

Great Blue Heron

Ardea herodias



Image Courtesy of SC Aquarium (D. Smith)

Relatives: Class: Aves - birds

Order: Ciconiiformes - a broad group that includes many common name orders, including hawks, eagles, ospreys, flamingos, loons, pelicans, and many others.

Family: Ardeidae - includes egrets, herons, and bitterns.

ITIS recognizes 14 species of herons, of which there are multiple subspecies. All together there is as many as 60 different species of herons, all found worldwide except in Antarctic and near the North Pole.

Description: The great blue heron has a grayish-blue body; white head with black stripe over the eye, a large yellow beak and a long black plume crest off the head. The immature youth looks similar to the adult except for having an all black head that gradually changes to white.

There is a white morph, (“Great White Heron”) which has orange to yellow legs and bill. This morph breeds in southern Florida but may sometimes be found in the Carolinas.

Size: Adults on average stand 45-54in (115-137cm) tall and can weigh 5-6lbs. (2.5kg). They can have a wingspan of 7ft (2m).

Young can be as large as the adults in 6 weeks.

Habitat: Great blue herons are commonly found in marshes, swamps, on the edge of lakes, river, and mangroves. They are highly adaptable and can be found near various types of water.

Range: They can be found all over North America. The great blue heron breeds throughout North and Central America, the Caribbean and Greater Antilles, and the Galapagos. Some populations migrate to South America during the winter months. Populations found in the more northern areas are migratory, making trips down to the Caribbean, Central America, or northern South America.

Predators: Red-tailed hawks, ravens, bald eagles, and raccoons eat the young. Alligators occasionally eat adults.

Diet/Prey: The great blue heron will mainly feed on fish; they will also feed on other animals found in or near the water such as frogs, salamanders, snakes, shrimp, rodents, birds and insects.

They will feed by standing completely still, like a statue, and then strike at their prey with their bill or they will wade through the shallow waters stirring up prey with their feet. The great blue heron will swallow the entire body of their prey, which means there might be cases where the bones are too large to digest; these will be regurgitated along with fur and feathers in the form of a cast.

Aquarium Fish and bird diet

Diet:

Reproduction: Breeding occurs in small colonies or alone. The male will choose a nest site and displays there to attract a mate. His display might consist of stretching his neck with his bill pointing up and flying in circles around the colony with his neck extended. The mating takes place in the trees.

Nests are usually built in trees, 20-60 feet off the ground (sometimes as high as 100 feet up), however, sometimes they are built in shrubs or even on the ground. The nest is built by the female and is made by materials gathered by the male such as dead sticks, leaves, grass, and Spanish moss, all “glued” together with guano (feces). Nesting occurs from March through May.

Between April and May, 3-7 pale blue eggs are laid. The incubation period is about 28 days with incubating done by both sexes. The hatchlings are fed by regurgitation by both parents and will fledge at about 2 months.

The juveniles are sexually mature at 2 years, but usually do not breed until they are 3.

Fun Facts:

- Largest heron in North America
- The young might strike at people who get too close or regurgitate foul smelling partly digested food
- They have 15-17 vertebrae in their neck (humans have 7), but you can not see this long neck when in flight because they curve it in towards their body like an “S”
- Voice has a harsh “frahnk” sound or a short “rok-rok” sound, these calls are given during aggression
- Are often confused with the Tricolored Heron

Ecology:

The great blue heron fishes during both night and day, with most of its activity around dawn and dusk. The heron uses its long legs to wade in shallow water and its sharp "spearlike" bill to catch its food. The great blue heron's diet consists of fish, frogs, salamanders, lizards, snakes, shrimps, crabs, crayfish, dragonflies, grasshoppers, and many aquatic insects. People who create and stock fish ponds may find that their expensive fish are being eaten by great blue herons. Inexpensive countermeasures include installing bird netting or decoy herons.

Conservation Connection:

This is the most well-known and most widespread heron in North America. Human interference with the heron primarily involves destruction of habitat. Many herons are also killed each year due to collisions with utility wires. In the past herons faced being shot because they were easy targets, but this hunting is not as common today.

Great blue herons are considered common and widespread throughout their native range, and there is currently no special concern/status for the conservation of this species.

Status in SC:

Common year-round

Aliases:

Great white heron, blue cranes

References:

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