

THE VILLAGE BIRDING LIFE

“The Majestic Great Blue Heron”

by HSV Audubon

The Great Blue Heron (GBH) gets our nod as the most impressive bird in the Village. After all, it's pretty hard not to notice a long legged four foot tall bird with a six foot wing span- almost as wide as an eagle's. GBHs, the largest of all U.S. herons, are in the family of wading birds along with the egrets, ibises and a few other heron species. Some non-birders may call them cranes or storks but these are completely different families. We find GBHs year around in Arkansas and most parts of the U.S. However, they are migratory visitors in Canada, Mexico and regions of the Rocky Mountains.

GBHs seldom stray far from water. Look for them foraging in the shallows of our Village lakes, ponds and creeks. It's not unusual to see them perched in a tree near the water. Occasionally you may even see them soaring high above like an eagle.

GBHs utilize a variety of hunting techniques ranging from standing motionless for long periods of time to rushing through the water “herding” a school of minnows. No matter what style they use, the hunt is finished with a lightning quick thrust of their spear-like bill. While fish are the mainstay of the GBH's diet, they eat whatever they can catch and swallow whole. This includes frogs, mice, snakes and other birds. Small prey are snatched with their bill; larger prey are speared and pecked into submission. Adult GBH need only be wary of Great Horned Owls, Golden Eagles (very rare in Arkansas) and, of course, armed people with adolescent mentality. Immature birds in the nest are threatened by hawks, crows, raccoons, etc.

Although GBH tend to be solitary as they hunt, they nest in groups called rookeries. The stick nests usually are built in tall trees in isolated areas and may be used year after year. However, when the environment requires it, GBH will nest in bushes or even on the ground.

Occasionally a Villager will report seeing a white GBH on their lake. What they are seeing is a long legged relative of the GBH- a Great Egret. Note, however, that there actually is a white morph species of GBH but these are found only in south Florida and a few places in the Caribbean.

As always HSVBIRDS.ORG has a lot of information about everything you'd like to know about birds and some of Nature's other wonders. HSV Audubon meets the 2nd Friday of each month, except in the summer, at 10:00 at the Coronado Center. Guests are always welcome.

Photos by Vic Prislipsky