

GREAT BLUE HERON Nesting Colony

at **HOLLAND PONDS Park, Shelby Twp.,MI.**

GREAT BLUE HERON Colony. . . .A Delicate Place

The tall, long-legged Great Blue Heron is the largest of the North American herons. Great Blue Herons are waders, typically seen along coastlines, in marshes, or near the shores of ponds or streams.

They are expert fishers. Herons snare their aquatic prey by walking slowly, or standing still for long periods of time and waiting for fish to come within range of their long necks and blade-like bills.

Though they are best known as fishing birds, mice, Chipmunks, Frogs, Baby ducks & Geese, also make up part of their diet.

Great Blue Herons' size (3.2 to 4.5 feet) and with their wide wingspan (5.5 to 6.6 feet) they are a joy to see in flight. They can cruise at some 20 to 30 miles an hour. The Heron usually holds it's neck in an "S" curve at rest and in flight.

Great Blue Herons hunt alone, but typically prefer the safety of a Colony while nesting. In this part of Michigan most Herons build their nests in tall trees near or overhanging water in some way. This is part of their protection from predators. Their Feces is very "acidic", and will kill the leaves on a tree quickly. This makes it hard for Raccoon and other tree climbing predators, to get up to their nests and kill their youngsters, without being noticed. Farther north in Michigan, Herons will build their nests on the shorelines of small Islands, directly on the ground or in low shrubs.

Females produce two to seven eggs, which both parents protect and incubate. Once the eggs have hatched, both parents spend most of their time feeding the youngsters. One parent remains at the nest, while the other searches for food. When one returns with food, the other parent leaves in search of food. The growing youngsters require a tremendous amount of food because they grow so quickly.

The mortality rate is very high amongst the youngsters. Out of the up to 7 eggs that are layed, only 2-3 young Herons survive, and are Fledged from a nest. Sixty-nine percent of new born Herons, once out of the nest, will die in their first year. Two of the oldest known Herons have lived 23 years.



Male & Female Herons are very hard to distinguish from one another.



The young Herons are very awkward and clumsy birds. That quickly changes, and they become very agile



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HOLLAND PONDS Heron History



The Great Blue Heron nesting Colony started at the Park, in 2003, with just a few nests, in what is called the front Heronry. Those are the nests closest to Ryan road. Little by little, more nests were built, while others were lost. The nesting trees are subject to high winds and severe weather conditions. The acidic feces the Herons spread on the trees, around the nests, to control the leaves and foliage, also weakens the tree itself, making it vulnerable to high winds and bad weather conditions.

In 2008, the Herons started building nest in what is called the rear Heronry. This new nesting area is located at the far southern and western end of the park, and is close to the Clinton river. As the older nesting trees in the front Heronry have fallen or been damaged by weather, more and more new nests are being built in the newer rear Heronry.

At the close of the nesting season of 2012, there were 24 active nests in the front Heronry and another 18 nests in the rear heronry. That has changed drastically this year in 2013. because of high winds and heavy rains undermining the nesting trees in the front Heronry, that part of the nesting Colony has lost over 12 active nests. This is a HUGE loss to the nesting Colony as a whole. With a lack of any more suitable nesting trees in the front Heronry, it is up to the growth of the rear Heronry to keep this nesting Colony healthy and active.



A Nest that had fallen from one of the Trees after all the Herons had left in the Fall was examined in detail.

The Nesting season for the Herons runs approximately from March 1st, through the end of August. This varies depending on seasonal temperatures and other weather conditions. The Youngsters are Fledged from the nests at different times starting in July and running through the end of August and even September.

At the end of the 2011 nesting season a wind storm had knocked down one of the nests and it was caught some 10 feet off the ground by a smaller tree, otherwise the nest would have disintegrated upon impact with the ground. Volunteers managed to retrieve this nest from its 10 foot perch off the ground. Upon close examination it was found to be a poorly built nest, with twigs and branches just layed upon one another and not interwoven. The inside of the nest was barren except for some pine needles and evergreen branches at the very bottom of the nest. The entire inside and outside of the nest was covered in Heron feces, making it a bacterial nightmare, while the acidic waste deteriorated the nest itself. Just some slight picking at the nest to examine it closer, caused it to completely fall apart. The whole experience was not a pleasant one.



HOLLAND PONDS PARK

LEGEND

- Main Roads -
- Park Trail/road -
- Restroom -
- Picnic Shelter -
- Benches -
- Fences -
- Observation Dock -
- Cattails/Swamp -
- Pine Trees -
- Hardwood Trees -
- Heron Nests -

HOLLAND PONDS is a Shelby Twp. park, operated by the Burgess-Shadish Nature Center. The park is located just north of 22 mile rd. on Ryan road.

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