A Gathering of Strangers:

The Biology and Ecology of Colonial Heronries

by William Moskoff

A heronry is a complicated biological organization where birds in the order *Ciconiiformes* (herons, egrets, ibis, spoonbills) gather to mate, breed, and then raise their young. These birds are largely colonial breeders, that is, they breed in physical proximity to other birds rather than nesting alone.[1] They are also socially gregarious and therefore breed not only in the company of their own species, but also alongside and even in the same tree with other species. It is this feature which makes a heronry a gathering of strangers. Consider, for example, the heronry of Cypress Island Preserve in Lafayette, Louisiana, which in the spring of 1994 had breeding White Ibis, Little Blue Heron, Cattle Egret, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Roseate Spoonbill, Black-crowned Night-Heron, and Yellow-crowned Night-Heron.[2]

Why Heronries Exist

If avian behavior serves the function of helping the species survive, what roles do heronries play? Colonies likely exist as a response to the pressures of breeding. For instance, colonies protect birds and their young from predators simply because there is strength in numbers. The larger the number of birds in a colony, the more likely a predator will be observed by a member of the colony who can then rouse other residents. A large colony can serve as a defensive strategy because the successful predation of a single bird signals a warning to the rest of the colony.

Colonies may also function to provide easy foraging. Young, inexperienced birds may find it worthwhile to roost near older birds who know where nourishment exists. But what do the older birds obtain from this increased competition for food? Research suggests that the younger birds offer increased protection from predators (Ehrlich et al 1988).