Standing tall with blue-gray feathers, long legs, and a dagger-like bill, these birds move with incredible patience while stalking fish along shorelines.

They are powerful hunters capable of catching surprisingly large prey including fish, frogs, snakes, and even small mammals. Watching one slowly move through shallow water is like watching a living piece of pre-historic Florida.



Snowy Egret

The Snowy Egret is smaller and more energetic than the Great Egret. Their bright yellow feet often look like they are wearing golden slippers as they dart through shallow water chasing prey.

These birds are active feeders and often use quick movements to stir fish and shrimp into motion.

Little Blue Heron

Little Blue Herons can confuse people because the juveniles are mostly white before gradually changing into the dark bluish adults. They are quieter and more delicate in appearance than some larger herons and often feed slowly along wetland edges.





Great Egret

Elegant and graceful, the Great Egret is one of Florida's most striking birds. Their brilliant white feathers, black legs, and yellow bill make them easy to recognize.

During breeding season, they grow delicate plumes that once made them targets during the plume trade era, nearly driving the species toward extinction before conservation laws helped protect them.



Green Heron

The Green Heron is small, secretive, and easy to miss despite being close by. Often hidden among shoreline vegetation, they wait quietly for prey before striking with amazing speed.

They are also one of the few birds known to use tools, sometimes dropping insects or feathers onto the water surface to lure fish closer.



Tricolored Heron

The Tricolored Heron is one of the most beautiful wading birds in Florida, combining striking shades of blue-gray, purple, and white. These birds are far more active hunters than many other herons and are often seen running, darting, and quickly chasing fish through shallow water. Unlike the slow, patient style of larger herons, Tricolored Herons use speed and sudden movements to flush prey into the open. Their slender build, long neck, and graceful movements make them a favorite among birdwatchers and photographers throughout Florida wetlands.



Cattle Egret

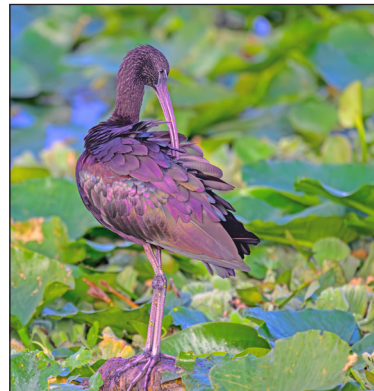
The Cattle Egret is easy to recognize by its habit of following cattle, tractors, and lawn equipment in search of insects stirred up from the grass. Smaller and stockier than many other egrets, these birds are often seen walking through open fields rather than wading in water. During breeding season, they develop soft buff-colored plumes on their head, chest, and back.

Special thank you to Sandy Juba for teaching Nancy Payne-Clark and Betty Salter about birding - plus Robin Francis for her photos used in this article.



White Ibis

The White Ibis is among the most social wading birds in Florida. Their curved orange bills are specially designed for probing mud and shallow water for insects, crustaceans, and small aquatic creatures. Large flocks moving together across lawns and wetlands are a common sight throughout TGO — mostly aerating our lawns as they search for food. Although adults are bright white with black wing tips, younger White Ibis are mottled brown and gradually develop their striking adult coloration as they mature.



Glossy Ibis

The Glossy Ibis is darker and more subtle in color than the White Ibis, but in sunlight their feathers shimmer with beautiful iridescent greens, bronzes, and purples. They are often seen feeding alongside White Ibis in marshy areas, probing the mud with their long curved bills in search of insects, crustaceans, and small aquatic creatures. From a distance they may appear almost black, but up close their rich metallic coloring is surprisingly striking.



Yellow-crowned Night-Heron

Closely related to the Black-crowned Night-Heron and specializes in feeding on crabs and other crustaceans. With their striking yellow crown, red eyes, and sturdy bill, these birds are well adapted for hunting along shorelines and shallow wetlands. They are often seen quietly stalking prey near marshes, canals, and ponds, especially during the evening and nighttime hours when they become most active.

Black-crowned Night-Heron

The Black-crowned Night Heron is a stocky, nighttime hunter most active during dusk and evening hours. During the day, these birds usually rest quietly in trees or shaded areas near the water's edge, often remaining motionless for long periods. Their thick necks, red eyes, and shorter legs give them a very different appearance from the taller, more elegant herons commonly seen in Florida. Black-crowned Night-Herons feed on fish, frogs, insects, and small aquatic animals, using patience and quick strikes to catch prey.





Anhinga

The Anhinga is often called the “Snake Bird” because of its long neck, which frequently appears above the water while the rest of its body remains submerged. Unlike ducks, Anhingas do not have fully waterproof feathers, allowing them to dive deeply in search of fish. After swimming, they can often be seen perched with their wings fully spread, drying in the sun.

If you are a golfer, you have no doubt seen these birds along the course standing motionless near the water’s edge or perched on a tree branch with their wings stretched wide open. Their prehistoric appearance and dramatic hunting style make them one of Florida’s most fascinating water birds to observe.



Cormorant

The Double-crested Cormorant is a skilled diving bird often seen swimming low in the water or perched near lakes with its wings spread open to dry. Its hooked bill helps it catch fish underwater, where it can dive surprisingly deep and stay submerged for extended periods. Despite their somewhat prehistoric appearance, cormorants are graceful hunters and excellent swimmers.

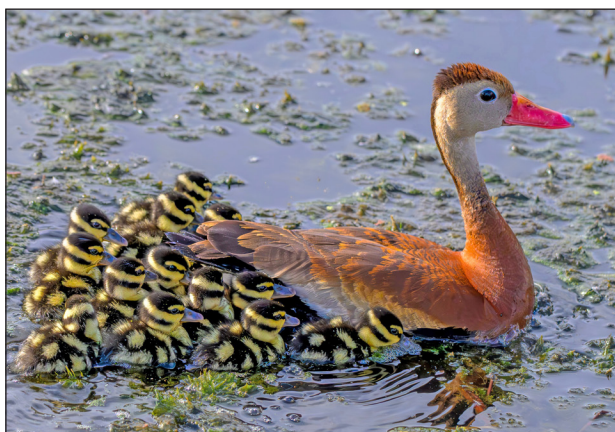


Here at TGO, these birds can be found throughout many of the community’s 32 lakes, especially in the early morning and evening hours when fishing activity is highest. Residents often spot them surfacing unexpectedly far from where they first disappeared underwater, adding a little mystery to their quiet but impressive hunting style.



Limpkin

The Limpkin is a tall, wading bird best known for its loud, haunting calls that often echo across Florida wetlands at night. Their unusual cry — sometimes described as a piercing wail or screaming whistle — can surprise newcomers who hear it for the first time around ponds and lakes after dark. With its brown, speckled plumage and long bill, the Limpkin is specially adapted for feeding on apple snails, which it skillfully removes from their shells. Although once uncommon in many areas, Limpkins have become an increasingly familiar sight throughout Florida, including around many of TGO’s lakes and wetland areas.



Black-Bellied Whistling Duck

One of Florida's most unusual and colorful ducks, easily recognized by its long pink legs, chestnut body, black belly, and bright red bill. Unlike many ducks, these birds often perch in trees and are commonly seen traveling in noisy groups. Their high-pitched whistling calls - often heard overhead in the early morning or evening - are what give them their name. Once considered uncommon in much of Florida, Black-Bellied Whistling Ducks have expanded rapidly and are now a familiar sight around TGO.

Momma with her babies - called Bumble Bees

American Coot

A small, dark waterbird often mistaken for a duck, although it is actually more closely related to rails. Easily recognized by its bright white bill and forehead shield, the American Coot is commonly seen paddling across the ponds and lakes in TGO or diving underwater in search of aquatic plants and small creatures.



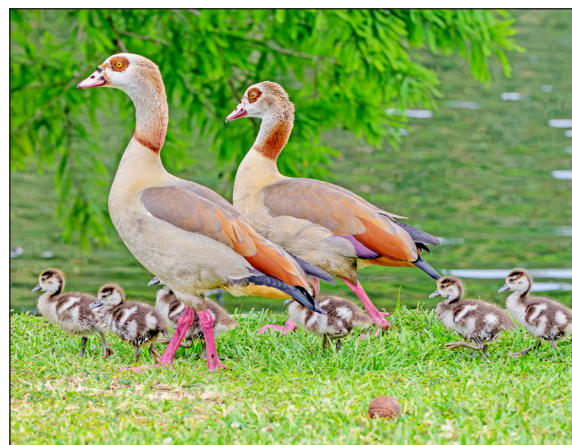
These birds are frequent visitors throughout TGO's lakes during the cooler months, often gathering in large groups. While they may appear somewhat clumsy on land, coots are surprisingly strong swimmers and can run rapidly across the water's surface when taking flight. Their calls are a mix of quirky grunts, clucks, and croaks that add to the lively sounds around Florida wetlands.

The Common Gallinule

Often still called a Moorhen, the Common Gallinule is a colorful marsh bird commonly seen along the edges of lakes throughout TGO. Its dark body, bright red forehead shield, and yellow-tipped bill make it easy to recognize as it walks carefully through shoreline vegetation.



Unlike ducks, Moorhens frequently use their long toes to walk across floating plants and lily pads while searching for insects, seeds, and aquatic vegetation. They are excellent swimmers but usually prefer staying close to cover. Their loud clucks, squawks, and chattering calls are a familiar sound around Florida wetlands, especially during early morning and evening hours.



Egyptian Geese

Not a native to Florida, this exotic-looking waterfowl is originally from Africa and has become increasingly common throughout the state. Easily recognized by their tan coloring, dark eye patches, and pink legs, these birds are often seen grazing on lawns, resting near ponds, or walking confidently through neighborhoods and golf courses.

Egyptian Geese are known for being very vocal and territorial, especially during nesting season. Their loud honking and aggressive behavior toward other birds often make them stand out around lakes and open grassy areas. They have adapted well to developed communities like TGO, where lakes, open spaces, and golf course fairways provide ideal habitat.



Roseate Spoonbill

The Roseate Spoonbill is one of Florida's most unforgettable birds. Their bright pink coloring and spoon-shaped bill make them instantly recognizable, especially when sunlight highlights their vibrant feathers in flight. They sweep their bills side to side through shallow water to detect prey by touch, feeding on small fish, shrimp, and aquatic insects.

Once considered rare in many parts of Florida, Roseate Spoonbill sightings along the Space Coast have become much more common in recent years. While they are still not seen in TGO as frequently as egrets or ibis, residents occasionally spot them feeding along wetlands, lakes, and shallow shoreline areas — always an exciting sight for bird lovers and photographers alike.



Wood Stork

The Wood Stork is a large, prehistoric-looking bird with a bald dark head and massive bill. They are federally protected and considered threatened due to wetland loss. Wood Storks feed by touch, walking slowly through shallow water with their bills open until they snap shut on fish or aquatic prey. Despite their somewhat awkward appearance on land, Wood Storks are powerful fliers and often soar high overhead on warm air currents alongside vultures and other large birds. Seeing them in TGO is a reminder of how important healthy wetlands and protected water systems are to Florida's wildlife.

Why These Wading Birds Matter

Herons, egrets, ibis, spoonbills, and storks are more than beautiful birds. They help maintain balance in aquatic ecosystems by controlling fish, insects, crustaceans, and other prey populations.

They also depend heavily on healthy wetlands, shallow ponds, and clean water. When these birds thrive, it often means the ecosystem around them is functioning well.

The next time you drive through TGO or walk near one of our lakes and wetlands, slow down for a moment and truly watch these birds. Their patience, beauty, and quiet presence are part of what makes living alongside nature here so incredibly special.