



The Return of the Great Blue Heron: Summer is here!

by Katie Seraikas, Education Intern, NH LAKES (July 2011)

You may not want to admit it, or perhaps you don't even realize it, but I bet you have a relationship with a bird. New Hampshire is blessed to have a diverse and beautiful array of bird species to admire. From the small state bird, the Purple Finch, to the massive Great Blue Heron, a plethora of different species fill our ponds, lakes, trees, skies, and bird feeders, with a picturesque spectrum of colors. For many of us, the arrival and departure of certain birds indicates the end of one season and the beginning of the next. I know that many 'lake people' seek comfort in the return of the loons which signals the end of a long, cold winter and warmer, spring and summer days to come. For me, summer doesn't really start until I witness a Great Blue Heron flying gracefully over my head—I smile and say to myself, "I always forget how big they are."



Great Blue Herons have a distinctive profile.
(Photo source www.nhptv.org)

The Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) is a large wading bird. From its head to its tail, it typically measures 36 to 55 inches and weighs four to eight pounds. It can be recognized by its long, pencil-thin legs, large wingspan, blue-gray feathers on most of its body, and its dagger-like yellow bill.

If you are like me, you remember the moment when you saw a Great Blue Heron for the first time. There is something so captivating about these birds—perhaps it is their grand size, their effortless elegance of flight, or their secretive demeanor. They are neither competitive nor boisterous animals by nature—they hunt for food on their own and very seldom are seen out with a companion. They are also perfectionists—standing still in shallow water, they wait patiently for the perfect opportunity to seize their prey (which includes fish, frogs, small reptiles, and small birds). Their strategy is well-calculated and very seldom results in missed meals.

What catches most people's eyes about the Great Blue Heron is just that—typically you only notice one with your eyes. This secretive bird usually gives no indication that it is gliding over your head—no honking like a Canada Goose. It seems almost like a miracle to look up just at that moment when a heron is effortlessly gliding, and occasionally flapping, up above. If lucky enough to catch a glimpse, you will see the sky suddenly displaced by an elegant creature with a wingspan similar to that of a professional basketball player—sometimes five or six feet wide! I often wonder how a creature so big can be so quiet. A Great Blue Heron doesn't need to make its presence known through intimidating or annoying growls, whoops, or squawking.

With that said, herons can make noise—their call resembles a harsh croak—but you will most likely only hear this when you visit their breeding grounds during the spring.

Great Blue Herons have no commitment phobia, a trait some of us, and other animals, fall victim to from time to time. They mate for life, equally sharing the childcare duties, and often returning to the same nest year-after-year to raise a family. You may see a nest high in a bare tree adjacent to a pond, or a group of nests. Great Blue Herons typically live in groups of up to 50 nests (the groups are called rookeries) in remote areas. In New England, shallow waters with beaver dams are popular nesting grounds for herons as these areas are usually indicators of waters rich in aquatic life and full of food.

In late March, herons return to New Hampshire from a variety of points, and from late-April to early-May, breeding pairs lay three to five eggs. On average, an egg requires nearly one month, 28 days, of incubation. During this period, the parents take turns as incubators. While one parent is tending to the eggs, the other is granted some alone time to eat and exercise its wings. When the chicks are first born, the parents take turns feeding regurgitated food until the young can hunt small fish themselves. Chicks will stay with their parents for approximately three months as they learn to fly and hunt. After 90 days of child rearing, the parents have raised young herons that are able to fully fend for themselves.

Great Blue Herons can indicate changes in the natural world. These birds are sensitive to the loss of habitat and also habitat disturbance. If wetland areas on the landscape are converted into developed land (such as roadways, parking lots, and buildings), some herons might not be able to find enough food to feed their young. And, because pesticides and other toxic substances can accumulate in the animals they eat, herons eating contaminated prey could become ill and unable to successfully reproduce. By preserving wetland areas and reducing pollution to surface waters, we can help ensure a healthy heron population in New Hampshire for our children and grandchildren to admire for years to come.



A Great Blue Heron soaring.
(Photo source: www.wmur.com)

NH LAKES is the only statewide, member-supported nonprofit organization working to keep New Hampshire's lakes clean and healthy, now and in the future. The organization works with partners, promotes clean water policies and responsible use, and inspires the public to care for our lakes. For information, visit www.nhlakes.org, email info@nhlakes.org, or call 603.226.0299.

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