

PLATES FROM JOHN JAMES AUDUBON'S BIRDS OF AMERICA

6 Great White Heron *Ardea occidentalis* Audubon

Now known as *Ardea herodias* Linnaeus

(PLATE CCLXXXI)

The Great White Heron is the largest of all the world's white herons, sometimes attaining a height of over four feet. It is therefore a tribute to Audubon's mastery of pictorial design that he was able to depict this fine specimen at life size nevertheless.

Audubon first came upon these birds on Key West, Florida, in 1832. A view of the small town there appears in the background of this print, which was based on the watercolor painted on May 26 of that year. From South Florida, Great White Herons are found all through the West Indies to islands off the coast of Venezuela. They usually nest in mangroves close to the shore, and their large stick nests are constructed in trees by both adults, with some ceremony, during January to March in the Northern Caribbean.

Adults pair and court in small colonies, with a territory defined about the nest site. The female lays three to five eggs, but loss of eggs or young to snakes, raccoons and other predators which gather around the herons' colonies usually reduces the number of developing young to two or three birds. The young hatch after about four weeks of incubation, and are initially naked and helpless. The parents split the duties of feeding until the young are well feathered and can move about the tree, and both adults can safely be away at the same time. Feeding of the young is by regurgitation, the parent 'coughing' up the prey it has swallowed.

Hérons feed mainly on fish, but they also eat crustaceans, insects, mice and snakes. The fish in the bird's bill is probably a Sand Perch (*Diplectrum formosum*). They stalk their quarry by wading through the shallows, or they stand quietly still until the prey comes within close enough range to be seized by the rapid spearing movement typical of the heron.

They are voracious eaters. 'It was difficult... to procure fish enough for them, they swallowed a bucketful or mullets in few minutes, each devouring about gallon...'. So wrote Audubon about the several live specimens he had presented to his friend the Reverend John Bachman, of Charleston. The herons also proved to be destructive pets. 'On many occasions, they also struck at chickens, grown fowls and ducks, which they would tear up and devour. Once a cat which was asleep in the sunshine, on the wooden steps or verandah, was pinned through body to the boards, and killed by one of them.' Finally, when a heron turned on one of his young children, Buchman had to get rid of his birds.

The Great White Heron is now recognized as large white subspecies of the widespread North American Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) but Audubon considered it a full species, hence the specific name he gave it in *Birds of America*. Writing to Robert Havell Jr. on November 1, 1885, he urged the engraver to apply, 'your most especial care (to) the plate of the Great White Heron—it is a new bird of my discovery and should like to it treated in your best manner.' Six weeks later he had received Havell's initial proofs with unrestrained enthusiasm. 'I have examined, and that closely too, the Plates or *Ardea occidentalis*: the bird is perfect!' he wrote in a subsequent letter, adding a few instructions for improvements to the background, 'but take it "all in all" it is most excellent, and I feel highly gratified that you have met my wishes with it.'

Audubon writes that he received this adult male 'from Captain NAPOLEON COSTE, of the United States Revenue Cutter, the Campbell,'