

Citizen science guide to the GREAT BLUE HERON, *Ardea herodias*



Photo by
Michael
Chapman

The Great Blue Heron is North America's largest heron and a Montana avian species of concern. While herons nest in colonies, or rookeries, along major waterways, often in mature cottonwood galleries, Breeding Bird Survey data indicates that populations have declined every year from 1966 to 2015. A number of factors may be affecting the population's decline, including the decline of riparian cottonwood stands, increased urban sprawl and human disturbance, or changing conditions of the waterway. As conditions change, it is not uncommon for herons to abandon their nests and establish elsewhere. As a result, they may move to more remote and undisturbed areas making population monitoring difficult. To better track this iconic species, Montana Audubon has partnered with the Montana Natural Heritage Program to improve and support greater statewide inventory and monitoring.



A distant rookery, by Janice Miller

- Nesting is colonial: rookeries contain few to dozens of nests
- Nests are large: ~3-4' across and 1-2' deep
- Nests high in the canopy, rarely on wetland islands
- Nests primarily in cottonwoods or ponderosa pine



Juvenile herons, by Janice Miller

Species Description: The Great Blue Heron is large and majestic with a slate-gray to blue body, long sinuous neck, yellow bill, and striking black eyebrow that extends back to long plumes emerging from its crown. Very tall, and with an average wingspan of 6', the adult stands at a striking 3', though weighs only 5-6 pounds. In flight, wingbeats are slow, and wings are held slightly arched, while the neck may be extended or held close to the body. In flight, the blue of the back contrasts with darker toned flight feathers. Overall the blue color and large stature are unique, making the bird unmistakable. Herons are well adapted to their water-based habitats: Their long legs allow them to hunt in deep water or along shallow shores, and their special neck vertebra allows the neck to curl into an "S" shape for a quick strike at prey. Their diverse diet consists of fish, amphibians, reptiles, or small mammals. Nestlings grow quickly and may be visible as early as three weeks after hatching (see image below).

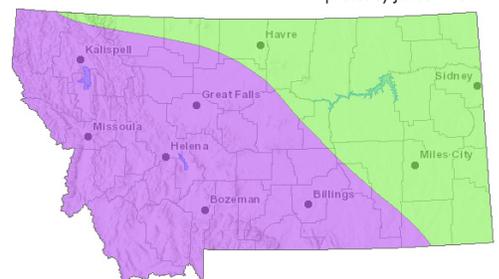
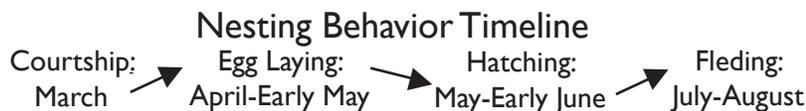


Courtship behavior

- chest puffing & bill dualing
- exchange of nesting material
- shared nest building (up to 2 weeks!)
 - shared preening



Courtship and Nesting photos by Janice Miller



Year-round

Summer

To participate, please contact:
Amy Seaman, aseaman@mtaudubon.org, 406-210-9449 or
Carmen Borchelt, carmen@mtaudubon.org or 406-443-3949