



# look around

New York City

## THE BROTHER ISLANDS

Side by side in the East River between LaGuardia Airport and the Bronx are two abandoned islands. There are several dilapidated buildings on the larger of the two islands, but no people live there. The buildings are covered in vines, and trees have grown up all around them. These islands stand together like a pair of siblings, so when Europeans arrived in New York they named them the Brother Islands.

The larger of the islands, North Brother Island, is owned by New York City and once had many hospitals on it. Then in 1963 the hospitals were abandoned. The ruins of the buildings now stand in the shadow of the City, largely forgotten.

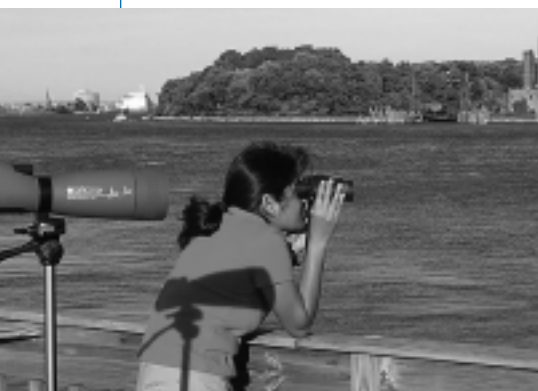
South Brother Island was always privately owned. Its most famous owner was Jacob Ruppert, who owned a local beer brewing company and the New York Yankees when Babe Ruth was a player. Ruppert's summer home burnt down in 1909.

After human activity on the islands ended, other creatures took up residence. In 1979 many species of water birds began to nest on South Brother Island. And by 1989

the birds were nesting on North Brother Island too. Today there are at least ten species nesting there, totaling over a thousand individuals.

New York City now protects the Brother Islands because they are such important nesting grounds for birds.

Of all the things these islands have been used for, this seems to be the best of all. **-GW**



## Hérons and Egrets



Hérons and egrets are elegant, long-legged fishing birds of shallow water. Several species nest together in groups on a few islands in New York harbor. They build their large stick nests in trees and bushes.

When flying, herons and egrets pull in their necks. Their long legs and feet stick out past their tails. Hérons use their long flexible necks and sharp bills to spear food.



Black-crowned night-hérons are gray and stocky with a black back and yellow legs. They feed at dawn and dusk and have large owl-like eyes to see in the dark. The night-heron stands motionless at the edge of the water and then lunges suddenly.



## Cormorants

Cormorants are large, dark water birds. There are thirty species found throughout the world. The double-crested cormorant is the kind found in New York harbor.



Cormorants are so good at fishing that in some Asian countries, like China, fishermen use them to help catch fish. They dive underwater to catch fish.

Cormorants can dive for over a minute and up to sixty feet deep. Unlike most other water birds, they don't have waterproofing oils for their feathers. When they dive, their feathers become waterlogged. This helps them stay underwater longer. When they return to land, they dry their wings in the sun or breeze.



## Gulls

Gulls are among the most common and visible birds along the shore. Many people call them "seagulls" but this is not really true, because not all gulls live by the sea.

The great black-backed gull is the largest gull. It is 2 1/2 feet long. They nest on the coast and islands of the North Atlantic.

They are common around New York.



Gulls walk well on land and often hunt for food on foot.

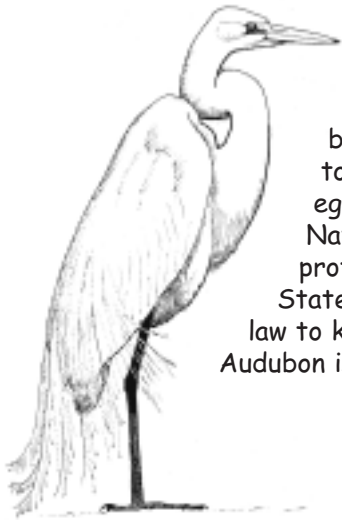
They use their webbed feet to swim like ducks. The ring-billed gull is small with a gray back.

Gulls are amazing fliers. They soar, glide, and wheel with ease. Gulls have learned to hover and drop clams or other hard foods onto rocks or pavement to break them open.

Gulls eat fish and other water creatures, but also scavenge trash and beg for human food.



For more information on the Harbor Herons Project



The large great egret is all white with a yellow bill and black legs and feet. They were once hunted for the lacy plumes on their back and tail. The plumes were used to decorate ladies' hats. Great egrets became very rare until National Audubon was formed to protect them. Finally the United States government made it against the law to kill them. The symbol of National Audubon is the great egret.

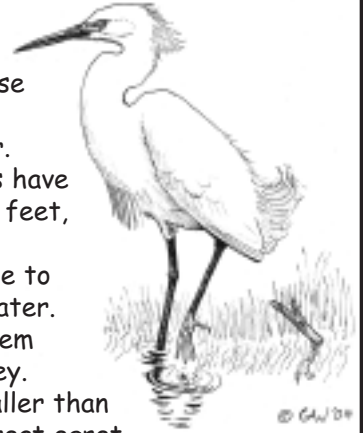
Snowy egrets are more active feeders.

They will chase prey through shallow water.

Snowy egrets have bright yellow feet, which they sometimes use to stir up the water.

This helps them find their prey.

They are smaller than the similar great egret, and have a black bill.



Cormorants have short legs with big webbed feet, long necks, and a longish hooked bill. They



Cormorants nest in groups called colonies. They usually nest in trees near the water. This colony is on U Thant Island, in the East River across from the United Nations.

Cormorants build large stick nests, and lay three or four eggs. They keep the eggs warm with their large feet. The babies look like the adults but are browner.



On North Brother Island in the East River, gulls have taken over the abandoned hospital buildings. They nest on the roof and fly in and out of the broken windows.

Many adult gulls, like the herring gull shown here, have a bright red spot on their bill, which the babies peck at when they want to be fed.

Gulls are noisy. They have different calls and displays. Laughing gulls are the smallest gull in New York City. They are named for their call, which sounds like raucous laughter. They have dark gray backs and black heads.



Usually gulls nest on the ground. The eggs and chicks are brown and spotted for protection.



visit NYC Audubon's website at [www.nycaudubon.org](http://www.nycaudubon.org)



## NEW YORK CITY AUDUBON'S HARBOR HERONS PROJECT

New York City Audubon started the Harbor Herons Project in the 1980's when birders with boats discovered wading birds nesting on abandoned islands near Staten Island. These birds hadn't been seen in the New York harbor since early in the twentieth century. NYC Audubon members decided to study where the birds were nesting, how many birds there were and how many young birds were born each year. This research would be important to protect the islands.

Every breeding season since 1986 NYC Audubon hired scientists to do these studies. Every spring and summer Audubon volunteers go with the scientists to the islands or check through binoculars from the nearest shore to **LOOK AT** how the birds are doing.

Now there are 14 islands in the Harbor Herons Project area. New York City owned some of them; NYC Parks & Recreation bought some more of them. Some are still private. The City-owned islands have been declared Forever Wild. This protects them from ever being used by humans again.

### Our Thanks to:

**GABRIEL WILLOW** is an artist and naturalist who works at the Prospect Park Audubon Center. He was the on-board educator for New York City Audubon's 2004 Harbor Herons EcoCruises. His drawings are copyright © 2004 and used by permission.

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## YIGAL GELB: HARBOR HERONS SHORE MONITORING COORDINATOR



When thinking of possibilities in New York City, counting and observing the migration of herons, egrets, and ibises is probably not something you would think is possible. Neither did Yigal Gelb, until he found out about the Harbor Herons Project and the position of shore monitoring coordinator. Yigal loves everything about the outdoors, so he applied immediately. Yigal had just received his master's degree in Environmental Science from Columbia University, after growing bored with studying economics. "I found out that I could make a career out of doing something I love," says Yigal.

Yigal's dream job involves **LOOKING AT** North and South Brother Islands, and two other islands from a distance. He stands on the shore with a group of volunteers, and counts the number of birds flying to and from the islands. He then uses this data to understand the birds' behavior. Yigal says, "The Harbor Herons Project has made a large number of people in New York City aware of many birds in the area that they never knew about." **-NL**



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New York City Audubon  
71 West 23 Street  
New York, NY 10010  
212-691-7483

lanyc@nycaudubon.org  
www.nycaudubon.org

**Naola Gersten-Woelf:**  
Publisher & Managing Editor

**Jean Lynch:** Editor

**Cecelia Rogers:** Art Director

**E. J. McAdams:** Executive  
Director

### LOOK IT UP

Sharon Seitz and Stuart Miller, *The Other Islands of New York City: A Historical Companion*, The Countryman Press, Woodstock, VT, 1996.

David Allen Sibley, *National Audubon Society: The Sibley Guide to Birds*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2000. This book is good for grownups. It is quite large, but a smaller Eastern edition came out recently.

James Coe, *Eastern Birds: A Guide to Field Identification (A Golden Guide)*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2001.



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