



WESTERN CUYAHOGA AUDUBON SOCIETY

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BIRD OF THE MONTH: Great Blue Heron

By Nancy Howell, Board Member, WCAS

Beauty, grace, elegance ... all these terms can be used to describe the Great Blue Heron. These large birds of wetland, pond, river, or marsh habitats will cause anyone to stop and look. In flight, the Great Blue Heron is just as impressive with a wingspan of 6 to 7 feet, undulating wingbeats, neck tucked in and legs stretched out behind - almost prehistoric.

Male and female Great Blue Heron look alike with birds standing an impressive 4 to nearly 5 feet tall. The blue of a Great Blue Heron is not like that of a Blue Jay, but the back and wings are a slaty, blue-gray color. Long, light colored plumes dangle from the base of the neck in front of the breast and a black patch of feathers is often seen at the bend of the wing when the wing is folded against the body. The long neck and long, black legs give the bird its height. A Great Blue Heron's head appears white, and black plumes stretch from above the eye to beyond the back of the head. A golden colored eye and spear-like, yellow-orange beak complete the bird's basic description.

It's not unusual for some people to call the Great Blue Heron a "crane". Crane is a colloquial term used in various places around the U.S. While the Great Blue Heron and the Sandhill Crane do look similar, the heron, at least in Ohio, is more commonly seen. Great Blue Heron are associated with aquatic habitats; rivers, lakes, ponds and marshes, while the Sandhill Crane will utilize wetlands, but they are also often seen in dry fields and agricultural cropland. Sandhill Cranes sport light gray to brown-gray plumage and have red skin on their forehead.

Great Blue Heron are carnivores, feeding primarily on fish and other vertebrates, such as frogs, tadpoles, snakes, mice, sometimes other birds and young muskrats. Using the spear-like beak and stealth, herons either move through the water slowly or remain in place while waiting for

prey to come close. With the long neck cocked back and eyes on its prey, the heron will rapidly extend its neck and either spear or grab its prey. If the bird spears a large fish, it shakes it off its beak and generally catches the fish before it falls back into the water. If observing a Great Blue Heron eating, whether it be a fish, frog or small mammal, the prey is manipulated in the beak to be swallowed head first. How do they know which is the head or tail end?

Most Great Blue Herons in northern Ohio migrate further south in the winter. If there is open water available in rivers and streams, a few herons may remain throughout the colder season. Should a hard freeze occur, those herons who remain may also head south, or perish. Once spring arrives, late February into March, Great Blue Herons begin to return to northern Ohio in larger numbers.

The returning birds are attracted to their “heronry” or “rookery” where they will nest. Imagine a 4 to 5 foot tall bird, with a 6 to 7 foot wingspan, nesting in trees in a colony with dozens to hundreds of nests in a stand of trees. Their maneuverability is amazing. One of the best places to observe nesting behavior during the spring and early summer in northern Ohio is at the heron rookery on Bath Rd. (between Riverview Rd. and Akron-Peninsula Rd.) in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Male herons return first, coming back to whatever remains of nests from the previous year. Females are not far behind. Recall those birds that stay all winter long ... they select the choice nesting sites, while later arrivals get whatever nests are left or must construct a new nest.

Pair bonds are strong between male and female herons. Part of the courtship includes the male bringing sticks to the female who will tuck them into the nest making a large platform. Nests that are used and repaired for many years tend to be larger than newly constructed nests. Two to 6 eggs are laid, and when the chicks hatch both male and female care for the young. Watching the nesting behaviors is a sight to behold.

Enjoy observing Great Blue Herons. Their beauty, grace and elegance. Know that they are an important part of our wildlife heritage as long as wetland and clean water habitats are available.