

Portland's Icon: The Great Blue Heron

DURING A 1986 SPEECH that mayor Bud Clark gave at the downtown Hilton ballroom, he described seeing great blue herons gliding by skyscrapers on his canoe outings. Afterward, I approached him about declaring the heron Portland's official city bird. Bud shouted a couple of his signature "whoop, whoops," and two weeks later he issued a proclamation before city council—the great blue heron became the city's official bird.

While adopting an official city bird may sound frivolous, the process led to the annual Great Blue Heron Week, when Friends groups and government agencies pay tribute to the heron. Ever since, Portland's mayor has read, and the city council has approved, a new proclamation with numerous clauses establishing why Portland cares that herons live in our midst. The annual proclamation ends with city commitments to undertake habitat acquisition, restoration, and management during the coming year to protect and improve heron habitat and, by extension, fish and wildlife habitat generally throughout the city. More recently, Metro has followed Portland's lead, proclaiming what will be done at the regional scale to improve conditions for herons and all of the species that share their habitat along the region's rivers, wetlands, and streams.

Soon after Clark's initial proclamation, Bridgeport Brewpub created Blue Heron Ale, ArtFX Murals installed a seventy-foot-high great blue heron mural on the west-facing wall of the Portland Memorial Mausoleum, and Oregon's poet laureate, William Stafford, uniquely captured the philosophy that nature belongs in the city with his poem "Spirit of Place."

Great blue herons are one of our most charismatic megafauna. They're the largest heron in North America and impossible to miss, standing over three feet tall, with a wingspan over six feet. No animal, save perhaps the salmon, is so iconographic a representation of nature in the Pacific Northwest as the great blue heron. Its image is everywhere: blue heron ale, blue heron cheese, blue heron condominiums, blue heron streets, even blue heron music festivals.

Ardea herodias, also known as "big cranky" or "shite poke," may be statuesque and beautifully adorned, but it is no melodic songster. Its call, especially when startled, is at best, a raspy harsh croak that it shouts as it flies off, neck tucked into a loose S-shape.

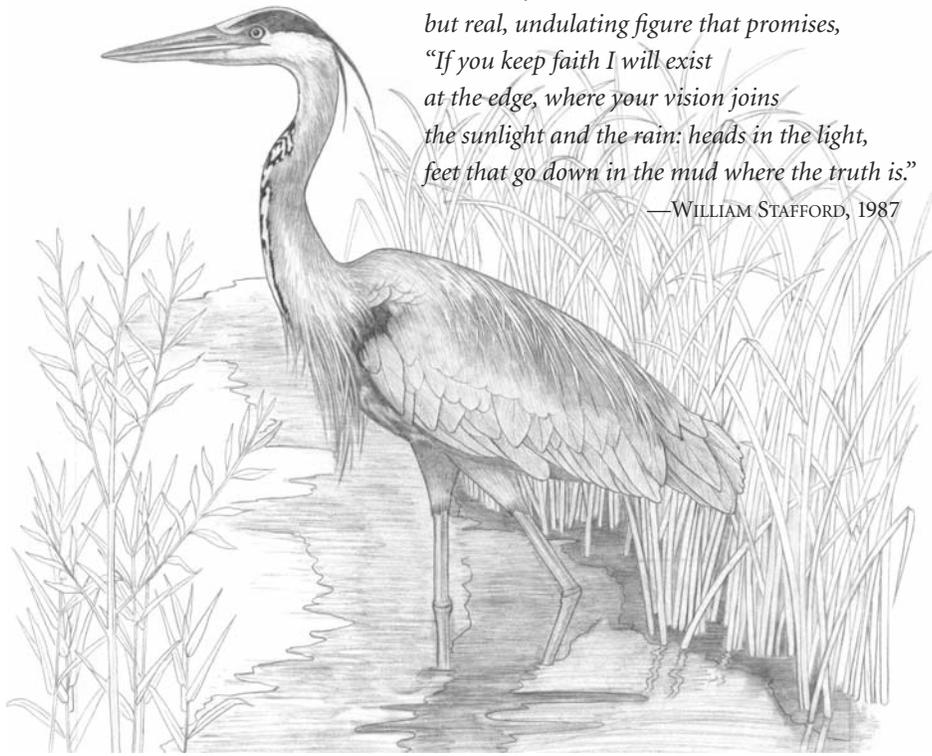
The great blue's feathers are slaty-blue, with reddish "shoulder patches," its breast streaked with black and white vertical stripes. The heron's head is light colored with two black plumes coming off its crown and draping across its back. Long white plumes also extend down the neck. During breeding season the bill changes color from a dull

SPIRIT OF PLACE: GREAT BLUE HERON

*Out of their loneliness for each other
two reeds, or maybe two shadows, lurch
forward and become suddenly a life
lifted from dawn or the rain. It is
the wilderness come back again, a lagoon
with our city reflected in its eye.
We live by faith in such presences.*

*It is a test for us, that thin
but real, undulating figure that promises,
“If you keep faith I will exist
at the edge, where your vision joins
the sunlight and the rain: heads in the light,
feet that go down in the mud where the truth is.”*

—WILLIAM STAFFORD, 1987



yellow to a brighter yellow-orange, and additional white nuptial plumes flow down its back.

Great blue herons are found from Alaska to South America, and across the United States. While herons migrate from colder climes in the Midwest and Northeast, they live year-round in the Pacific Northwest. In our region herons can be found virtually anywhere there is water, from the smallest tributary to the Willamette and Columbia Rivers.

Hérons are the ultimate eating machines, trying anything they can stab or snap up with their long, killer bill. There's an account of a heron piercing a two-inch-thick canoe paddle with its dagger-like bill. While they primarily eat fish, it's not uncommon

to see herons stalking small rodents in grasslands around Portland International Airport or farm fields on Sauvie Island. I've watched great blues spear huge carp in the open pond at Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge and then take a half hour positioning the fish so that the fins won't lodge in their throats. The herons then perform a neat flip, taking the carp head first into their gullets, but it takes a long time for the fish to make it down their throats.

Spotting the Great Blue

Hérons nest in colonies throughout the metro area, the largest ones being along the Columbia Slough near the St. Johns Landfill, Jackson Bottom Wetlands, Heron Lakes Golf Course, and Goat Island near West Linn. Numerous smaller colonies can be seen on Ross Island, Koll Center Marsh in Beaverton, and along Rock Creek off NW Evergreen Parkway in Hillsboro. New nests are rickety-looking stick platforms, usually in black cottonwood or sometimes in Douglas fir. In older colonies the nests look more substantial, although even these look incapable of holding the three or four young that will eventually fledge at adult size.

If you arrive at an active colony in mid February, you'll have the opportunity to watch mated pairs bonding with one another through ritualistic neck stretches, bill snapping, and tugging over nesting materials, which are usually small branches gathered from the ground by the male and presented to the female. While herons reuse the previous year's nests, they do not necessarily return to the same nest in the colony.

Great blues are serially monogamous, choosing a new mate annually. In our region they lay three to five light blue eggs in mid to late April, after which both female and male incubate—females at night and males during the day, for about one month. It takes six weeks or so before the young approach adult size and start beating their wings, preparing to fledge. Before fully fledging, they become “branchers,” venturing in forays to nearby limbs where they flap their wings vigorously, building up strength for their first flight, which comes at about eight weeks. If you want to see young herons at their most raucous—they are incredibly boisterous as parents return to the nest with food and each young bird vies to get as much food as it can gobble down—visit a heronry late May to mid-June. (They sometimes fledge as late as early July, but more often by mid to late June.)

Once fledged, the young will sometimes continue to fly back to the nest, where they are fed by the adults. Eventually, they leave the colony and can be seen around the region hunting for fish and rodents on their own. They are easily distinguished from the adults by the lack of plumes and their dull, gray bill.

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