

Great Blue Heron

(*Ardea herodias*)



Relatives

Member of the Family Ardeidae which includes other herons and bitterns.

Description

Has a grayish-blue body, white head with black stripe over the eye, large yellow beak and a long black plume crest off the head.

Size

45-54in (115-137cm)

Can weigh 5-6lbs (2.5kg)

Habitat

Found in marshes, swamps, on the edge of lakes, river, and mangroves. Typically found anywhere near water.

Predators

Young are eaten by red-tailed hawks, ravens, bald eagles and raccoons. Adults are occasionally eaten by alligators.

Diet/Prey

Mainly feed on fish, but will also feed on other animals found in or near the water such as frogs, salamanders, snakes, shrimp and insects.

Reproduction

Breed in small colonies or pairs. They mate in trees and form nests in heavily wooded swamps and river bottoms made of dead sticks, leaves, grass and Spanish moss all "glued" together with guano (feces). Nesting occurs from March through May where 3-7 eggs are then laid in April-May. Incubation period is about 28 days.

Adaptations

- Great blue herons have two, large feet. Each foot has four toes that are widely spread. This "toe arrangement" distributes the weight of the bird across more area and thus allows the bird to walk on top of muddy surfaces (this same principle was used to create effective snowshoes for humans).
- Great blue herons have large, feathered wings that enable flight.
- Great blue herons have pointed beaks that they use to grab and stab prey.
- Great blue herons grow to very large sizes. As adults, their large size makes them too big to be eaten by many predators.
- Great blue herons can stand incredibly still (a behavioral adaptation). These birds feed by standing completely still and then strike at their prey with their bill. They also wade through the shallow waters stirring up prey with their feet.
- Great blue herons have long necks that they can extend to strike prey. These birds have 15-17 vertebrae in their necks (humans have seven).