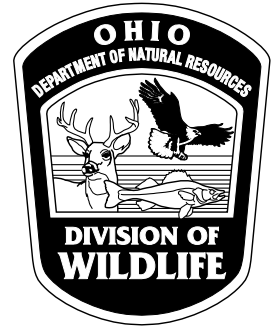


Great Blue Heron

Scientific Name: *Ardea herodias*



Publication 70
(1099)

Introduction

One of the largest bird species in Ohio, populations of the great blue heron are widely distributed throughout the state. Native to Ohio, there was a time when heron numbers dwindled as these birds' feathers were a favorite of the millinery trade during the 1800s.

The great blue heron is often observed motionless, as it pursues its prey while standing in a stream, river or wetland. Unlike numerous other predators that actively stalk on foot or wing, the great blue heron takes the complete opposite approach—it stands still, watching the water for a fish. Then in the blink of an eye, in a sharp and seamless movement it will snare its prey.

Description

The great blue heron stands nearly four feet tall. It has a whitish head with black plumes that originate just above its eyes and project out behind its head. The plumage of the body is brown, black, and white, yet it gives an overall appearance of being a bluish-gray color. The toes of its feet are not webbed. For the most part, great blue herons are silent birds; they utter a rough croaking sound when alarmed or harassed.

Breeding populations are found in 60 of Ohio's 88 counties. In North America, they inhabit and breed in areas as far north as Alaska and south to Mexico, Cuba, and Jamaica. There are numerous varieties and subspecies of the great blue heron throughout this range.

Habitat and Habits

The great blue heron is found in both freshwater and saltwater habitats. It prefers shallow water areas with trees for nesting nearby. Great blue herons may be found along the banks of rivers or at the shores of major water ways such as Lake Erie.

These birds are colonial nesters, with 10 to 75 pairs nesting in one location. Some colonies, however may have as many as 1,500 to 2,000 pairs as found at the West Sister Island heronry in western Lake Erie, or as few as two to five pairs along smaller waters. Male herons are the first to arrive at the previous year's nest. Later after females arrive, courtship rituals are initiated between pairs. The birds will dance in circles and nibble at each others' feathers. The female will often urge the strutting males on by croaking in response to their actions.

The herons will migrate to warmer areas with unfrozen waters in the winter; rarely does a great blue heron remain in the state at this time of year. They return to Ohio as soon as the ice melts—mid-February in warm years and mid-March during a particularly long or cold winter.

Reproduction and Care of Young

Great blue herons are monogamous, meaning the birds form a pair bond and work together to raise the young. Both the male and the female will incubate the eggs, and once the young have hatched feed them by regurgitating food into their mouths. In Ohio breeding occurs generally from the end of March through mid-April. The hatching period begins after 28



days of incubation, usually reaching its peak in May. Once the young herons hatch, they are altricial, or helpless. The young birds will have matured enough to leave the nest after about 60 days.

Management Plans

The Division of Wildlife bands young great blue herons at many of the heronries statewide. This allows biologists to monitor the movements of individual birds and their survival rates, as well as track population numbers. Division personnel also monitor nest sites looking for trends in nesting populations.

Viewing Opportunities

The best location to view great blue herons in Ohio is at West Sister Island. Access to this area is restricted; however, boaters can readily view the birds from the perimeter of the island. There is also a colony that can be seen from the parking lot of the Little Portage Wildlife Area in Ottawa County. Two other areas with significant populations of great blue herons are Stage's Pond State Nature Preserve in Pickaway County and the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge in Ottawa County.

Watching wildlife is encouraged, but it is important that visitors use good judgement on their trips. In the case of the great blue heron, it is particularly important to remain quiet when

observing a heronry. The herons are easily disturbed and too much activity and noise around their breeding grounds can be disruptive to the process.

Do Something Wild!

The great blue heron is among the majority of wildlife species in Ohio that are not hunted. All these animals are vital parts of our overall ecosystem and contribute to the wildlife diversity of the state. Helping us to manage and research these species are the generous citizens of the state of Ohio. With money they either donated through the state income tax checkoff, the purchase of wildlife conservation license plates, or their direct contribution to the Endangered Species Special Account, the Division is able to purchase critical habitat essential to sustaining wildlife diversity in the state and provide educational materials and opportunities on wildlife to children and adults.

Contributions to our Endangered Species and Wildlife Diversity Program are accepted throughout the year. To make a donation, please send a check to: Endangered Species Special Account, Ohio Division of Wildlife, 2045 Morse Road, Bldg. G, Columbus Ohio 43229-6693. All contributions, whether made on your income tax return or directly, are tax deductible.

At a Glance

Mating: Monogamous

Peak of Breeding Activity: March 25-April 15

Incubation Period: 28 days

Young Hatch: May

Number of Eggs: 3-7, usually 4

Eggs Produced: Once a year, but they will renest if a nest is destroyed.

Adult Height: 4 feet

Life Expectancy: 21 years was the age of the oldest known heron in the wild; most have shorter lives.

Feeding Periods: Herons feed during both day and night

Typical Foods: Fish, snakes, frogs, crustaceans, birds, small mammals, and insects

Native to Ohio: Yes

