Nesting and foraging areas of the Harbor Herons

Huckleberry Island

Goose Island

North Brother Island

2

South Brother Island

Shooters Island

Canarsie Pol

Pralls Island

1

Isle of Meadows

Hoffman Island

New York-New Jersey Harbor Estuary

3   4

● **Island Breeding Colonies**

▨ **Tidal Wetlands**

Today it is not difficult to see a Harbor Heron; in fact, they can be easily spotted in many areas across the Harbor Estuary. Compared with only a handful of nests on South Brother Island in the mid 1970s, the Harbor Herons now build close to 3,000 nests each year on more than six islands, including Canarsie Pol in Jamaica Bay and Hoffman and Swinburne Islands off of Staten Island.

While almost all the nesting islands are now protected, this is not true for many of the foraging grounds where Harbor Herons feed on fish and other organisms. These freshwater and tidal wetlands are extremely important for the birds' survival and can be located as far as ten miles from their nests. Feeding sites include areas like the New Jersey Meadowlands and Jamaica Bay, as well as Manhattan's Central Park.

Hoffman Island

Visit these natural areas to see Harbor Herons

1. Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge of Gateway National Recreation Area
   www.nps.gov/gate/
   718-318-4340

2. Meadowlands Environment Center
   www.njmeadowlands.gov/EC
   201-460-8300

3. Cheesequake State Park
   www.state.nj.us/dep/parksand
   forests/parks/cheesequake.html
   732-566-2161

4. NJ Audubon Society, Sandy Hook
   www.njaudubon.org
   732-872-2500

5. Forever Wild Nature Preserves in New York City
   www.nyc.gov/foreverwild
   212-360-3350

BE SURE TO OBSERVE THE BIRDS FROM A RESPECTFUL DISTANCE.

They are especially sensitive to disturbance when on their nesting grounds.

YOU ARE TOO CLOSE TO THE BIRDS IF THEY:

- Raise their heads to watch you
- Call with increasing frequency or loudly in alarm
- Begin to move away or take flight

For a guided boat tour, contact

New York City Audubon
www.nycaudubon.org
212-691-7483

Hackensack Riverkeeper
www.hackensackriverkeeper.org
201-968-0808

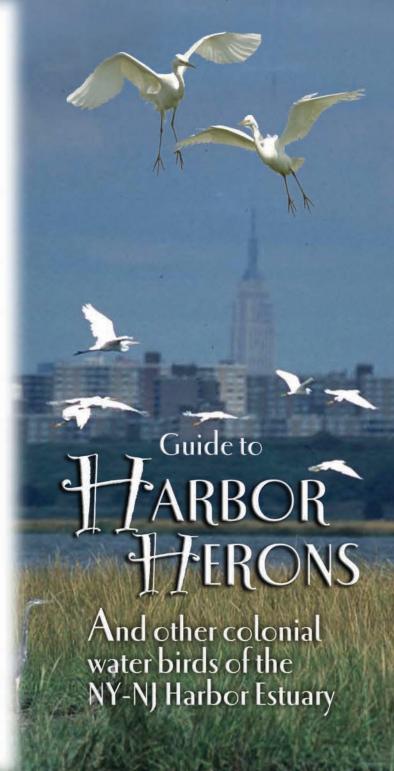**American Littoral Society**
www.alsnyc.org
718-318-9344

To learn about the estuary, contact:
NY-NJ Harbor Estuary Program
www.harborestuary.org
212-637-3816

New York – New Jersey Harbor Estuary Program

Sea Grant New Jersey New York

NEW YORK CITY AUDUBON

Guide to
HARBOR HERONS

And other colonial water birds of the NY-NJ Harbor Estuary

Harbor Herons

The large and stately **GREAT EGRET** was once hunted for the lacy plumes on its back and tail, which were used to decorate hats. Great Egrets are the largest of the egrets, with long black legs and a yellow bill. Their large size allows them to feed in deeper water and catch larger fish than other species. They make a dramatic sight flying at sunset, returning over the city to the islands where they nest.

The **BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON** is the most common heron in the estuary with a total of about 1,000 nesting pairs. Feeding at dawn and dusk, they have large owl-like eyes to see in the dark. This stocky heron feeds on fish and crabs, which they capture by standing motionless at the edge of the water and grabbing with a sudden lunge.

GREAT AND SNOWY EGRETS perched in a tree on an island in the Harbor. Note the considerable size difference between the Great (larger birds) and Snowy (smaller birds) Egrets.

The **SNOWY EGRET** is a more active feeder, often chasing its prey through shallow water. These small and delicate wading birds have black legs with yellow feet. They use these bright "slippers" to stir up the water to find their prey. One island on which they nest side by side with other species is South Brother Island, where every tree carries a few nests.

The **GLOSSY IBIS** is a distant relative of the herons and egrets. Ibis have long legs and necks, but their strikingly long, curved bills are very different from the straight bills of herons and egrets. The Ibis feeds by using its bill to probe marshes and mudflats for worms, crayfish, and crabs. Ibis fly with necks outstretched, unlike herons and egrets, which pull in their long flexible necks when in flight. The ibis is called glossy because of the beautiful reflective shades of its green, brown, and blue feathers. Most Ibis in the Harbor can be found nesting on a large Island in Jamaica Bay called Canarsie Pol.

In the hustle and bustle of the NY-NJ Metropolitan region,

it is all too easy to forget that our homes and workplaces are built atop a series of islands and peninsulas - and surrounded by an estuary where fresh water from rivers meets the salt water of the ocean. Scattered across this urban archipelago are many smaller islands, where the most prominent inhabitants are a surprising number of birds known as the Harbor Herons.

The name Harbor Herons is given to several species of long-legged wading birds - herons, egrets, and ibis - that nest together in large groups, or colonies. In the summer, these migratory birds seek the relative isolation and protected environment of the harbor's uninhabited islands, where they build large stick nests in trees and bushes.

After virtually abandoning the harbor in the 1960's and 70's, the Harbor Herons have made an impressive come-back as our urban waters have become much cleaner. The annual nesting of several thousand of these birds in the Harbor is a true conservation success story of our time.

South Brother Island

Other Colonial Waterbirds

The **DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT'S** water-absorbing feathers help it dive deep for schools of fish. Look for this common bird drying its outstretched wings on pilings.

The **COMMON TERN**, a small, sleek, black-headed bird, often confused for a gull, hovers over the water before it crashes below the surface to catch fish.

The **GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL** is the largest of the gull species. It often nests on the Harbor Heron islands and eats just about anything it can get its bill on, from stolen tern eggs to discarded french fries.

The **RING-BILLED GULL** is a small gull that has a distinctive black ring around its bill. It is very common in the winter, wheeling and soaring over the estuary.
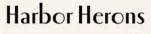

The **LAUGHING GULL'S** small size and black head make it easy to spot. Look for this bird foraging on the beaches and in Jamaica Bay.

The **HERRING GULL** is a clever hunter that cracks open clams by dropping them on piers, parking lots and gravel trails. It is also seen scavenging at dumpsters and landfills.