



Great Blue Heron

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Ken Taylor

Great Blue Heron

(*Ardea herodias*)

The great blue heron is the largest heron in North America and one of North Carolina's most familiar and frequently seen wading birds. Often called a "crane," it is common around shores of open water and in wetlands where it stands silently or walks very slowly waiting for prey to get close enough so it can spear it with a rapid thrust of its bill. The great white heron (*Ardea herodias occidentalis*), a subspecies of the great blue heron, has been seen across the state on several occasions.

Description

As one of the largest herons in the world, the great blue heron stands more than 3 feet high as an adult and weighs approximately 5 ½ pounds. Its wingspan covers nearly 6 ½ feet. It has a slate blue body and wings, long, dark-to-yellowish legs and a long, pointed yellow bill, which is used for catching fish. Adult great blue herons have a white head with a black stripe above each eye that extends down the plumes of the back of the head. Juvenile birds have gray heads and do not have plumes. Plumes will grow as they become adults.

History and Status

The number of breeding pairs of the great blue heron has increased significantly across the state since about 1980. In fact, it was very poorly known as a breeding species as late as the 1970s, with nesting colonies few and far between, mainly in remote swamps. However, with the great increase in beaver ponds, and a smaller increase in reservoirs and other man-made lakes and ponds, great blue herons have taken advantage of these new freshwater wetlands. Birds now nest in most North Carolina counties away from the mountains, and nesting colonies are often easily visible around the upper ends of reservoirs and at beaver ponds.

Habitats & Habits

Great blue herons live in both freshwater and saltwater habitats, including marshes, swamps, shores, rivers and tidal flats. They don't generally nest in estuaries or saltwater environments. They forage in calm waters or slow-moving rivers where they feed on almost anything that comes within striking distance of its long, pointed bill. They typically feed in shallow waters. Because of their large size, great blue herons can feed in deeper waters where other birds cannot reach. Favorite prey include fish, amphibians, reptiles, small mammals, insects and other birds. They grab their prey in their strong mandibles or use their bills to impale larger fish, often shaking them to break or relax the spines before gulping them down.

The great blue heron is usually silent when fishing or flying; however, it can be heard easily when near its nesting colony, by offering a roh-roh-roh sound to alert its mate its approaching. It will make a frawnk sound when alarmed and a gooo call at the end of a courtship ritual.

The great blue heron is one of the largest herons in the world standing more than 3 feet high as an adult.



Mark Buckler

Range and Distribution

The great blue heron is found throughout most of North America, as far north as Alaska and the southern Canadian provinces during the summer. In winter, its range extends south through Florida, Mexico and the Caribbean to South America. Birds east of the Rocky Mountains in the northern part of their range are migratory and winter in the coastal areas of the southern United States, Central America or northern South America. In North Carolina, great blue herons are year round residents and are found statewide, although they are most common in the Coastal Plain and Piedmont.

Range Map



■ Great Blue Heron Range Map

Great Blue Heron

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Great blue herons breed in inland colonies in trees or shrubs over rivers, creeks or ponds. Unlike most other wading birds, great blue herons never nest on coastal islands with other herons, egrets, and ibises. Instead, they nest mostly by themselves, or with great egrets and/or anhingas, with nests placed mainly in living trees — almost always over standing water — to deter mammalian predators, such as raccoons and foxes. This group nesting is called a herony, or rookery, and may range from five to 500 nests per colony, although the average is 160 nests per colony.

NCWRC & Human Interactions

The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) completed the most thorough survey of great blue heron nesting colonies within Piedmont and Upper Coastal Plain regions in 2012, and detected more than 7,680 nests in 518 colonies (Schweitzer, NCWRC, unpublished report). Aerial surveys of North Carolina's heronries are extensive and only conducted every ten years. The NCWRC continuously updates its colonial waterbird database with reports of active nesting colonies of great blue herons from partner agencies and researchers.

These data are used to provide guidance to project managers so buffers are maintained between projects and colonies of nesting great blue herons. Loss of nesting trees and human activities adjacent to colonies are causes of nest failure and abandonment of sites by great blue herons. Colonies in trees within swamps or on islands include a water buffer between nest trees and human activities, and are optimal sites. During the nesting season, keeping foot traffic ≥ 100 m from the colony will enhance nesting success and reduce the probability of abandonment.

Great blue herons are adaptable and tolerant of people's presence ≥ 50 m from them while foraging, and are often seen near homes and businesses, feeding in ponds, drainage ditches, and waterway shorelines. In fact, they have become savvy to people's small and large aquaculture operations, sometimes eating koi and other fish. Mesh netting over ponds and dogs which chase herons are methods used to protect aquaculture facilities. Before any management of great blue herons is implemented, the NCWRC or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must be consulted due to the protected status of the species.

References/More Information

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Credits

Written by Dr. Sara Schweitzer, NCWRC. 2018

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Ciconiiformes

Average Size

Height: 36 inches

Wingspan: 6½ feet

Weight: 5½ pounds

Food

Great blue herons are opportunistic feeders, eating fish, amphibians, reptiles, small mammals, insects and other birds.

Breeding/Young

Great blue herons are monogamous during a single breeding season, but individuals often may choose a different mate each season. Females lay two to six pale blue eggs once a year, usually in March and April. Eggs are usually laid in two-day intervals and both the male and female incubate them for around 27 days. Both parents feed the chicks by regurgitating food. Young herons can fly around 2 months of age, becoming independent at about 10 weeks.

Life Expectancy

Average 15 years, although more than half of great blue herons will die within the first year.



Great blue heron with young (Photo: NCWRC)