



Alan Vernon/Flicry

Great Blue Heron

How can a great blue heron be distinguished from other birds?

The great blue heron is a large iconic bird of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. The body of the great blue heron is long and narrow covered in grayish feathers. They have a long grayish neck that can help identify them when they are flying. Its head consists of a large black “eyebrow”, yellow to red eyes, and a very long bill with at least some yellow to it.

What do great blue herons eat?

The diet of the great blue heron consists mostly of fish - any species large enough that it can catch and eat. Blue herons have also been known to eat amphibians, reptiles, invertebrates, small mammals, and even small birds. Their diet is not picky and they eat basically anything that they can swallow.

What predators do great blue herons have?

Crows and raccoons eat great blue heron eggs. Raccoons, hawks, eagles, and raccoons occasionally prey on adults and chicks. However, in general great blue heron adults are not commonly preyed on due to their large size and the lack of many large predators in North America.

Where do great blue herons live?

Great blue herons are found in most of North and Central America. They are found in almost all parts of the lower 48 states, coastal Central America, northwest South America, the Galapagos, and stretching up the pacific coast all the way to south central Alaska.

Do great blue herons migrate?

Some great blue herons, depending how far north they breed, do migrate. However the great blue herons that we have in the Mid-Atlantic are year round residents of the area. The birds do however leave their nesting sites when breeding is over, and they move back to being independent in their normal habitats.

At a Glance

Scientific Name: *Ardea herodias*

Body Length: 63 inches

Wingspan: 72 inches

Weight: 4-6 lbs.

Avg. Lifespan: 15 years

Diet: mostly fish, but will also eat amphibians, reptiles, and invertebrates

Habitat: swamps, marshes, rivers, lakes, almost anyplace with fresh to brackish water

Reproduction: lays 3-5 pale blue eggs

Incubation Period: 25-29 days

Nestling Period: 60 days



Photo by Ian Plant



Great blue heron eggs

How do great blue heron raise their young?

Great blue herons select new mates every year, laying 2-7 eggs. These eggs are then incubated approximately 28 days until hatching. The young are then fed for around 60 days in the nest by both parents. Once the chicks are able to fly they leave the nest, however they still rely on their parents for food for a few more weeks until they can properly hunt on their own.

Are great blue heron endangered?

The great blue heron is listed as least concern due to its generally large range and large population. The species is also highly adaptable, allowing it to eat a diverse amount of food. The only major threat to all blue herons in general is nest disturbance. In many parts of the U.S. large amounts of noise near a nesting colony can cause the birds to abandon their nests. Also the increase of predatory birds, like bald eagles, from raptor introduction programs, leads to more harassment and preying on chicks. Many groups have now been trying to help great blue herons by stopping the destruction of their habitats, and attempting to establish safe and secluded nesting locations.

Fun Facts

- There are five confirmed subspecies of great blue heron, the one that we have locally is *Ardea herodias herodias*.
- Great Blue herons almost always swallow their prey whole!
- Heron is from *hairon* in old French meaning long necked, long legged wading bird, but in multiple other language it is possible it came from the word(s) to cry or shriek. This is referring to its croaking call.
- Although great blue herons have a different mate every year, they only have one mate unlike some birds who breed with multiple other birds every year.
- The great blue heron is the largest heron in North America.

Questions?

Contact us at info@chesapeakeconservancy.org

Sources:

http://www.birdweb.org/birdweb/bird/great_blue_heron#
<http://www.arkive.org/great-blue-heron/ardea-herodias/>
http://www.biokids.umich.edu/critters/Ardea_herodias/
http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=heron
<http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/birds/great-blue-heron/>