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Nonnative Egyptian water birds are thriving in Texas

By Gary Clark | January 29, 2016 | Updated: January 29, 2016 8:31pm

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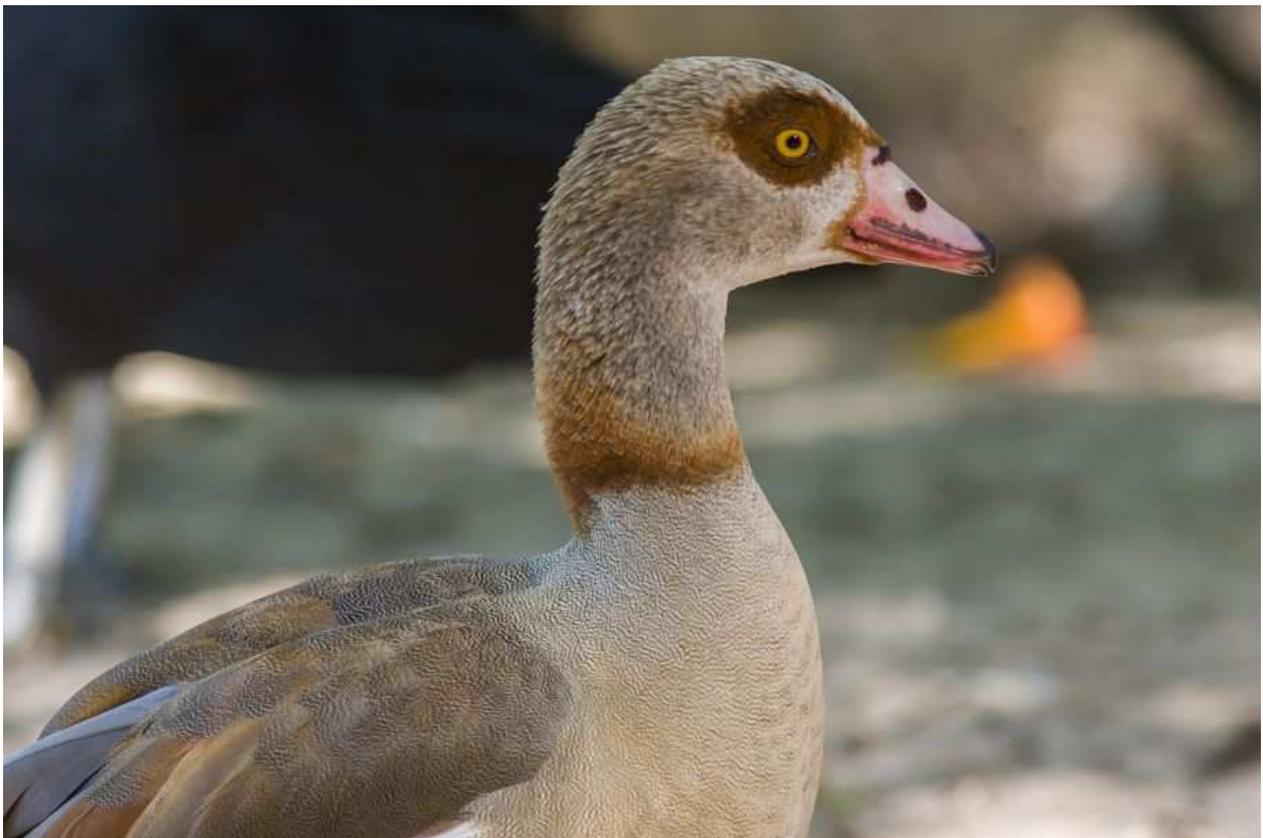


Photo: Kathy Adams Clark/KAC Productions

IMAGE 1 OF 3

Egyptian geese don't appear to be harmful to natural ecosystems or to native waterfowl.

Big, showy, gooselike creatures have invaded our region and strut among us with aplomb at parks, golf courses and on neighborhood lawns.

Readers tell me about them all the time. I explain that the birds are Egyptian geese. A male and female recently took up residence in my backyard, acting suspiciously like a nesting couple. Great. That's all I need, more baby birds with parents hounding me for seeds.

The birds arrived in North America as invited but captive guests last century to decorate private ponds and aviaries. They eventually escaped or were released from captivity to become uninvited guests in many states, particularly in Florida and Texas. The geese originated in Egypt, especially the Nile Valley and also sub-Saharan Africa.



The birds must think the Houston region, with its temperate climate and abundant ponds, lakes and bayous, is as good as the Nile Valley because they've rapidly multiplied and spread all over the place, even to other parts of Texas. They're not really geese but akin to an Old World species called shelducks, a group of waterfowl categorized between geese and ducks.

Ancient Egyptians, presumably including Cleopatra, revered the indomitable birds. Some depictions of the indomitable Cleopatra rather

MORE INFORMATION

Egyptian geese

Occupy open areas near water but avoid deep forests.

resemble the faces of Egyptian geese, with bold, sharply outlined eyes.

Big golden-yellow eyes framed by broad, elliptical, chestnut-colored patches accent a face with a stern expression that would have commanded reverence in ancient times. The birds also are elegant, with buffy necks adorned with a brown necklace, an apricot breast sporting a dark-brown patch like a medallion, grayish-brown or reddish-brown feathering on the back, pink legs and gaudy white wing patches displayed mostly in flight.

With a robust 2-foot-long body, the birds fiercely defend their territory, launching into raucous quarrels with their own kind and flashing their broad 5-foot wingspan at intruders.

A benefit of their bellicose behavior in my yard is that they chase off incessant feral cats that kill songbirds. And they live peaceably among wild, native birds at my bird feeders. Maybe I'll start revering Egyptian geese.

The birds appear neither harmful to natural ecosystems nor to native waterfowl, such as ducks and geese. If their populations boom, they could become a pest to croplands as they are in some parts of Africa.

Meanwhile, they thrive in our neighborhoods by feeding on grasses, seeds, berries and maybe a few ground-dwelling insects. Although waterfowl, they're primarily land dwellers near pond and lake shores because, unlike ducks, their beaks are not equipped to filter food from water.

Genders are best distinguished by voice, with the female making a yank-yank-yank sound and a male making a gravelly hissing sound.

Live in small family groups, but breeding pairs will nest alone.

Dan Brooks, curator of vertebrate zoology at the Houston Museum of Natural Science, is studying the spread of Egyptian geese.

Report sightings of the birds to him at dbrooks@hmns.org

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