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Great Blue Heron

February 2015

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Great Blue Heron

If you have spent any time along one of Idaho's lakes, rivers or streams, you have probably met a great blue heron. This bird's name can help you identify it. It is called great because it is so tall—about the size of a third grader. Blue comes from this bird's blue-gray feathers. Heron refers to the group of birds to which the great blue heron belongs.

Some other things you will notice about great blue herons are their long beaks, long necks and long legs. These features help this bird catch its food. Fish and other aquatic animals are favorite foods. Having long legs makes it easier to wade into deep water to find food. The long neck allows the heron to reach farther to catch food. It also allows the bird to strike at food with lightning speed. The long beak is used for grasping slippery prey.

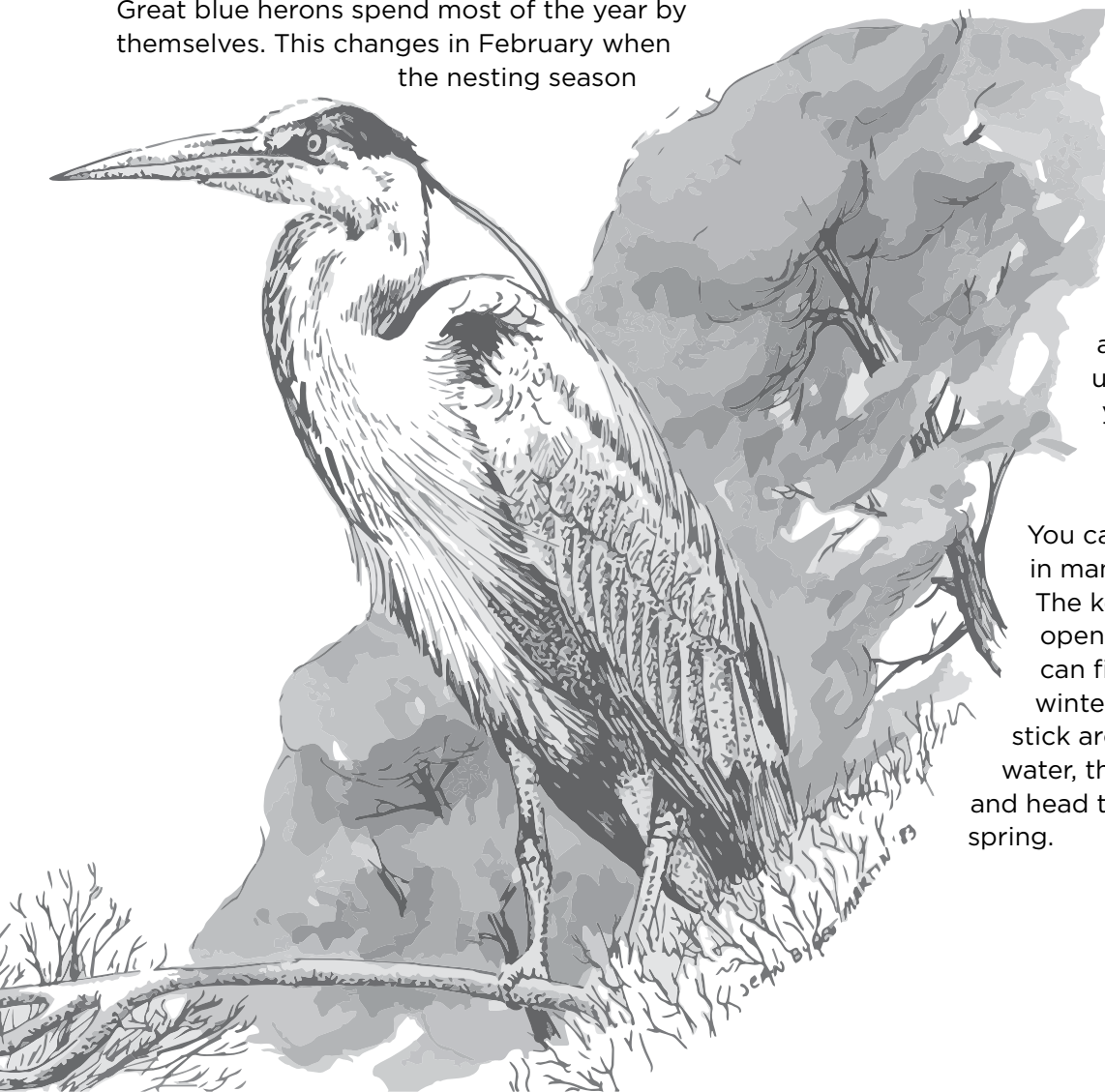
Great blue herons spend most of the year by themselves. This changes in February when the nesting season

begins. In late winter, the herons grow special long beautiful feathers called nuptial (NUP-chew-al) plumes. They display these plumes to make themselves look big and impressive. This helps a heron claim a territory and attract a mate.

Heron nest in groups called a heronry. They build their stick nests high up in large trees. Often a heronry is used by the birds for many years. Some heronries can have hundreds of nests. Great blue herons might build a new nest or fix up an old one. The male gathers sticks and the female builds the nest. Two to six pale blue eggs are laid by mid-March. Both parents incubate the eggs and feed their nestlings. Young herons grow fast! Two weeks after hatching, they can leave the nest and perch on nearby branches. This is why they are often called branchers.

Many heronries can be found on small islands. The surrounding water helps keep away predators that can climb, like raccoons. Any predator trying to climb into a nest tree is in for a nasty surprise. Parents and young herons will throw up and poop on intruders—yuck! But it works, and predators usually learn their lesson.

You can find great blue herons in many parts of Idaho all year. The key to spending the winter is open water. If great blue herons can find open water in the winter, then they will probably stick around. If ice covers the water, then the herons will leave and head to southern Idaho until spring.



Wading Birds

Great blue herons belong to a group of birds called wading birds. This includes herons, egrets, bitterns, ibis and flamingoes. More than 65 different kinds of wading birds are found all over the world, except in Antarctica. Eighteen live in North America and seven of these live in Idaho. Our largest wading bird is the great blue heron. It is four feet tall. The smallest heron in the world is the little bittern. It is only a foot tall and lives in Africa and parts of southern Europe and Asia.

Wading birds can be found just about anywhere they can find water. Lakes, streams, rivers, marshes, and swamps are just a few places where wading birds live. They are all carnivores. Fish, amphibians, reptiles, crayfish, snails, worms, clams, small mammals like mice and voles and even small birds are eaten by wading birds. Scientists have observed over 30 different feeding behaviors these birds use to catch food. Some of them wade to scare fish from shelter. Others shade the water with their wings to see better and attract prey. A few wading birds even use bait! They place things like insects, twigs and flowers on the surface of the water to attract their meal.

Wading birds have a neat adaptation to help them stay clean and dry. Specialized feathers called powder down grow on the chest and sides of wading birds. These feathers grow constantly. The ends of these feathers fray into a powdery substance like baby powder. A wading bird will rub this powder onto its feathers with a special fringed claw on its middle toes. Powder down makes living in wet places a little easier.

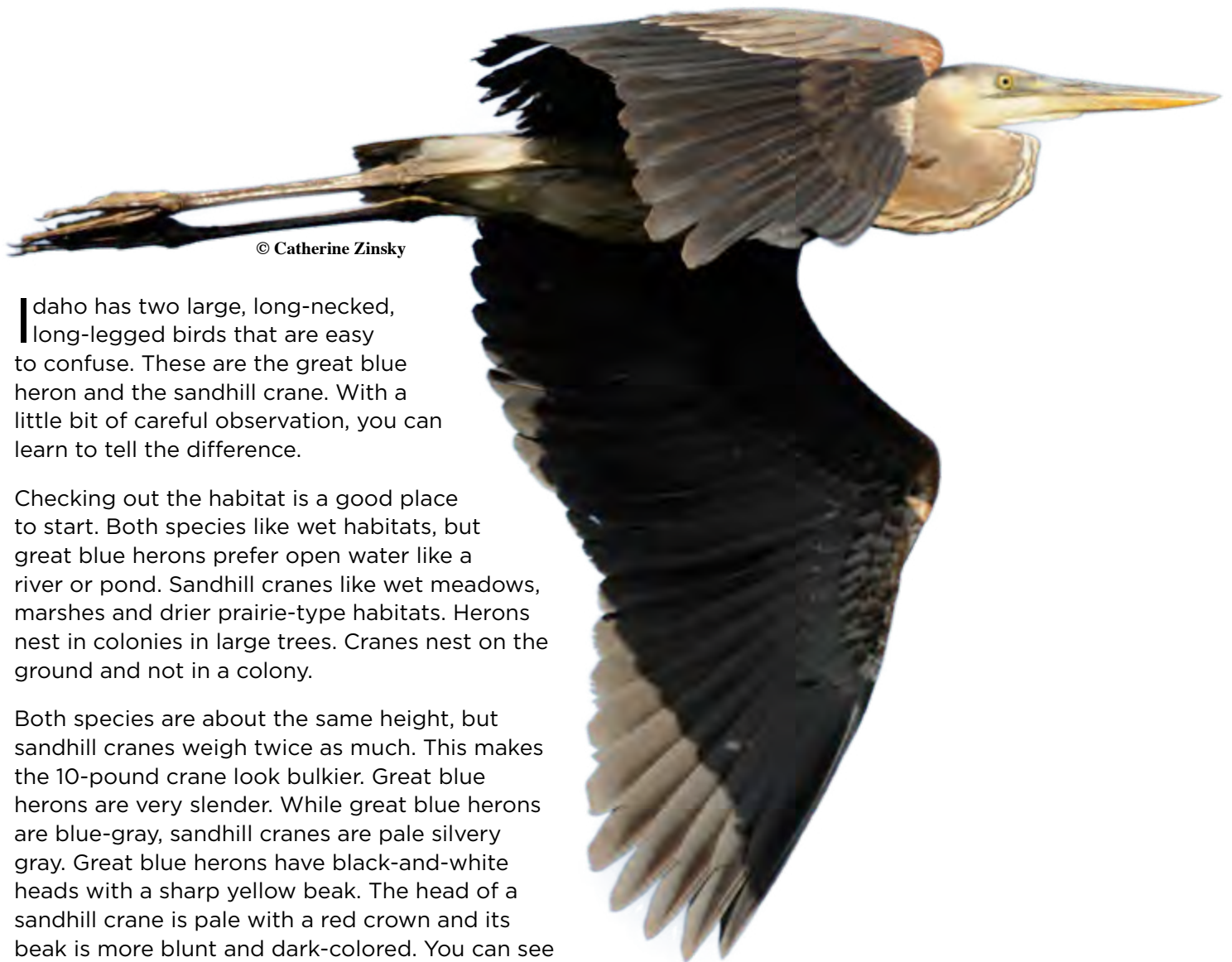
Another cool adaptation is a wading bird's long neck. Often, the neck is held in the shape of an "S." When a wading bird flies, its neck is not extended. Instead, the neck looks like it is coiled up. This makes flying easier. A modification to one of the bird's neck bones causes this "S" shape. If you feel the back of your neck, you can feel your bones. They help you hold your head up and let you move your head around. These bones let wading birds do the same thing but they also allow the birds to strike quickly to capture food.

Most wading birds nest in colonies. In some places, several different species will nest in the same colony. Hundreds of nests of different species of heron can be found in some colonies, especially in the southern United States. Overall, wading birds are important indicators of the health of wetlands. A healthy population of wading birds means a healthy habitat.

White-faced Ibis



Crane or Heron?



© Catherine Zinsky

Idaho has two large, long-necked, long-legged birds that are easy to confuse. These are the great blue heron and the sandhill crane. With a little bit of careful observation, you can learn to tell the difference.

Checking out the habitat is a good place to start. Both species like wet habitats, but great blue herons prefer open water like a river or pond. Sandhill cranes like wet meadows, marshes and drier prairie-type habitats. Herons nest in colonies in large trees. Cranes nest on the ground and not in a colony.

Both species are about the same height, but sandhill cranes weigh twice as much. This makes the 10-pound crane look bulkier. Great blue herons are very slender. While great blue herons are blue-gray, sandhill cranes are pale silvery gray. Great blue herons have black-and-white heads with a sharp yellow beak. The head of a sandhill crane is pale with a red crown and its beak is more blunt and dark-colored. You can see a big difference when you see these birds flying. Great blue herons fly with their neck coiled against their shoulders. Sandhill cranes fly with their long neck stretched out. Additionally, herons are usually alone while cranes frequently fly in pairs or flocks. The final thing to do is listen. Herons are usually quiet, but when they make a sound it is a loud croaking “FRAWWWNK.” Sandhill cranes are known for their bugling calls. It’s a sound that carries for many miles and is often given in flight.

Next time you see one of Idaho’s long-necked, long-legged birds, check it out. With a little practice, you will be an expert at identifying the great blue heron and the sandhill crane.



photo from USFWS library

It's February and that means Valentine's Day. What are you giving your favorite valentine? How about a stick, pebble or a dead mouse? How about a little showing off with some fancy clothes or a special dance? You could try making loud humming, popping or hooting noises. No? This might not impress your valentine, but in the bird world, it's just like sending cards and flowers.

Courtship is serious business. It helps males establish a territory and attract a mate. In the spring, we hear courtship all around us when we hear birds singing. These male birds are telling other male birds that this territory is taken. They are also asking the females, "Hey baby, wanna nest with me?" Along with singing, most male birds have colorful feathers in the spring. These are also part of the courtship display. While great blue herons do not have brightly colored feathers, they grow nuptial plumes and their beak turns orange.

Displays and dancing are also part of courtship for some birds. Members of the grouse family are well-known for their courtship dances. Great blue herons do a special stretch display. During this display, both the male and female stretch their heads and necks straight up into the air, with their beaks pointing up. This is often followed by bill snapping. Male herons also give the female a stick as part of his courtship.

Courtship is not just for the birds. Many other kinds of animals engage in courtship. Think about a bugling elk in the fall or frogs singing in a pond in the spring or even crickets chirping. These are all types of courtship displays—no cards or flowers required!

A Heron Valentine



Great Egret in Courtship Display

By Andrea Westmoreland from DeLand, United States [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Bird Beaks—Tools of the Trade

Bird beaks come in many shapes and sizes. You can think of a bird's beak as a special tool for a specific job. Think about the long, dagger-shaped beak of a great blue heron. It is perfect for catching and holding slippery prey. In fact, most fish-eating birds have long beaks with sharp edges like pincers for grasping.

The basic structure of all bird beaks is the same. They are bony jaws covered with a layer of skin. This skin is usually hard and horn-like. In birds like ducks and sandpipers, the outer skin is leathery. This skin is made up of several layers. The outer layer is made of dead skin. It gets worn away as the bird uses its beak. Living layers underneath renew the outer dead layer. The tip of the beak grows almost constantly, but is worn down with use.

The shape of the bill can tell you a lot about what a bird eats. Hawks, eagles and owls have hooked beaks that help them kill and tear apart prey. The extra-long beak of a hummingbird is perfect for getting nectar out of long, tube-shaped flowers. Birds that eat insects usually have long, slender beaks almost like tweezers. This lets them probe into places where insects hide. The long beaks of sandpipers let these birds search for food buried in the sand. Seed-eating birds, like sparrows, have cone-shaped beaks that can crack seed shells to get out the seed inside. Some of these birds are called grosbeaks because of their huge nutcracker-like beaks. One of the strangest beaks belongs to the crossbills. The top and bottom part of the beak crosses over at the tip. This allows crossbills to open pine cones to get the seeds inside.

Beaks can also be a part of courtship displays. The house sparrow that we see in our yards has a yellowish beak that turns black during the spring. The robin's beak turns from brown to yellow during the breeding season. And the great blue heron's beak goes from yellow to orange.

Because a bird's beak is so important, birds are careful to clean their beaks. This is especially true if the bird eats messy foods like a gooey insect or mouse. Many birds clean their beaks by bill-wiping. This involves wiping their beak on a twig, grasses or other surfaces. Birds like doves use their feet to clean their beaks. Ducks and other water birds clean their beaks by taking a bath and wiping their wet beak on their feathers. A bird keeping its beak clean is just like you keeping a tool clean—it will work well when you need it.



Not to scale

By original by Shyamal modified by Jeff Dahl (Own work) [CC BY-SA 2.5 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5>)], via Wikimedia Commons

BE OUTSIDE— Heron Watch



look at the adult birds to see if they have nuptial plumes. You might even get to see them use their plumes in a display to other herons. As the weeks go by, you will observe a lot of activity at the nests. Keep taking photos or making drawings and jot down notes about what you see.

February is a great time to observe the start of the great blue heron nesting cycle. With the leaves off of the trees, it is much easier to spot the large stick nests high up in the treetops. Search for heronries in tall trees growing near a river or on an island in a lake.

When you first start observing a heronry, only a few herons will be perched near the nests. As the season advances, more and more herons will arrive. Make a drawing or take a photo of the heronry. Do this from the same spot once a week and compare your drawings or photos. What changes? Look for birds bringing sticks for nest building. Use binoculars to get a close-up

When you are observing, make sure to be a good wildlife watcher. While you want to be close enough to see what is going on, you want to make sure not to disturb the birds. Use binoculars to get close-up views. Stay in one spot and sit very quietly. Binoculars, pencils, drawing paper, a camera, snacks and some water are good things to have with you. February and early March can be cold, so dress warmly. Remember to tell an adult where you are going. Better yet, bring your family with you and teach them how to be good wildlife watchers. Together, you can enjoy observing and learning about some of your wild neighbors.



Great Blue Heron Word Search

L K C O U R T S H I P H D H K
O G R L I I B S E I E J R A C
N C D L C Z W G O M E W E T V
G H R C O J H K N B U B K L H
N H I P N N H Z N B R L D G J
E R B C R D G S Z E M B P H M
C L G Q E E K L G W L Y S O Q
K J N H T M J G E U V I B R H
W Z I H A U A U E G F F R M G
G O D C W D V G Q J S G A E Q
Z L A J B Y R N O R E H B H X
M W W Z T A E I H D M G G A O
W Y S Q Y M X T D O G A I A X
G G R Y N R B H G K K V G Z Y
J G M L I J L W H C L L B N M

WORDS

BLUEGRAY
COURTSHIP
DAGGER BEAK
FISH
HERONRY
LONG LEGS
LONG NECK
PLUMES
WADING BIRD
WATER

WILDLIFE EXPRESS

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Lead Writer: Vicky Runnoe **Layout:** Kelly Kennedy Yokoyama **Contributors:** Lori Adams, Adare Evans
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For more information, call or write:
Wildlife Express, Idaho Fish and Game
PO Box 25, Boise, ID 83707

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adare.evans@idfg.idaho.gov

