

## Great Blue Heron

As we become more advanced in our birdwatching we can grow jaded about common birds that live in our neck of the woods. I have certainly been guilty of this. It depends on the type of birdwatcher you are, but it can be easy to take the more familiar birds for granted. I'm often humbled a bit when I observe participants on my bird walks get very excited about what might be considered a run-of-the-mill bird.



Across North America, one of the more common birds is the elegant great blue heron. It's an expected sight along the shores of almost any body of water, and it's even common to see them atop a pelagic kelp-bed, hunting the local sea life. Beyond their natural association with water, herons will patrol farm fields and even mountain meadows for small animals. They seem to have a particular eye for the gopher population in our area, much to the delight of local landowners.

Hérons deploy a lethal combination of unwavering patience punctuated with explosions of precisely placed energy. They will slowly tighten up their posture to create a powerful spring, tipped by their lance-like beak. They can stand motionless for an eternity, waiting for the right moment to spear a unsuspecting passerby with lightning speed.

One of those instances in which my blasé approach to this species was instantly challenged was during a bird walk I led. We were traveling a trail near one of the local lakes, which ran along a mature cottonwood stand. In a flooded clearing among the trees, we were able to see a heron standing conspicuously among the reeds. At the big end they can be as tall as four and a half feet, so they're hard to miss. We peered through our binoculars and the situation we observed was hard to decipher at first. It became clear, though, that this heron had bitten off a little more than it could chew. He had a firm grasp on a gopher

snake, many feet in length, but the snake also had a firm grasp on him. Gopher snakes are non-venomous constrictors that help keep our local rodents in check. Much like a boa, they will grab and then wrap themselves around prey until they have suffocated the small animal.

The snake was using its powerful muscles as a defense, wrapping itself around the heron's beak, head and neck. They were at something of a stalemate, and ironically the snake's powerful squeeze was further clamping the heron's beak on itself. As each animal adjusted, the other responded in kind. The snake could have easily suffocated the big heron if given the opportunity to wrap itself firmly around its airway. After several minutes of watching this struggle unfold in front of us, the heron was able to cast its opponent to the ground and dispatch it with a series of well placed jabs. The snake was dead, but now came the task of devouring the oddly proportioned animal. After lightly tossing its prey into the air a few times, the heron found the right angle to swallow the entirety of the slain serpent in one gulp. This was all so he could have breakfast — which kind of puts things in perspective!

This daily predator-vs-prey relationship exists all around us, 24/7. I've personally witnessed herons feeding on the snakes, crayfish, small fish, gophers, huge bass, bullfrogs and even small birds. On occasion we even hear of them in backyard ponds, depleting a small water feature of its expensive koi.

Hérons can be found any day of the year in Prescott, and you can even observe them from a distance in nesting settings. Herons nest together in small communities called rookeries. This is similar to cormorants and egrets, other species that can be found nesting in close proximity to one another. These scenes are generally filled with loud squawks, screeches and various guttural noises.

Awkwardly developed juvenile herons bounce around the trees until they learn to use their wings, littering the ground with the leftovers of recent meals. It really is a spectacle! Unfortunately, many of young birds perish before they ever reach water. During times of drought, their first walk to the shore is an extended gauntlet of exposure to coyotes, big cats and human activity. Still, enough make it to carry on the species.

Scan the shoreline of any of our lakes and you're almost certain to see a heron lurking along the water's edge. If you're fortunate enough you may see them driving through the air on slow, powerful wingbeats, trailing their lanky legs behind. Enjoy them, but, as our region rapidly changes with all avian species grappling to keep up, don't take them for granted. Happy Birding!