

The Great Blue Heron Rookery

Safe haven and great peril for young birds

By Dick Ellis



During a two hour vigil with camera near one of many Wisconsin Great Blue Heron rookeries, the reporter watches adults come and go to about a dozen nests to continue caring for their young. From laying eggs to first flight, the nests will be tended beginning in spring for about three months.

From my ground stand holding vigil on the bank of the shallow and muddy creek just across from the Great Blue Heron rookery in southern Wisconsin, distinguishing young birds from adults takes a bit of careful scrutiny. By day 45 after hatching, herons have already achieved 86 percent of what will be their adult weight. On this May 31st cloudless morning, young of year stand to greet adults returning from hunting or socializing with other members of the isolated colony to a dozen nests constructed many years ago

in dead trees overlooking a large wetland.

In Wisconsin, according to numerous internet sites, migrating Great Blue Herons will return in spring to the same colonies year after year from warmer climates to find a new mate and raise their young. Virtually found statewide, established Wisconsin heron colonies are found in Hayward, The Brule River and Mercer in the north to Horicon and Theresa and Waukesha County in the south. An elaborate spring mating ritual allows males and females to be se-

lective in their mates. A male, as just one example, may steal sticks from a nearby nest to reinforce his own dwelling and impress a female. Although monogynous for that year, Herons pick out new mates each spring.

Incubation period for the heron is 28 days with both male and females helping to sit on an average of a four egg clutch. First flight occurs at 50 to 60 days, with the young leaving the nests from between 60 and 91 days of hatching. With nests placed as high as 130 feet (these nests are between

40 and 60 feet), the birds also can guard against predators like raccoons which seek the eggs or occasionally, hawks or owls which occasionally prey on the herons.

Before flight, young birds grow fast on a diet of fish, reptiles, insects, crustaceans and sometimes small animals and birds brought to the nest by the parents. With good nocturnal vision, males and females hunt day and night by wading in shallow water or working upland fields for rodents. Choking to death by at-



Three Great Blue Heron nests with adults and young among a rookery of about a dozen nests in southeast Wisconsin. Wisconsin heron rookeries range from Hayward, The Brule River and Mercer in the north to Horicon and Theresa and Waukesha County in the south.

Blue Heron Wisconsin Rookeries:

NORTHERN SITES:

Chippewa Flowage, Hayward
Turtle Flambeau Flowage,
Mercer
Nicolet National Forest, Brule
River, Eagle River

LAKE MICHIGAN AREA:

Navarino Wildlife Area,
Navarino
L.H. Barkhausen Waterfowl
Reserve, Green Bay
Mink River Estuary State
Natural Area, Ellison Bay

WESTERN WISCONSIN

Chippewa & Red Cedar

Rivers, Eau Claire to
Menomonie
Trempealeau National Wildlife
Refuge, Trempealeau

CENTRAL WISCONSIN

Necedah National Wildlife
Refuge, Necedah
Sandhill Wildlife Area,
Babcock

SOUTHEAST WISCONSIN

Theresa Marsh Wildlife Area,
Theresa
Horicon Marsh, Horicon
Goose Pond Sanctuary,
Arlington

tempting to eat too large of prey is relatively common and listed on internet sites as among the top five causes of mortality.

This is my first visit to the site. I have walked more than a mile to reach the rookery from the nearest road, ending at the creek bottom which is part of a typical heron wetland environment that provides food and isolation. Although power lines in the distance reveal that we are not far from urban Wisconsin, large cattail stands, ponds and large

stands of mature softwoods and conifers offer a feel of isolation and wilderness that the birds demand in spring.

It is an awesome experience. I move within 40 yards of the rookery slowly and the herons despite their increasing chatter seem to tolerate the intrusion. They stay with nests as I sit down across the creek in open view of close scrutiny by adults and soon their attention is not solely on me. I shoot the camera often with telephoto and a standard lens.



Two canoeists, Jimmy Blaha (left) and Timmy Artl (right) of Waukesha County are the only other people seen during a vigil near a Great Blue Heron rookery, navigate a small and shallow creek and inform the reporter that a young heron had fallen to its death from a nest.

Adults from different nests do take flight eventually and I wonder briefly if I caused the departure. A canoe with two young men exploring the wetlands, the only people I will see in this urban jungle works down the creek and tells the real story.

The men tell me that their ongoing search for salamanders has been futile again, but also let me know that a young Great Blue Heron has fallen to its death sometime this spring and that it still lies below the nests. With the adults gone, I take the opportunity to look for a crossing.

I use a walking stick to negotiate a fallen tree and cross the creek. The heron's staple of fish and frogs skitter for safety in front of me. One "soaker" over my hip boots and a graceful writer arrives below the colony. The young bird is decomposing. Because its size in comparison to the other young birds is small, I wonder how long it fell. Or did it fall?

In his book *The Great Blue Heron*, Robert W. Butler states that mortality among the birds particularly in the younger stages of life is high, with mortality among dispersing herons great in the first weeks after fledging. Only about 50 percent of birds from eggs hatched fledge, and according to Butler, only 14 percent of chicks become yearlings. Only one in 10 reach adulthood. But veterinarian Ken Langelier post mortems on 43 young birds discovered below nests, he said, contradict common thoughts that starvation often induces the falls.



Most Great Blue Herons never see adulthood, according to studies, with many falling to their deaths from nests, like this young heron found May 31 below a nest in Waukesha County. Siblings competing for food or simply displaying aggressive behavior often push young birds from their nests

Twenty-three of the young herons had died of trauma but nine had broken wings or legs that had partially healed before the fall. More than half of the bird's stomachs contained food. Only four had died of starvation suggesting, Butler said, that siblings kill or injure by pushing birds out of the nest or by aggressive action in the nests and for reasons other than food.

In addition to choking, common causes of death for adults include disease, predation of young and winter kill. Young are vulnerable to predation, disease, and inclement weather. For those birds that do beat the odds to survive, breeding age is reached at 22 months, or their second spring. Although a very old Great Blue Heron is 17 years, the oldest bird banded by Wildlife biologists reached age 23.

It's time for a reporter to leave. Almost 130 new shots are on the camera. Soon, it will be time for the surviving birds to leave as well. I have had an up close and personal introduction to the Blue Heron in Wisconsin.

I agree. It is indeed, Great. ^oW_o