

## Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*



**Folk Name:** Big Blue Crane, Old Crank

**Status:** Resident

**Abundance:** Fairly Common to Common

**Habitat:** Lakes, rivers, ponds, wetlands, marshes

The Great Blue Heron is the ubiquitous heron found on rivers, lakes, ponds, and wetlands throughout the Carolina Piedmont. It is a resident heron that most everyone knows by sight, if not by name. It is both our most common heron and our largest heron, and, as its name suggests, it is grayish-blue-gray in color in all plumages. This statuesque bird stands about 46 inches tall, making it one of the tallest birds found in the region. In the 1917 edition of *Our Bird Book*, which was an official science text for North Carolina primary schools, students were advised the Great Blue Heron could be easily identified because it was the only bird “tall enough to eat from a table without stretching his neck.”

Great Blue Herons were recorded every month of the year in this region during the late 1800s and early 1900s. They were noted as especially common in the summer. In 1905, ornithologist H.C. Oberholser reported this heron nesting on “larger streams” in “western” North Carolina, but we have no confirmation of breeding in this region from that period.

One of the earliest accounts of a Great Blue Heron in the region was published in the *Mecklenburg Times* on August 28, 1897:

72 inches from tip to tip. ...Mr. H.C. Sims, who lives near Charlotte brought to the city this morning one of the finest specimens of the blue heron yet seen here. The bird was caught this morning on Barnett Creek, three miles from the city, and he was caught alive and was uninjured when captured. Mr. Sims brought the bird to the News office where it was measured. From the end of his bill to his feet he measured fifty-six inches and was even taller with his neck fully extended. ...It is a powerful bird and has a bill that plays havoc with everything in reach.

Another early account was chronicled on the evening of September 19, 1929. William McIlwaine took his son for a sunset walk along the shore of the Catawba River and recorded his special experience in his journal:

Still later as the shadows were deepening and a silent dimness was settling over the broad river, I saw—just saw—a great blue heron (He looked all black.) flapping his rhythmic way leisurely over the water, not more than six feet from the surface. I



gave my glasses to my little boy. He said, “Daddy, was he just like a shadow?” And he was. And in a few moments he was lost in the deeper shadows on the banks of the river. A pair of belated doves flew near, and on into the haze, and night was upon us.

McIlwaine’s son grew up to be a pilot. He was shot down and lost during World War II.

In North Carolina in 1977, the Great Blue Heron was listed as a Species of Special Concern along with our other colonial nesting herons and egrets. As a group, nest colonies of these wading birds had been severely impacted by man and breeding populations remained low. There was widespread concern about their long-term nesting success in the state.

Fortunately, the Great Blue Heron began to make a comeback by the late 1980s, possibly due in part to the



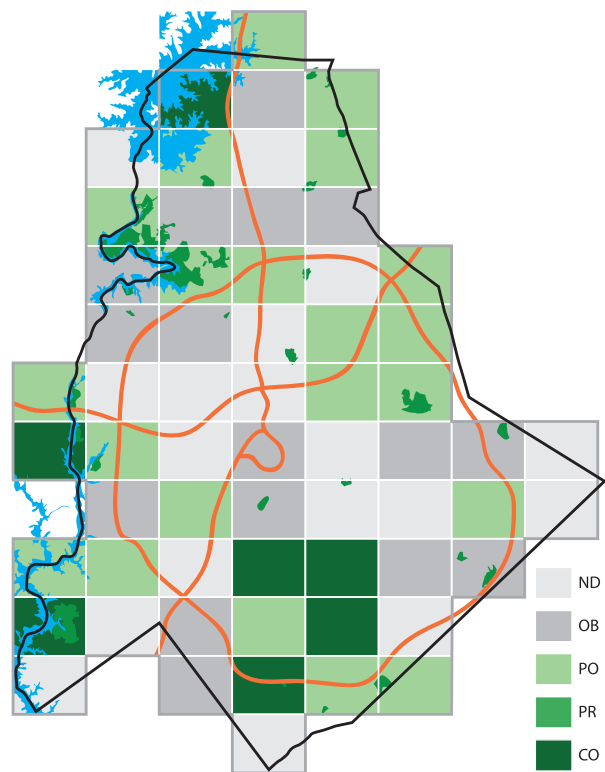
*Great Blue Heron building nest in Charlotte. (Will Stuart)*

reintroduction of the American Beaver and an expansion of beaver-created wetlands. This birds' status was soon downgraded to a Watch List species: "rare to uncommon" but "not necessarily considered to be declining or otherwise in trouble." Finally, in 1999, the Great Blue Heron was removed from North Carolina's Watch List.

In the spring of 1991, biologists discovered what were billed as the first Great Blue Heron nests ever confirmed in the Piedmont of North or South Carolina. Ken Knight, a wildlife biologist with the North Carolina Wildlife Commission, located about four nests placed high in the treetops above a beaver pond on Clarks Creek in Cabarrus County, just yards east of the Mecklenburg County line. About the same time, James Parnell discovered "18 to 20 active nests in a swamp east of Salisbury, near High Rock Lake, during an aerial search for eagle nests on 17 March 1991."

By 1998, there were 24 nests counted at the Clarks Creek site, and nests had been discovered as far west as Clemson in South Carolina. Around 1996, Great Blue Herons established a rookery on Davidson Creek Island in Lake Norman, about 10 miles to the northwest of the Cabarrus rookery. The colony grew to 30 nests within just a few years, and Duke Power worked with the North Carolina Wildlife Commission to formally declare the site a "Colonial Waterbird Nesting Area," making it off limits to boaters from April through August. By the turn of the twenty-first century, nest colonies were confirmed expanding south along the Yadkin-Pee Dee River corridor and at several sites along the Catawba River corridor.

In 2001, staff with the MCPRD began a formal survey of colonial waterbird nesting sites in the greater Charlotte region to help document this breeding expansion. Over the next decade, staff performed over one hundred site surveys, mapped nest locations, estimated nest numbers, and recorded young. They also assisted North Carolina Wildlife Commission staff with aerial surveys and ground truthing of rookery sites. During this period nest sites



### Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

*Local (PR/0, CO/7)*

increased from 4 in 2001 to at least 48 in 2009. Great Blue Heron rookeries are now found in almost every Piedmont county east of the mountains. Today, the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program tracks only heronies with at least 10 nests.

Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers documented nest building underway as early as mid-January and young hatching in late March or early April.