



## Blue-listed species

are considered vulnerable because they have characteristics that make them particularly sensitive to human activities or natural events.

# The Great Blue Heron

## *Ardea herodias*

### **At a Glance**

The Great Blue Heron is a very large bird, growing to over one metre in height. It has blue-grey body feathers, a white head, a yellow bill and a black stripe above each eye. Adults have a black crest. Younger birds are more evenly grey and have no crest. During the breeding season, long plumes at the base of the neck give adults a "hairy-chested" appearance. Because of its size and long neck, the heron is easy to tell apart from most other B.C. birds. The Sandhill Crane looks somewhat similar, but it has an unmistakable red crown. In flight, the heron usually curls its neck back against its body, while the crane holds its neck straight out.

### **Home Sweet Home**

Heron are colonial nesting birds, which means groups of them nest close together in a colony or heronry. Generally they prefer to nest in high trees, 20 to 50 metres above the ground, where they are safe from most predators. However, they are adaptable birds and have been known to nest low down in mangrove swamps, sagebrush or bulrushes, on top of channel markers floating in the water, and even on the ground on remote islands. In B.C., they usually nest in forests and woodlands. Some heronries here have as many as 200 nests in two hectares of forest. One tree may contain many nests.

Like crows and some other birds, Great Blue Herons build their nests out of sticks, but theirs are much larger than crows' nests. Nests may be added to year after year and used many times, although not usually by the same birds. Some colonies are occupied continuously for many years. Often, however, the birds move to a new site after a year or two. They may return to an old colony some years later.

### **This is the Life**

Great Blue Herons lay three to five eggs in April or May. The eggs hatch in about 27 days.

Within two months, the young birds are able to fly. Herons living in the wild can reach at least 23 years of age.

### **What's on the Menu?**

You may have seen herons wading in shallow water in the ocean or in estuaries, rivers, marshes, lakes or ditches. This is where they find their favourite foods, such as small fish up to 30 centimetres long. Other items on the menu include crayfish, crabs, frogs, salamanders, snakes and large insects. Occasionally they catch mice and voles in farm fields, especially in the Lower Mainland. The heron uses its long, powerful bill to grab its prey. Big fish are sometimes stabbed after they have been caught.





# BRITISH COLUMBIA'S Wildlife at Risk

## NO KIDDING!

*Standing 135 centimetres high, the biggest Great Blue Herons are taller than many Grade 3 students. However, they weigh only 2 to 3 kilograms, about the same as a small newborn baby.*



*Sometimes herons overestimate their capacity. They have been known to choke to death on large fish!*



*Great Blue Herons are not very good housekeepers. Nests often end up cluttered with droppings, leftover food and even dead chicks.*



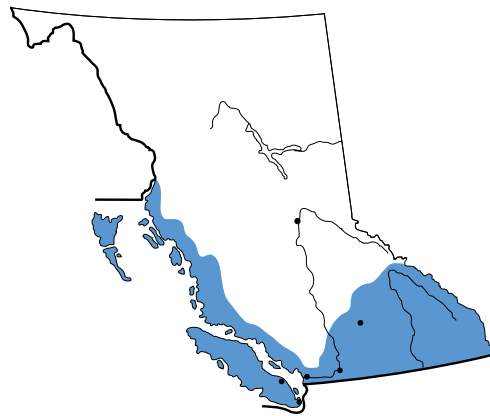
*When herons catch voles and mice, they swallow them whole. They can digest the bones, but not the fur. That gets spit up in pellets, similar to the pellets that owls produce.*



*Because its main call sounds like "frank," this bird is known in some places as "Old Frankie." As well as the "frank" call, you may hear herons clucking, snapping their beaks or mooing like a calf!*



■ **Present range of the Great Blue Heron in British Columbia**



## Where and When

The Great Blue Heron can be found almost anywhere in southern Canada and the United States, except in high mountain areas and dry deserts. It also lives in Mexico and Central America. In British Columbia, it is seen all year round along the coast and in the southern interior. A few birds travel farther north for the summer after the breeding season. About 5000 to 6000 herons live in B.C.

## How They're Doing

Although the Great Blue Heron is commonly seen in parts of B.C., its numbers are decreasing. The main reason is human activity. Most of B.C.'s human population lives in the heron's favourite areas – the coast and the southern interior. This makes it hard for herons to find undisturbed sites for nesting. The presence of humans as far away as 200 metres from a colony can cause the birds to abandon it. Sometimes, however, they become used to people. Herons have been nesting in Vancouver's busy Stanley Park for over 75 years.

Because of the Great Blue Heron's sensitivity to human activity and its declining population, it has been placed on B.C.'s Blue List of vulnerable species.

The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) has designated the Pacific Great Blue Heron as Vulnerable.

## How We're Helping

Great Blue Herons, their nests and their eggs are all protected by the British Columbia *Wildlife Act* and by the federal *Migratory Birds Convention Act*. Their nest trees are also protected year round, on both public and private land. Guidelines have been drafted to help landowners avoid harming or disturbing herons. Cooperative stewardship programs are also being planned. To help safeguard this species, land managers are asked to protect feedings areas, such as marshes, estuaries and fields, that are located near heron colonies. They should also avoid logging close to heronries, because this may disturb the birds. If possible, they should leave groups of large trees standing near existing colonies, so the herons will have a choice of nest sites in the future.

## How You Can Help

If you find a Great Blue Heron colony, check at the nearest Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks office to see if they already know about it. If it is a new site, they will take steps to protect it, if possible. Be careful not to go near colonies, especially from March to late June. This is the most sensitive period for herons and any disturbance could cause them to abandon their eggs.

*You can find out more about the Wildlife Branch and Conservation Data Centre at:*

<http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/wild/>

**Conservation Data Centre**  
Resources Inventory Branch  
Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks  
P.O. Box 9344 Stn Prov Gov  
Victoria, B.C. V8W 9M1

**Wildlife Branch**  
Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks  
P.O. Box 9374 Stn Prov Gov  
Victoria, B.C. V8W 9M4



**BRITISH COLUMBIA**

Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks

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