

Great Blue Heron

Ardea Herodias

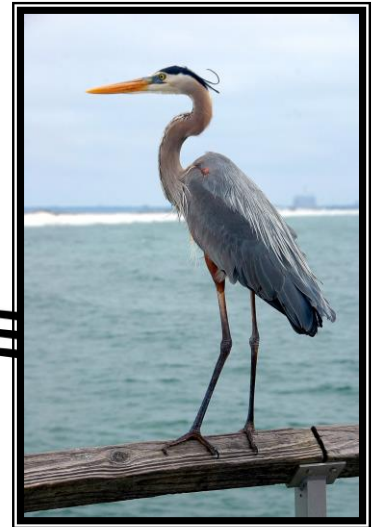


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<https://www.publicdomainpictures.net/en/view-image.php?image=88520&picture=great-blue-heron>

Physical Description:

The great blue heron is one of the largest, and most common, herons in North America and is one of 60 heron species worldwide. There are seven subspecies of the great blue heron recognized in North America. This huge bird, which can measure up to 53.9 inches (137 centimeters), has: a slate-gray body; chestnut and black accents; a thick, dagger-like bill; very long legs; and a long, “S” shaped neck. Males are larger than females. Despite its size, an adult great blue heron only weighs about five pounds due to all the hollow bones. Great blue herons appear blue-gray from a distance, with a wide black stripe over the eye that extends back to black plumes emerging from the head. Adults sport a shaggy ruff at the base of their necks. Juveniles have a dark crown with no plumes or ruff, and a mottled neck. The head, chest, and wing plumes of great blue herons give a shaggy appearance. Wings are broad and rounded and the legs trail well beyond the tail. In flight, great blue herons look enormous with a whopping six-foot wingspan! The upper side of the wing is two-toned: pale on the forewing and darker on the flight feathers. When flying, a great blue heron typically holds its head in toward its body with its neck bent.

Natural History:

Adaptable and widespread, the great blue heron is found in a wide variety of habitats. They inhabit sheltered, shallow bays and inlets, sloughs, marshes, wet meadows, shores of lakes, and rivers. When foraging, they wade slowly or stand silently along riverbanks, lake shores, or in wet meadows, waiting for prey to come by, which they then strike with their bills. They will also stalk prey slowly and deliberately. Although they hunt predominantly by day, they may also be active at night. They are solitary or small-group foragers, but they nest in colonies. Males typically choose shoreline areas for foraging, and females and juveniles forage in more upland areas. Great blue heron numbers are stable and increased in the U.S. between 1966 and 2014, according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. However, notable population declines have occurred in some areas, particularly in the “great white heron” group in southern Florida, where elevated mercury levels in local waterways may be a factor. The North American Waterbird Conservation Plan estimates a continental population of 83,000 breeding birds, and

rates the species an 8 out of 20 on the Continental Concern Score. Great blue herons can be found throughout the year all over North America.

Reproduction:

Great blue herons breed all over North and Central America and they can be either permanent residents or migratory. In fact, most of Washington's breeding population remains in the state year round. Nesting colonies are typically found in mature forests, on islands, or near mudflats and are often located within two to four miles of feeding areas. These colonies can contain a few to several hundred pairs. In fact, some colonies have more than 500 nests in them! Isolated pair-breeding is rare. In the north, nest building begins in February when a male chooses a nesting territory and displays to attract a female. Displays include bill snapping, neck stretching, moaning calls, preening, circular flights, twig shaking, twig exchanging, crest raising and even bill duels. Pair bonds only last for the nesting season, and adults form new bonds each year. Nest building can take up to three weeks. Nests are usually situated high up in trees but herons will also nest on the ground, on bushes, in mangroves, and on structures such as duck blinds, channel markers, or artificial nest platforms. The male gathers sticks for the female who fashions them into a nest lined with small twigs, bark strips, and conifer needles. The finished nest can range from a simple platform measuring 20 inches across to more elaborate structures used over multiple years, reaching 4 feet across and nearly 3.5 feet deep. Ground-nesting herons use vegetation such as salt grass to form the nest.

Life Cycle:

Female great blue herons lay three to five light blue eggs and usually have either one brood (if breeding in northern areas) or two broods (if breeding in southern areas) a year. Both parents incubate the eggs for 25 to 29 days. At hatching, chicks have bluish eyes which are open, are covered in pale gray down, and are able to vocalize. Both parents regurgitate food for the young. The young can first fly at about 60 days old and usually depart the nest at around 65 to 90 days, although they will continue to return to the nest and are fed by the adults for another few weeks. By the age of 22 months, great blue herons are sexually mature. Herons have a lifespan of 15 years to 24 years.

Range:

The great blue heron is widespread across North America in both saltwater and freshwater habitats from southern Alaska and central Canada southward to northern Central America and the Caribbean. Populations along the Pacific Coast may be permanent residents, even as far north as southeastern Alaska. Great blue herons spend the winter throughout most of the breeding range. However, in parts of their range where food is not available in the winter, great blue herons tend to be migratory. Individuals (mainly from northern populations east of Rockies) will migrate to southern Central America and northern South America. They migrate by day or night, alone or in flocks. Some wander well to the north in late summer. Most populations in Canada are present only during the breeding season, and most populations in Mexico are only present during the winter. Some prominent colonies can be found in Washington State on Samish Island between Samish Bay and Padilla Bay (Skagit County); at the Dumas Bay Sanctuary in Tacoma (Pierce County); by the Ballard Locks in Seattle, at Lake Sammamish State Park (both in King County); on Vancouver Lake (Clark County); and at Potholes WRA (Grant County).

Diet:

Great blue herons have a highly variable diet. Fish, amphibians, reptiles, invertebrates, small mammals, and even other birds are all potential prey. In Washington State, much of their winter hunting is on land, with voles making up a major portion of their winter diet.

Threats:

Although great blue herons are common and widespread, they are vulnerable to habitat loss. One change that has been noticed in Washington in recent years is that colonies that once numbered 100 to 200 nests are breaking up into smaller groups with 30 to 40 nests each. Disturbance during a breeding season may lead to nest failure or colony abandonment. Traffic, logging, construction, motorboats, and other human intrusions can cause disturbance. A 1,000-foot buffer zone around colonies is recommended. In April of 1999, 40% of the Seattle-area heron colonies were abandoned mid-season. This may have been caused by human disturbance or, as has recently been observed in the Seattle area, by avian predators such as bald eagles and crows. Other threats include chemical pollutants or other causes of reduced water quality. Although contaminant levels have declined in many areas, pollutants such as PCBs and DDT and newer types of industrial chemicals continue to affect heron habitats and can contribute to factors such as reduced nest site attendance.

Fun Facts:

- There is a pure white subspecies of great blue heron that lives in southern coastal Florida known as the great white heron.
- Where the dark and white forms of the great blue heron overlap in Florida, intermediate birds known as "Wurdeemann's herons" can be found. They have the body of a great blue heron, but the white head and neck of the great white heron.
- Colonies of great blue herons are called heronries.
- As herons attempt to swallow their prey whole, they have been known to choke to death. Their long, S-shaped necks makes it difficult for them to swallow fish which are too long or large.
- In 19th century, herons were hunted for their beautiful feathers. Women would decorate their hats with heron feathers which later on led towards the species' depletion. Just for this reason, in early 20th century, a law was passed to ban hunting of great blue herons.
- Great blue herons can hunt day and night thanks to a high percentage of rod-type photoreceptors in their eyes that improve their night vision.
- Although some people refer to great blue herons as cranes, they are not. Cranes are an entirely different species of birds.
- Great blue herons have specialized feathers on their chest that continually grow and fray. The herons comb this "powder down" with a fringed claw on their middle toes, using the down like a washcloth to remove fish slime and other oils from their feathers during preening. Additionally, applying the powder to their underparts helps protect their feathers.

Sources:

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