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Great Blue Heron

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This article is about the bird. For the Music Festival, see [The Great Blue Heron Music Festival](#).

The **Great Blue Heron** (*Ardea herodias*) is a large wading [bird](#) in the [heron](#) family [Ardeidae](#), common near the shores of [open water](#) and in [wetlands](#) over most of [North America](#) and [Central America](#) as well as the [Caribbean](#) and the [Galápagos Islands](#). It is a rare vagrant to Europe, with records from Spain, the [Azores](#), England and the Netherlands. An all-white population found only in the Caribbean and southern Florida was once treated as a separate species and known as the **Great White Heron**.

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Taxonomy [edit]

The Great Blue Heron was one of the many species originally described by [Carolus Linnaeus](#) in his 18th century work, *[Systema Naturae](#)*.^[2]

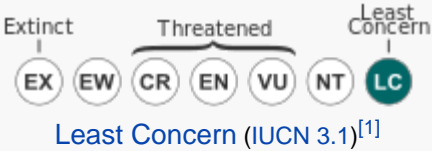
The Great Blue Heron is replaced in the [Old World](#) by the very similar [Grey Heron](#) (*Ardea cinerea*), which differs in being somewhat smaller (90–98 cm (35–

Great Blue Heron



Great Blue Heron with a catch in [Tarpon Springs, Florida](#)

Conservation status



Scientific classification

Kingdom: [Animalia](#)
Phylum: [Chordata](#)
Class: [Aves](#)
Order: [Pelecaniformes](#)
Family: [Ardeidae](#)
Genus: [Ardea](#)
Species: ***A. herodias***

Binomial name

Ardea herodias
[Linnaeus](#), 1758

Diné bizaad

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Esperanto

Euskara

فارسی

Français

Íslenska

Italiano

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Magyar

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Edit links

39 in)), with a pale gray neck and legs, lacking the browner colors that Great Blue Heron has there. It forms a **superspecies** with this and also with the **Cocoi Heron** from **South America**, which differs in having more extensive black on the head, and a white **breast** and neck.

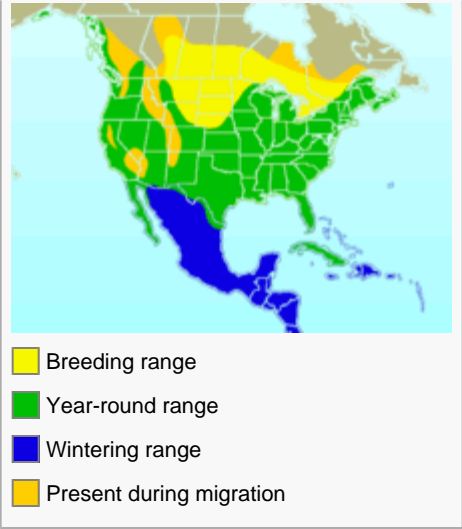
There are five **subspecies**:^[3]

- *Ardea herodias herodias* Linnaeus, 1758. Most of North America, except as below.
- *Ardea herodias fannini* Chapman, 1901. The **Pacific Northwest** from southern **Alaska** south to **Washington**; coastal.
- *Ardea herodias wardi* Ridgway, 1882. **Kansas** and **Oklahoma** to northern **Florida**. Sightings in southeastern **Georgia** have occurred.
- *Ardea herodias occidentalis* Audubon, 1835. Southern Florida, **Caribbean** islands. Formerly known as a separate species, the **Great White Heron**.
- *Ardea herodias cognata* Bangs, 1903. Galápagos Islands.

Description [edit]

It is the largest North American **heron** and, among all extant herons, it is surpassed only by the **Goliath Heron** (*Ardea goliath*) and the **White-bellied Heron** (*Ardea insignis*). It has head-to-tail length of 91–137 cm (36–54 in), a wingspan of 167–201 cm (66–79 in), a height of 115–138 cm (45–54 in), and a weight of 2.1–3.6 kg (4.6–7.9 lb).^{[4][5][6]} In **British Columbia**, adult males averaged 2.48 kg (5.5 lb) and adult females 2.11 kg (4.7 lb).^[7] In **Nova Scotia** and **New England**, adult herons of both sexes averaged 2.23 kg (4.9 lb),^[8] while in **Oregon** both sexes averaged 2.09 kg (4.6 lb)^[9] Thus, Great Blue Herons are roughly twice as heavy as **Great Egrets** (*Ardea alba*), although only slightly taller than them, but can themselves weigh about half as much as a large **Goliath Heron**.^[10] Notable features of Great Blue Herons include slaty **flight feathers**, red-brown thighs, and a paired red-brown and black stripe up the flanks; the neck is rusty-gray, with black and white streaking down the front; the head is paler, with a nearly white face, and a pair of black plumes running from just above the eye to the back of the head. The feathers on the lower neck are long and plume-like; it also has plumes on the lower back at the start of the breeding season. The bill is dull yellowish, becoming orange briefly at the start of the breeding season, and the lower legs gray, also becoming orangey at the start of the breeding season. Immature birds are duller in color, with a dull blackish-gray crown, and the flank pattern only weakly defined; they have no plumes, and the bill is dull gray-yellow.^{[3][11][12]} Among standard measurements, the wing chord is 43–49.2 cm (16.9–19.4 in), the tail is 15.2–19.5 cm (6.0–7.7 in), the **culmen** is 12.3–15.2 cm (4.8–6.0 in) and the tarsus is 15.7–21 cm (6.2–8.3 in).^{[13][14]}

The heron stride is around 22 cm (8.7 in), almost in a straight line. Two of the three front toes



are generally closer together. In a track the front toes as well as the back often show the small talons.^[15]


The subspecies differ only slightly in size and plumage tone, with the exception of subspecies *occidentalis*, which as well as normal colored birds, also has a distinct white **morph**, known as the **Great White Heron** (not to be confused with the **Great Egret**, for which "Great White Heron" was once a common name). It is found only in south **Florida** and some parts of the **Caribbean**. The Great White Heron differs from other Great Blues in bill morphology, head plume length, and in having a total lack of pigment in its plumage. It averages somewhat larger than the sympatric race *Ardea herodias wardi*. This is mainly found near salt water, and was long thought to be a separate species. Birds intermediate between the normal morph and the white morph are known as **Würdemann's Heron**; these birds resemble a "normal" Great Blue with a white head.

The theory that Great White Heron may be a separate species (*A. occidentalis*) from Great Blue Heron has again been given some support by **David Sibley**.^[16]

Voice [\[edit\]](#)

The call is a harsh croak. The heron is most vocal during the breeding season, but will call occasionally at any time of the year in territorial disputes or if disturbed.

Nonvocal sounds include a loud bill snap, which males use to attract a female or to defend a nest site and which females use in response to bachelor males or within breeding pairs.^[17] The bill snap may be analogous the territorial song of passerines.^[17] Bill clapping, the rapid chattering of the tips of the bill, is very common between paired herons.^[17]



Great Blue Heron call

Four calls of the Great Blue Heron

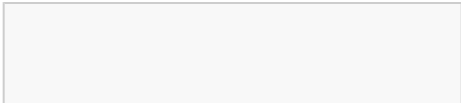
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Similar species [\[edit\]](#)

The "Great White Heron" could be confused with **Great Egret** but is larger, with yellow legs as opposed to the Great Egret's black legs. The **Reddish Egret** (*Egretta rufescens*) and **Little Blue Heron** (*Egretta caerulea*) could be mistaken for the Great Blue Heron, but are much smaller, and lack white on the head and yellow in the bill. In the southern reaches of its range, the Great Blue sometimes overlaps in range with the closely related and similarly sized **Cocoi Heron** (*Ardea cocoi*). The Cocoi is distinguished by a striking white neck and solid black crown, but the duller juveniles are more easily confused. More superficially similar is the slightly smaller **Grey Heron**, which may sometimes vagrate to the Northern coasts of North America. The Grey (which occupies the same ecological niche in **Eurasia** as the Great Blue Heron) has very similar plumage but has a solidly soft-gray neck. Erroneously, the Great Blue Heron is sometimes referred to as a "crane".

Distribution and habitat [\[edit\]](#)

The Great Blue Heron is found throughout most of North America, as far north as **Alaska** and the southern



[Canadian](#) provinces. The range extends south through [Florida](#), [Mexico](#) and the [Caribbean](#) to [South America](#). Birds east of the [Rocky Mountains](#) in the northern part of their range are [migratory](#) and winter in [Central America](#) or northern [South America](#). From the [southern United States](#) southwards, and on the [Pacific coast](#), they are year-round residents.^[3] However their hardiness is such that individuals often remain through cold northern winters, as well, so long as fish-bearing waters remain unfrozen (which may be the case only in flowing water such as streams, creeks and rivers).

The Great Blue Heron can adapt to almost any wetland habitat in its range. They may be found in numbers in fresh and saltwater [marshes](#), [mangrove](#) swamps, flooded meadows, lake edges, or [shorelines](#). They are quite adaptable and may be seen in heavily developed areas as long as they hold bodies of water bearing fish. Great Blue Herons rarely venture far from bodies of water but are occasionally seen flying over upland areas. They usually nest in trees or bushes near water's edge, often on island (which minimizes the potential for predation) or partially isolated spots.^[18]

It has been recorded as a [vagrant](#) in England,^[19] [Greenland](#), [Hawaii](#), and the [Azores](#).^[3]

Behavior [\[edit\]](#)

Diet [\[edit\]](#)

The primary food for Great Blue Heron is small [fish](#), though it is also known to opportunistically feed on a wide range of [shrimp](#), [crabs](#), aquatic [insects](#), [rodents](#) and other small [mammals](#), [amphibians](#), [reptiles](#), and small [birds](#). Primary prey is variable based on availability and abundance. In [Nova Scotia](#), 98% of the diet was [flounders](#).^[8] In [British Columbia](#), the primary prey species are [sticklebacks](#), [gunnels](#), [sculpins](#) and [perch](#).^[20] [Californian](#) herons were found to live mostly on [sculpin](#), [bass](#), [perch](#), [flounder](#) and top [smelt](#).^[21] Non-piscivore prey is rarely quantitatively important, though one study in [Idaho](#) showed that from 24 to 40% of the diet was made up of [voles](#).^[22]

Heron locate their food by sight and usually swallow it whole. Herons have been known to choke on prey that is too large.^{[23][24]} It is generally a [solitary](#) feeder. Individuals usually forage while standing in water but will also feed in fields or drop from the air, or a perch, into water. Mice are occasionally predated in upland areas far from the species' typical aquatic



Flying with nesting material in [Illinois](#), USA



Eating a small fish, the main prey.



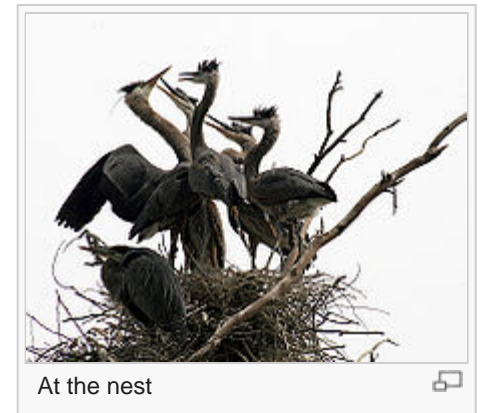
On a slow-flying glide



environment.^[18] Occasionally loose feeding flocks form and may be beneficial since they are able to locate schools of fish more easily.^[18] As large wading birds, Great Blue Herons are capable of feeding in deeper waters and thus are able to harvest from niche areas not open to most other heron species. Typically, the Great Blue Heron feeds in shallow waters, usually less than 50 cm (20 in) deep,^[18] or at the water's edge during both the night and the day, but especially around dawn and dusk. The most commonly employed hunting technique of the species is wading slowly with its long legs through shallow water and quickly spearing fish or **frogs** with its long, sharp bill. Although usually ponderous in movements, the Great Blue Heron is adaptable in its fishing methods. Feeding behaviors variably have consisted of standing in one place, probing, pecking, walking at slow speeds, moving quickly, flying short distances and alighting, hovering over water and picking up prey, diving headfirst into the water, alighting on water feet-first, jumping from perches feet-first, and swimming or floating on the surface of the water.^[18]

Breeding [\[edit\]](#)

This species usually breeds in **colonies**, in trees close to lakes or other wetlands. Adults generally return to the colony site after winter from **December** (in warmer climes such as **California** and **Florida**) to March (in cooler areas such as **Canada**). Usually colonies include only Great Blue Herons though sometimes they nest alongside other species of herons. These groups are called **heronry** (a more specific term than "**rookery**"). The size of these colonies may be large, ranging between 5–500 nests per colony, with an average of approximately 160 nests per colony.



Heronry are usually relatively close, usually within 4 to 5 km (2.5 to 3.1 mi), to ideal feeding spots.^[18] Heronry sites are usually difficult to reach on foot (e.g., islands, trees in swamps, high branches, etc.) in order to protect from potential mammalian predators. Trees of any type are used when available. When not, herons may nest on the ground, sagebrush, cacti, channel markers, artificial platforms, beaver mounds and duck blinds. Other waterbirds (especially smaller **herons**) and, occasionally, even fish and mammal-eating raptors may nest amongst colonies.^{[25][26]} Although nests are often reused for many years and herons are socially monogamous within a single breeding season, individuals usually choose new mates each year.^[17] Males arrive at colonies first and settle on nests, where they court females; most males choose a different nest each year.^[17] Great Blue Herons build a bulky stick **nest**. Nests are usually around 50 cm (20 in) across when first constructed, but can grow to more than 120 cm (47 in) in width and 90 cm (35 in) deep with repeated use and additional construction.^[27] If the nest is abandoned or destroyed, the female may lay a replacement **clutch**. **Reproduction** is negatively affected by human disturbance, particularly during the beginning of nesting. Repeated human intrusion into nesting areas often results in nest failure, with abandonment of eggs or chicks.

The female lays three to six pale blue **eggs**. Eggs can measure from 50.7 to 76.5 mm (2.00 to

3.01 in) in length and 29 to 50.5 mm (1.14 to 1.99 in) in width, though the smallest eggs in the above sample may have been consider "runt eggs" too small to produce viable young. Egg weigh range from 61 to 80 g (2.2 to 2.8 oz).^[28] One brood is raised each year. First broods are laid generally from March to April.^{[29][30]} Eggs are usually laid at 2 day intervals, incubated for around 27 days and hatch asynchronously over a period of several days.^[17] Males incubate for about 10.5 hours of each day while females usually incubate for the remainder of each day and the night, with eggs left without incubation for about 6 minutes of each hour.^[17] The first chick to hatch usually becomes more experienced in food handling and aggressive interactions with siblings, and so often grows more quickly than the other chicks.^[31] Both parents feed the young at the nest by regurgitating food. Parent birds have been shown to consume up to four times as much food when they are feeding young chicks (about 4300 kJ/day) than when laying or incubating eggs (about 1200 kJ/day).^[17] By the time they are 45 days old, the young weigh 86% of the adult's mass.^[32] After about 55 days at the northern edge of the range (Alberta) and 80 days at the southern edge of the range (California), young herons take their first flight.^[17] They will return to the nest to be fed for about another 3 weeks, following adults back from foraging grounds and are likely to gradually disperse away from their original nest over the course of the ensuing winter.^[17] Young herons are not as successful at fish capture as adults, as strike rates are similar but capture rates about half that of adults during the first 2 months post-fledging.^[17]

Predation [[edit](#)]

Predators of eggs and nestlings include Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*), Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*) and American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*). Red-tailed Hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*), American Black Bears (*Ursus americanus*) and Raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) are known to take larger nestlings or fledglings and, in the latter predator, many eggs.^{[7][33][34][35]} Adult herons, due to their size, have few natural predators, but a few of the larger avian predators have been known to kill both young and adults, including Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) (the only predator known to attack Great Blue Herons at every stage of their life-cycle from in the egg to adulthood), Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) and, less frequently, Great Horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*) and Harris's Hawks (*Parabuteo unicinctus*).^{[36][37][38][39][40]} An occasional adult or, more likely, an unsteady fledgling may be predaceously snatched by an American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) or an American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*). Using their considerable size and dagger-like bill, a full-grown heron can be a formidable foe to a predator. In one instance, during an act of attempted predation by a Golden Eagle, a heron was able to mortally wound the eagle although itself succumbed to injuries sustained in the fight.^[41] When predation on an adult or chick occurs at a breeding colony, the colony can be abandoned by the other birds, but this does not always occur. The primary source of disturbance and breeding failures at heronries is human activities, mostly through human recreation or habitat destruction, as well as by egg-collectors and hunter.^{[20][42]}

In art [[edit](#)]

John James Audubon illustrates the Great Blue Heron in *Birds of America*, Second Edition

(published, London 1827–38) as Plate 161. The image was engraved and colored by Robert Havell's, London workshops. The original watercolor by Audubon was purchased by the [New-York Historical Society](#) where it remains to this day (January 2009).

Gallery [\[edit\]](#)



Wading at Grande Lakes
Audubon Cooperative
Wildlife Sanctuary
Orlando, FL









Eating a [Common Snapping Turtle](#)
(*Chelydra serpentina*)
hatchling



Profile of the head of a
Great Blue Heron. The
sharp bill is useful for
spearing fish and frogs


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External links [edit]

- [Audubon's Great Blue Heron](#) – Close-ups from Plate 161, [Birds of America](#)
- [Great Blue Heron - *Ardea herodias*](#) - USGS Patuxent Bird Identification InfoCenter
- [Great Blue Heron Species Account](#) – Cornell Lab of Ornithology
- [Great Blue Heron videos, photos, and sounds](#) at the Internet Bird Collection
- [Great Blue Heron photo gallery](#) at VIREO (Drexel University)

 Wikimedia Commons has media related to [Ardea herodias](#).

 Wikispecies has information related to: [Ardea herodias](#)

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