



## Strange Partners: Photographing Wading Birds

by Andy Long

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**The great egret and wood stork don't mind each others presence nearby as they search for food.**

each other's way. No one really wants an image that shows a head or legs of one bird sticking out from behind another.

This kind of free floor show played itself out for me on a recent visit to Fort DeSoto Park in St. Petersburg, Florida, one of my favorite locations for photography. I try to get there a couple of times a year, because no matter what the season, there are always a good variety of subjects. More often than not, I'll find several species in the same area. On this visit before the end of my first morning out, I had images of a wood stork, great blue heron, great egret, reddish egret, and a snowy egret in the same area fishing for food. The next morning, the cast of characters changed a bit to include a reddish egret, snowy egret, ibis, tri-colored heron, little blue heron, great egret, and a great blue heron (although the great egret and great blue heron didn't stick around very long).

Thief! *Lazy*. Working partners. Taking advantage of a situation. *Jealous?* These are a few of the thoughts that might cross your mind when you're watching a group of wading birds working the flats in search of a meal. When one bird is having success in a given spot, others will come to the same area to hunt. Sometimes one of them will shadow the first bird, hoping to snatch a free meal that the first one scares up but doesn't see. In a situation like this, the entertainment is just as fun as the photography. Sometimes, though, you can feel frustrated as you work to take a potentially great photo while the birds keep getting into

While any of the larger birds will tolerate another bird in its area for a short time, when the intruding marauder comes too close, the larger bird will chase it away. Their comfort zone can vary, though, according to how successful the hunting is. Typically, the range is about five yards, and it's typically the great blue heron that doesn't want anything else in the area. Great blues will also come in and chase another bird off when they see the second bird succeeding when they're not having any luck where they are. Such is the world of wildlife: the larger the animal, the more dominance it has over smaller animals in the area. This behavior is especially common for larger mammals during mating season when the bigger and stronger males chase away their smaller, weaker competitors. Interestingly, while the males are bitter enemies during mating season, once that time is up (during the winter and summer non-mating seasons) the males will group together.



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**When in the area, the great blue is not a friend of having company very close by.**

The jealousy birds exhibit creates rich opportunities for flight shots, if you're prepared. If you were focused on a heron as it took off for a new location near another bird, be ready to catch shots of the second bird as it prepares to leave. It might fly only ten yards away, but it will fly. You have to be quick since the action takes place in just a few seconds. The bird that is most often chased away is a great egret. Conversely, the great blue seems to be the only bird that doesn't want anyone else around. The great egret and wood stork never seem to have a problem sharing, making the great blue the bully of the flats.

**Positioned on the egret as a great blue heron came by to chase it off its feeding area.**



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Another situation in which space is a concern for the birds happens when a reddish egret is chasing after small baitfish rather than going for a shrimp. When going for a shrimp, egrets will stand around or move slowly through the grass flats to lure their prey from hiding. But, when they're going for small baitfish, they need lots of area as they spread their wings to provide shade that decreases the glare of the water. They tend to move away from the other birds in the area to create the space they need for their wings and to give themselves room to scurry about. When you're hoping to take photographic advantage of this type of hunting, stand with the sun at your back and wait for the reddish egret to position itself with the sun illuminating it nicely as its wings are spread in interesting poses.



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**Reddish egret running across the water chasing after a meal.**



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**Getting in the right position as a reddish egret runs around lets you get good actions shots.**

The most common culprit for trying to take advantage of another bird's hunting skills is the snowy egret. When an egret sees another wader having success, it will move right behind it and follow it all over the place in hopes of letting the first bird do all the work while it snags a meal. The first bird doesn't seem to have a problem with this opportunism and lets the snowy egret tag along. I've yet to catch a snowy stealing a meal from a host hunter, but I have witnessed it grabbing a victim a white ibis missed as it searched out shrimp in the grass flats.



One problem you'll have when you're trying to capture photos of two birds working in tandem is getting enough depth-of-field to keep them both in focus. On occasion, they move parallel to you for a good shot, but more often than not their positions are staggered. On a very sunny day you can boost the ISO high enough to get a reasonable amount of

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**The ever present snowy egret near a reddish egret.**

them.

The various hunting techniques you'll observe as you watch wading birds can be fascinating. Just about every species has a different style, whether it be the frantic reddish egret running all over the place, the tri-colored heron standing still and moving its head around like a snake to search out a victim, or the great egret freezing like a statue as it waits for a meal to swim by. Each bird presents great photographic opportunities when it hits the water on the hunt. You'll have a chance at some great shots at the moment of impact as well as when the hunter wins its prize. Then, if the bird has to reposition its catch in order to swallow it, you'll have more good material.

depth for both subjects, but don't be surprised if the focus on one is just a little softer. You can also move farther away for more depth-of-field at a given f-stop than you could manage if you were closer to



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**Egret: Work on your timing to get the moment of impact into the water.**



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**Egret: Be ready to get the shot when a bird repositions its meal to swallow it.**

What do you need to do to optimize your chances of capturing truly great images? **GET OUT THERE!** If you're serious about working the flats and its congregation of birds, move in there with them. Because the water is typically

only calf-deep for most people, standing in the water with the birds allows you to approach much closer than you could on land. Also, when you're in the water with them, the birds feel less threatened than they do if they observe someone apparently stalking them from shore. You'll be amazed at how close they'll let you be, sometimes too near for you to be able to focus with your large lens. (A pair of water shoes is ideal for walking through the shallows.) If you aren't the only photographer on scene, be aware of the others and their locations so you don't move between them and their subjects or accidentally scare their subjects off.



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**When in the water with the birds, they allow you to get very close for tight head shots.**



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**Ibis: The successful hunter will usually have company in the near future.**

What will become of your equipment once you've taken it "out to sea"? Don't worry that your tripod will be ruined by the salt water. Simply wash the sea salt off the tripod legs after each session. Every couple of days out, you might also want to take the legs fully apart to wash them and do a good wipe down. As for the camera body and lens, use a damp washcloth to wipe everything down (except the lens element). After that, use a small one-inch wide paintbrush to get around all the buttons and dials to eliminate the small grains of sand that will no doubt work their way into these areas. You'll need a micro-fiber cloth or lens fluid and paper to perform a good cleaning of the lens to remove any sea salt that might have created a film there.



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**A snowy egret gets right behind a white ibis, which has been successful with its hunting.**

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