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Natural History Notes

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THE GREAT BLUE HERON

This majestic bird is a common sight among our many lakes and streams here in northwestern Wisconsin. The great blue heron is most often seen by fishermen as it wades among the weeds in shallow waters in pursuit of the same quarry. With an infinite amount of patience this bird quietly stalks fish and other aquatic animals which make up its diet. You may have seen what appeared to be a stick or root sticking out of the water, but suddenly with lightning-like speed the heron thrusts its long beak into the water and up it comes with a small fish. Chances are this bird will outdo even the best of anglers. An adult great blue heron can take fish up to a foot long, but prefers smaller minnows which are easier to swallow. However, they also eat snakes, mice, frogs, crayfish and other aquatic animals. This heron has also been observed in open dry marshes feeding on grasshoppers. Nature gave this bird its lanky design which best suits it for wading, its long beak, sharp eyes, long flexible neck and long legs that make it an excellent fisherman.

The great blue heron is the largest of the dark herons. If you have traveled in the south no doubt you have seen many white herons or egrets. Another relative of the great blue heron which may inhabit the marshes and wetlands of the midwest is the American bittern. When you hear a hollow croaking or a sound like an old pitcher pump, this is the call of the American bittern. The great blue heron's call is a hoarse squawk. A series of four squawks is an alarm call.

The great blue heron's plumage is blue to a pale slate gray which blends into chestnut wings, a black and white streaked breast and a black crest. Its long neck is commonly coiled back, giving it the appearance of an "S" shaped hook. This is a common identifying characteristic, even in flight. The bird stands up to four feet tall and a large adult may have a wing span exceeding five feet. The great blue heron is slow in flight with a maximum speed of

about 28 mph. It can take directly to flight from a floating position, but generally takes off from the more common wading position.



Great Blue Heron

The great blue heron arrives in the spring as soon as there is open water. It breeds here in the north and ranges from Nova Scotia to British Columbia. It nests in colonies, called rookeries, where five to twenty pair may have their nests. The rookeries are usually near feeding places, but well away from human activity. Herons build a crude nest of dry sticks and brush, usually in large elm or ash trees in secluded swamps. The same nest is used year after year with a few sticks added each year. Each bird has a single mate, usually for life. A fairly ritualized courtship display precedes mating. Three or four pale blue eggs, about the size of chicken eggs, are laid and have an incubation period of 28 days. The young are scrawny and helpless upon hatching and are fed partially digested fish by the parents. By mid-July the young are usually busy learning the art of fishing and survival. They generally remain near their nesting range until freeze-up, when they migrate south to their winter range in Central America. A young heron banded in Door County, Wisconsin, was shot five months later in the British Honduras.

Few people ever see a great blue heron rookery, but if you keep a watchful eye open when you are near water or marshy areas, chances are that you too will see this majestic bird.

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