

The 1983 Census
of the
Pig's Eye Heron Rookery

On Saturday, June 4, members of the St. Paul Audubon Society and staff from the Nongame Wildlife Program joined together to spend the day censusing the Pig's Eye heron rookery. As early June was plagued by enduring rains we were very lucky to be greeted by sunny skies, pleasant temperatures and, best of all, few mosquitos!

Our task was further aided by the fact that in previous years staff from the Nongame Wildlife Program and Scientific and Natural Areas Program had placed numbered aluminum tags on as many nest trees as could be found. Permanently marking each tree will help us to conduct a more complete and efficient survey as we are able to tract the history of each nest tree - i.e. the number of nests per species and, when possible, the success of each nest.

Prior to the 1983 census a total of 460 nest trees were tagged which together supported 900 nests. Not all of the nests appeared to have been active. Many were either in poor condition or showed little sign of activity (e.g. downy feathers and/or conspicuous droppings on the tree or ground underneath).

When our crew arrived on the island on June 4, we were met by the raucous cries of young birds anxious to be fed and of protective adults travelling to and from the colony in their search for food. Nearly eight hours later, having been unceremoniously "doused" from above and with many sore necks, we had finished the census. An additional 116 nest trees were located and marked. The total number of nests recorded was 865 as follows:

Great Blue Heron nests	75
Black-crowned Night Heron nests	236
Great Egret nests	91
Double-crested Cormorant nests	4
Unknown/Unoccupied nests	459

The Pig's Eye heron colony is a particularly difficult colony to work in. It is very large and is spread over a wide area.

Several subcolonies, where the nests are densely concentrated, are connected by woods where the nest trees are widely dispersed and few in number. The results of the 1983 census help to point out some of the problems encountered. For example, the 116 trees that were newly tagged in June are likely not new nest trees. Rather, they were probably missed by the earlier work crews. Is it hard to miss nest trees? Despite all our hard work in 1983, we missed 117 nest trees that had been marked previous to our arrival! Although all 117 trees together accounted for 179 nests, the large majority of these trees supported only one nest when they were originally found. The dense foliage makes the task of looking for nests comparable to looking for a needle in a haystack!

A more realistic estimate of nests would then be $865 + 179$, or 1044. Total occupancy, however, is difficult to estimate. Of the 865 nests counted in 1983 it was not possible, from 20-30 feet below, to determine the occupancy or activity of 459 nests.

The Nongame Wildlife Program would like to thank all those members of the St. Paul Audubon who participated in the survey: Kiki Sonnen, Tracy, Mark Martell, Terry, Juan, Chris, Dorothy, and Peggy.