



Graceful Great Blue Heron

When it stands perfectly still near the shoreline, it looks like a graceful statue • When it swoops over the water, it looks like a prehistoric pterodactyl • The graceful great blue heron is a beautiful sight for its human admirers, but a terrifying sight for its prey



The great blue heron is the largest bird native to Ohio, at an average of 4 feet in height, with a wingspan of six feet • Herons are long-legged wading birds, and they make themselves at home near large lakes, small ponds, wide rivers or small streams

Great Blue Hunter

The great blue heron's body is perfectly adapted for fishing and catching wetland critters • It has excellent eyesight and a long flexible neck • Its long, sharp beak is more than six inches long, and a lethal weapon • Unlike other shore birds that swoop in or make a big splash when hunting their underwater prey, the great blue heron likes to watch and wait • The heron stands very still, usually on just one of its long thin legs, and peers into the water until it sees a fish • With amazing speed and force, the heron bends its curved neck and plunges its beak into the water to stab the fish • Great blue herons are also happy to dine on frogs, snakes, dragonflies, and small mammals that live near lakes and streams

Family Life

Although they hunt alone, great blue herons are social nesters • They make their nests high in trees near shallow water areas in large groups, called colonies • The heron colony, also known as a heronry, may include up to 75 nesting pairs making their homes in a few large trees

Great blue herons are native to North America and Canada, and found all over Ohio during the summer, but they migrate to Central or South America during the cold winter months • They come home to breed in late February or early March

Great blue herons are monogamous, meaning the male and female stay together through the breeding season • The female lays 2 to 7 eggs in the cozy nest • Both the male and female work together to guard the nest and incubate the eggs by gently sitting on them • The heron breeding season occurs from late March to mid-April, and it takes about 28 days before the eggs hatch • By May, the baby great blue herons have arrived!

After hatching, the chicks are helpless and depend on their parents for food • Both the mother and father feed the chicks by chewing up and swallowing food, like fish, and then regurgitating into the babies' mouths • After about two months, the young birds are big and strong enough to leave the nest

Great blue herons typically live 15 to 20 years in the wild • Adult great blue herons have few predators, but the eggs and chicks may be snatched up by a hungry raccoon, turkey vulture, eagle or red-tailed hawk brave enough to get close to the nest and the heron's protective parents • An entire heron colony may abandon their nests if a chick or adult is killed there by a predator

Heron Heroes

Native Americans admire the great blue heron for its beauty and lifestyle • The blue feathers symbolize a connection to the sky, as well as peace and tranquility • The heron's ability to balance on one leg, and stand strong and still as it hunts, is a symbol of patience, self-reliance, and the skill to stand alone • Although they are powerful birds, great blue herons seldom fight each other, and the harmony of the colony makes the great blue heron a symbol of harmony

This month, plan a visit to your local Ohio State Park so you can observe the graceful great blue heron • Look for nests high in the trees along the lakeshore or river bank • Look for herons hunting in the shallow water close to the shore early in the morning, or at dusk • They will be standing very still, so you need to look carefully • Stay quiet, be patient, and keep your distance and you may get to see the great blue hunter in action!

Photos from left to right: **Great Blue Heron** in the Muskingum River (*photo courtesy of Phillip Bohn*) • **Nesting Pair** grooming each other (*photo courtesy of Al Freeman*) • **Great Blue Heron** posing for the camera (*photo courtesy of William Henry*) • **Great Blue Heron** spearing a fish (*photo courtesy of Erik Brummer*)

