

BIRD OF THE MONTH

By Ben Long

Big and Glamorous Great Blue Heron

The Great Blue Heron is one of those big, glamorous birds that delight both the novice and the expert birder alike. Not everyone appreciates the different phases of the dark-eyed junco, or can distinguish the calls of treetop warblers, but everyone can appreciate the Great Blue Heron.

First off, they are *big*. The largest of herons, they are nearly four feet long and have a wingspan of seven feet, which makes them hard to miss. Even at that size, Great Blue Herons weigh only about five pounds, built light for flight. Males are somewhat larger than females, but look similar. (At least to those of us who are not Great Blue Herons.)

Great Blue Herons are foragers, patiently stalking swamps, stream banks and lakeshores, wading on long, sticklike legs. You often see them standing stone-still in quiet waters. They snap their long, snakelike neck to grab frogs, fish, crawfish, mice and other morsels. The bill looks like a dagger but pinches the birds' prey, never stabbing it. (They have died from choking themselves by trying to swallow fish that are too big.)

Mature Great Blue Herons are slate-grey overall, with a blue wash over the body and wings. Those sweeping wings are tipped in dark primary feathers. Adults have a plume off the back of the head. A fringe of feathers where the neck joins the body adds to its showy airs.

In flight, herons are distinctive by slow, steady wing-beats. Legs trail straight behind them; their neck is crooked in an "S." In flight at a distance, they can be mistaken for Bald Eagles and Sandhill Cranes, all of which may be expected in similar habitats. But look closer. The eagle, of course, lacks those long, trailing legs. The crane points its neck out straight, not crooked in an "S."

The heron is more closely related to storks,

ibises and flamingos. Other members of the heron family are bitterns and egrets. There is an all-white "morph" of the Great Blue Heron common in the Florida Keys but which has never been recorded anywhere near Montana.

Hérons are vocal. In flight, they have a deep, hoarse "fraaaahnk" or "braaak," which also helps distinguish them from airborne eagles and cranes.



Photo by Karen Nichols from her backyard!

Great Blue Herons are widespread in North America, south of the Arctic in both fresh and salt-water environments. They are mostly solitary but do join together to nest in rookeries to provide better protection for vulnerable young. These rookeries can number in the hundreds and in the Flathead there are rookeries of dozens of pairs. Nests are massive platforms of sticks 4 feet or more across. In the Flathead, the birds seem fond of nesting in streamside galleries of black cottonwood trees. They tend to lay 3-7 eggs at

a time, incubating them for 28 days sometime between March and May.

Young herons are the picture of awkward adolescence, with loud voices, ungainly necks and limbs and unruly plumage. Yet they generally fly within two months of hatching and abandon the nest around three months.

Some Great Blue Herons linger around the Flathead Valley all winter, where there is open water and enough food to support them. Most follow their instincts and open water when fall weather freezes their favorite haunts.

Before long, the birds will be flying around North America on seasonal migrations, topping speeds of 30 miles per hour. With luck, each will live ten years or so, or perhaps even break the record age of 21 years, delighting people all the way.