

Wading Bird Hunting Behaviors

HUNTING TECHNIQUES

STANDING ERECT

- used when feeding in groups where antagonistic encounters with other birds are common
- *Upright posture* is an advertising display as well as way of viewing a wide area for potential prey
- *Crouched posture* may restrict the bird's field of vision, but it brings the head closer to the strike zone
- *Standing fly catching* involves taking insects, amphibians, or even small birds off plants or in the air



WALKING SLOWLY

- used by most species and involves carefully looking for and stalking prey
- upright and crouched postures are used
- walking speed and style differs among species (Little Blue Herons tend to crisscross the same area while Snowy Egrets tend to continuously move away from previous locations)

HEAD AND NECK MOVEMENT AND POSTURES

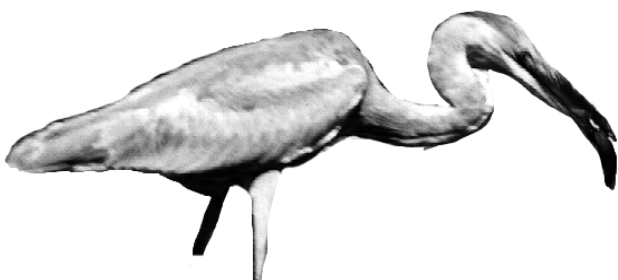
- *Head tilting* used to overcome glare from sun by shifting the glare away from the striking zone
- *Head cocking* and *peering over* are used to locate prey
- *Head swaying* provides a precise estimate of distance and location when only a single strike is probable.

WINGS

- *Wing flicking* and *open wing feeding* used to disturb and startle prey so it moves
- *Underwing*, *double-wing* and *canopy feeding* help increase visibility by reducing glare. The *canopy position* is one in which the back is towards the sun producing a shadow in front of the bird

FEET

- Foot stirring, raking, probing, and paddling are variations that cause prey in murky water, mud, and vegetation to move from hiding and reveal themselves
- Brightly colored toes or feet (Snowy Egret, Wood Stork) help to startle prey



CAPTURE TECHNIQUES

METHODS

- *bill snap*: rapid bill closure in reflex to tactile stimulation. Wood stork bill-snap reflex averages 25 milliseconds.
- *bill grab*: grasping prey in forceps fashions without movement of the neck. Both visual and non-visual foragers use this with slow moving prey.
- *bill thrust*: downward or lateral strike involving fast directed movement of the head neck and body (Tri-colored Herons and Green Herons strike nearly horizontal to the water while the Little Blue Heron and Great Egret strike deeply and vertically).

PIERCING VS. GRASPING

A strike is usually made with bill slightly open to grasp small fish while wide large fish are usually stabbed using one rather than both mandibles.

TOO BIG TO SWALLOW AT ONCE

All species have tactics for handling prey that cannot be immediately swallowed. They may move the prey up the bill during the process, release it, and recatch at the tip of the bill. Large, hard, or dangerous prey may be battered, rubbed, shaken, dropped, or stabbed, and may be picked apart and eaten in pieces.

JUST RIGHT FOR SWALLOWING

Small prey is swallowed immediately after capture by either flipping the bill upward and catching the item or by releasing the prey and moving the mouth forward to catch it. Ibis use the latter method and can swallow prey nearly instantaneously without altering the head-down posture.

TIME OF DAY

- *Night fishing...* nocturnal oxygen depletion can force fish toward the water's surface at dawn and wading birds are able to catch fish by standing and waiting. As oxygen levels become less restrictive during the day, fish become less available at the surface and more active behaviors are required.
- *Dawn & dusk fishing...* Most wading birds typically forage near dawn and dusk and rest at midday. Tide is important in coastal locations. Spoonbills on Sanibel roost during high tide and forage during falling and low tide.

