



Creature Feature: Spring 2018

By W. Scott Douglas

Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*)

Arguably one of the most readily recognized birds in the Watershed, the Great Blue Heron always attracts attention, whether it's flying overhead or standing at attention in the marsh grass waiting for a meal. My wife and I were out for a leisurely paddle on Lake Nockamixon recently and she asked me if both the males and females had the white "beard". I realized that I did not know, and of course this prompted me to find out all I could about these enigmatic birds. I am taking this opportunity to share my new found knowledge with you.



The Great Blue Heron is the largest heron in North America, and one of our largest birds, with an impressive six-foot wingspan. They always fly with their necks coiled and their legs outstretched behind their foreshortened tail, the opposite of most birds. When I was a youngster I always thought it made it look like they were flying backwards! Adult herons are mostly grey blue in color, with white and rust on the neck and chest, and a distinctive black cap that runs through the eye.

During breeding season the adults have black plumes on the back of their heads, like unruly cowlicks. Juveniles are more grey than white and lack the chest plumes. In southern Florida there is a white morph often called the Great White Heron, and in northern and central Florida there is an intermediate morph called the Weidemann's Heron that has a blue body and white neck and head. They are all the same species.

Great Blue Herons are widespread across North America from central Canada to Mexico. Herons are incredibly tolerant of temperature extremes, but most will migrate south when their feeding areas freeze over, and north for cooler temperatures to breed. While most of us feel lucky to see the solitary heron feeding in the shallows of ponds and wetlands, they do gather in colonies to breed. The colonies can contain dozens to even hundreds of nests, often high up in dead trees or in shrubs close to where water and forest meet. We are lucky enough to have several of these colonies, or heronries to be more precise, close by. There is one in Springtown, but it is on private property. The males collect sticks and grasses and bring them to the females to construct the nest. Often the female will simply add



the new offerings to a previously used nest. The resulting mess can be as small as 20 inches across to a whopping four feet across and almost as deep. Herons are monogamous for the season, but choose new mates each year. The female lays 2-6 light blue eggs about the size of a large chicken egg. Both male and female share the incubation duty which lasts about a month. The nestlings require a fair amount of attention, and are fed via regurgitation by both parents for 49-81 days. The young learn to hunt on their own, and the steep learning curve prompts them to follow the adults home each night in the hopes of getting a free meal.

Since most of us see Great Blue Herons while they are hunting, I am sure you know their preferred method of prey capture is stalking or ambush. They will use a variety of techniques, and eat anything that is within striking distance. On occasion they have been known to try to swallow something too big and die trying! Herons eat mostly fish and frogs, but will also eat small mammals, snakes, small water birds, salamanders and insects. While adult Herons are pretty much free from predation due to their size, their eggs and nestlings are preyed upon by bears, raccoons, vultures, ravens, crows, hawks and owls. Even with all these predators, herons do not warrant any special conservation status, and this is probably because their most important habitats are solidly protected already. Recent recovery of natural beaver populations in the northeast and southern Canada have resulted in even more habitat for herons.



Observing herons in the wild is as easy as visiting most any water body during most of the year, but it can be especially rewarding to observe them during mating and nesting season if you have permission, of course. If you have the right habitat and want to attract them to nest on your own property, visit www.nestwatch.org to download plans to build your own roost. On the other hand, if you raise fish or have ornamental fish, you might not be a fan of backyard heron visits. Please be advised that it is illegal to harm these birds, but there are ways to discourage them with nets or strings. You can also place a plastic drainpipe in your pond to give the fish a place to hide when the herons visit.

Both the female and male herons have what appears to be a white “beard”. In actuality it is a collection of white feathers.