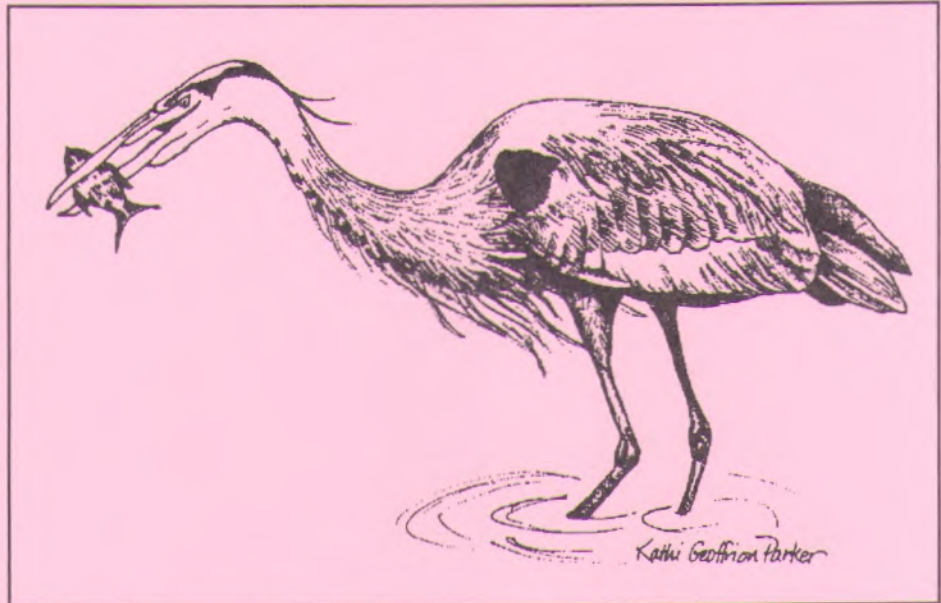




WILDLIFE NOTES

GREAT BLUE HERON

She waits by the shore, her sharp eyes searching for food, her large body motionless on stilt-like legs. The tuft on the head, the long bill and the bluish-gray body all identify her as a great blue heron (*Ardea herodias*). When you approach too close, and she flaps her long wings and flies into a tree, you can be sure this is a spectacular bird indeed.



Great blue herons are large-bodied, from 40 to 50 inches tall. Their black crown extends backward in a 10-inch plume over each eye. Their heads are black and white; their bodies are bluish-gray. Look for a black shoulder patch with a smaller cinnamon patch just behind it. Their breasts and bellies are black with white streaks. The two sexes are alike in color, but females may be 10 percent smaller than males.

During the breeding season, the yellow iris of the eye reddens; the yellowish bill turns orangey red; and the dark legs flush pink or scarlet. Once eggs are laid, these colors fade.

These birds stand patiently in shallow water or slowly stalk their prey of fish, amphibians, crustaceans, reptiles, birds, insects and small mammals. Their cry is much like a "grak" but they are often silent. They are wary and cautious, ready to take flight when disturbed, flying with slow strokes of their long wings, their legs extended behind them.

Look for great blue herons along swamps, lakes, streams and ponds. The species is widespread in North America, from New England across southern Canada, across most areas of the U.S. and even down to Panama during migration. During breeding season, you may be fortunate to see a courtship display of dancing. Several birds may strut and jump into the air.

They will choose tall trees, bushes, rocky areas and even the ground for nest sites. They build a large nest of sticks and twigs that the male collects, but which the female assembles. A clutch will vary from three to seven eggs, pale bluish-green or olive. The birds may lay eggs in late April in the northern part of their breeding range, early February in the south. Both sexes help incubate the eggs for 28 days.