

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*

ROARING FORK VALLEY HERONS

One of the most widely recognizable wading birds in North America, great blue herons depend on quality habitat and undisturbed nesting sites to maintain their current population in Colorado. As part of its commitment to river stewardship, Roaring Fork Conservancy maintains five conservation easements in heron habitat. These easements, along the Roaring Fork and Crystal Rivers protect sensitive riparian, or riverside, vegetation including willow and cottonwood trees.

While some herons remain in the Roaring Fork Valley year-round, most migrate to southern New Mexico and Arizona, and northern Mexico in the winter. Those that migrate, return to their nesting sites in late February or early March. Courtship begins soon after and eggs are laid in late March and April. Eggs hatch in late April or May. Young herons usually fledge from the nest by late July. Herons remain in the Valley until early fall when they return to warmer climates and lower elevations.

NATURAL HISTORY

Great blue herons stand four feet high; males are slightly larger than females. Weighing between five and eight pounds, herons have a wingspan of up to seven feet. They range throughout North America from southern Canada to Mexico. Species in the southern parts of their range winter as far south as northern South America.

Herons generally prefer marshes, swamps, tide flats, shores, rivers and ponds, which are either salt-water or freshwater. In Colorado, great blue herons nest primarily along river courses from 4,000 to 9,000 feet in elevation. They frequently spend winters below 6,000 feet or in the southwestern United States and northern Mexico.

Herons are generally solitary birds except during mating season. Although herons can choose new mates each year, they are considered monogamous. Some herons occasionally break this rule while nesting in dense colonies.

Herons eat mostly fish. They stand in shallow water no higher than their chest and grab or stab fish with their bill. Fish must be eaten head first to avoid choking which can be fatal. Other food sources include: small mammals (shrews, voles, mice, ground squirrels, pocket gophers), frogs, salamanders, lizards, snakes, dragonflies, and other species' nestlings.

Herons make a deep, harsh croaking sound, frahnk, frahnk, frahnk.

BREEDING

Herons generally build their nests 30 to 70 feet high in live deciduous trees, such as cottonwoods. They rarely build nests on the ground and in shrubs. Nests are large, platforms of interwoven sticks lines with twigs, leaves, mosses, and grasses. Returning to the same nests each year, herons nest in colonies of nests called colonies. Colonies can

range in size from a few nests to more than 1,100 in one colony in the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland.

Both males and females begin courtship displays in March or April. Males change brighter in color than females during breeding months and use displays to attract females. These displays include: neck stretching and fluffing, circular flight, and crest raising. Adult herons become fertile after three years and give birth to one brood per year, usually in April or May.

Clutch sizes, which range from two to six eggs, increase with latitude. The pale blue eggs are about



Painting by Leigh Gillette

the size of a chicken egg. Both males and females turn the eggs every two hours and females incubate them during the night. In late April or May, after a 28 day incubation, young herons hatch.

Once born, the parents begin feeding young herons regurgitated fish. As nestlings grow older, they switch to whole fish. Adults will forage up to 15 miles for food for their young. Although adults will defend nests against other herons, they flee the nest and nestlings at the sight of predators. If nestlings survive competition with siblings, who often throw other nestlings out of the nest, they will fledge around mid-summer.

Nestlings fledge 56 to 90 days after hatching. The first three years of a fledgling's life are critical. Sixty-nine percent of first year fledglings die due to incompetent fishing techniques. In the second and successive years, mortality rates fall to 36% and 22% respectively. Young must contend with predators such as raccoons, hawks, snakes, owls, vultures, crows, and eagles. Adult herons have few predators and can live up to 23 years.

CONSERVATION

In the early 1900's, population levels severely declined in the United States because great blue herons were hunted for decorative feathers for women's hats. Until the 1960's, DDT and other chemicals which contaminated heron food would concentrate in heron's organs, causing thinner egg shells and lowering hatching success. In the middle half of

the twentieth century, population numbers also declined after dams were built along the Colorado river and its tributaries, which destroyed heron's natural habitat.

Today, great blue herons are threatened by loss of nesting sites, poor water quality, and poor wetland habitats. During the nesting season, human disturbance within 200 yards can cause adults to flee nesting sites and disrupts care of young. Currently, there is an estimated 2.1% increase annually in the heron population state-wide. There are estimated to be 133,000 nesting pairs in North America with about 1,600 nesting pairs in Colorado.



Great blue herons not only eat fish, but a variety of amphibians, rodents and insects.

OBSERVING HERONS

When viewing herons from February to August in the Valley, be mindful that herons flee easily from their nests. Biologists recommend limiting most human activities within 300 yards of nesting sites especially during courtship and incubation. Your cooperation with these guidelines insures a healthy Roaring Fork great blue heron population. As this population continues to grow, it will provide future generations the chance to observe this amazing bird in its natural habitat.

For more information regarding heron populations and colonies throughout the Roaring Fork Valley, contact Roaring Fork Conservancy, at (970) 927-1290, or the local chapter of the National Audubon Society, at (970) 925-7134.

*Compiled by Tim O'Keefe
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ROARING FORK CONSERVANCY

P.O. Box 3349, Basalt, Colorado 81621
(970) 927-1290 www.roaringfork.org

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