



## Great blue herons

*Great blue herons are the most widespread North American heron and can be found from Alaska to northern South America. In Utah, they are the most commonly seen heron species, and they live throughout the state, typically near lakes, rivers and marshes.*

### Physical characteristics

Adult great blue herons stand about 4 feet tall — with a wingspan of 6 to 7 feet — but they only weigh 5 to 6 pounds. They have blue-gray plumage and a distinctive S-shaped neck that's perfectly designed to coil and strike at their intended prey.

Hérons also have special chest feathers that continually grow and fray into a powdery substance. Using the fringed claw on their middle toe, they comb this powder through their feathers, cleaning and protecting them from the fishy oils and slime found in the wetlands.

### Habitat and diet

Great blue herons live in both freshwater and saltwater habitats, as well as in grasslands and agricultural fields.

The heron is a carnivore and will eat nearly anything it can strike with its long sharp beak. Herons mainly feed on fish, but amphibians, reptiles, small mammals and even other birds are also on the menu. Meals often include snakes, frogs, turtles, voles and mice.



## Reproduction and nesting

Great blue herons nest mainly in trees, but they will also nest on the ground, in bushes and on artificial structures like telephone poles. (You can see them seasonally on the nesting platforms outside the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources' George S. and Dolores Doré Eccles Wildlife Education Center.)

Herons nest in colonies (sometimes also called rookeries or heronries). The male collects nest materials, bringing them back to the female, who weaves the nest to her liking. Nest building can take anywhere from three days to two weeks. Herons often reuse their nests, so after multiple years and modifications, a nest can reach up to 4 feet across and 3.5 feet deep.

Herons are known for their courtship displays, which sometimes include elaborate greetings, stick transfers and a ceremony in which the birds raise their plumes and tap their bill tips together. Great blue heron pairs typically stay together throughout the breeding season, but they will choose new partners the following year.

Great blue herons lay between one and seven eggs each year, and both parents alternate incubating the eggs for 25 to 29 days. Young herons can typically fly after two months, but they will sometimes remain near the nest site for up to five months.

## Artificial rookery

The artificial rookery at the Eccles Wildlife Education Center was built in partnership with Rocky Mountain Power. The structure was repaired in 2022, expanding from 18 to 33 platforms. This artificial rookery was built to help keep the herons off of nearby power transformers. Great blue herons typically arrive at the rookery in February and stay until the end of June.

### Did you know?

- Male and female herons work together to feed their young. They have excellent, specialized vision and can hunt day or night.
- Great blue herons can fly 20–30 miles per hour.
- The oldest recorded great blue heron was found in Texas — it was at least 24 ½ years old.

