

## Great Blue Heron

*Ardea herodias*

The Great Blue Heron is widely distributed in North America, breeding from southern Canada to Mexico. Most Great Blue Herons winter in the southern half of the U.S. (particularly along the coast), throughout the Caribbean, and in northern South America. They winter in large numbers along the Atlantic Coast as far north as Massachusetts. Some birds linger into the early winter in Vermont, and recently there have been reports of birds wintering or attempting to do so in the western part of the state along rivers such as the Batten Kill, which often remain partly open (RVB, Winter 1976-77). The first northbound Great Blue Herons arrive in Vermont in mid March, and most have departed southward by mid November, although in most years some linger into December at the Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge (RVB 1973-83; T. Mountain, pers. comm.).

Historically, little has been written about the species in Vermont. Perkins and Howe (1901) stated that "it is not an uncommon bird in the wilder parts of the state, especially in the vicinity of Lake Champlain." Spear (1976) referred to a rookery on Valcour Island in Lake Champlain (in New York State) and mentioned that Great Blues nest in different regions of the state, not necessarily near water.

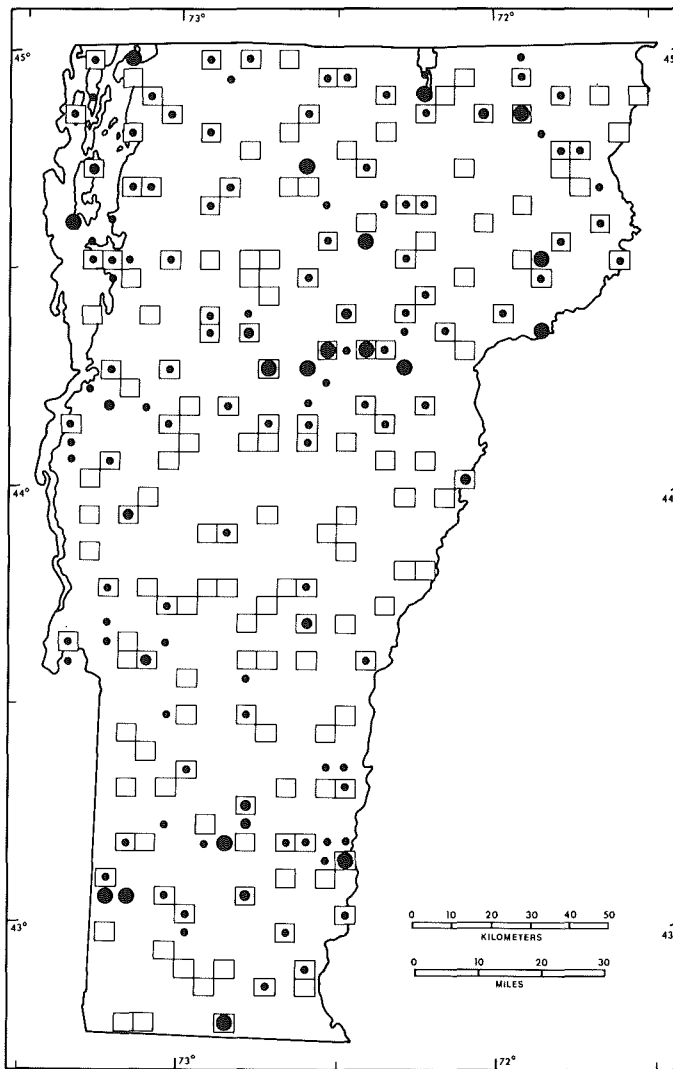
This bird inhabits waterways—marshes, swamps, streams, and lake shores—and is widely distributed in Vermont. Great Blues are local breeders and will not tolerate much disturbance, particularly during initiation of breeding. The rookeries are generally situated in wooded swamps; the nests are platforms of sticks, usually located in tall, deciduous trees. Some nests may be found a good distance from water, on wooded hill-sides or cliffs.

Vermont nesting data are scant, as heronries are frequently in remote places and difficult to locate. Confirmations, though reported from all seven physiographic regions,



were relatively few. Most reports were of possibles, many of which undoubtedly were nonbreeding individuals, late or early migrants, postbreeding wanderers, or breeding birds flying between feeding grounds and the rookery, which are occasionally up to 16 km (10 mi) apart (Krebs 1974). The distribution of nesting Great Blue Herons shows no particular pattern, although there was an absence of confirmations across central Vermont. Suitable feeding habitats, such as lakes, beaver ponds, marshes, swamps, and rivers, are abundant statewide.

Nesting sites included Brighton, where a nest was discovered being built on a mountainside at about 518 m (1,700 ft) on May 10; Groton State Forest, where 6 to 10 pairs with nestlings were located at about 610 m (2,000 ft) on June 20; and Victory, where 27 nests contained 57 nestlings. Vermont nesting dates range from June 15 to July 30 (three dates). Fledglings out of the nest were seen in early July 1981 at Cobb's Marsh, South Londonderry. The largest Vermont Great Blue Heron rookery is on Shad Island in the Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge. This rookery, first discovered in 1943, has been active intermittently since then. Systematic nest and nestling counts began in 1979. The number of active nests increased from approximately 160 in 1979 to 290 in 1983; the average number of nestlings per nest ranged from 2.2 (1979) to 2.7 (1983); and estimates of the total number of young



**No. of priority blocks in which recorded**

TOTAL 88 (49%)  
 Possible breeding: 72 (82% of total)  
 Probable breeding: 10 (11% of total)  
 Confirmed breeding: 6 (7% of total)

**Physiographic regions in which recorded**

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	22	71	25
Green Mountains	22	41	25
North Central	12	63	14
Northeast Highlands	9	56	10
East Central	8	42	9
Taconic Mountains	5	31	6
Eastern Foothills	10	42	11

herons produced each year ranged from 360 (1979) to 785 (1983) (Nissen, unpubl. rept.). Bull (1974) reported New York nesting data: egg dates range from April 15 to June 9, and nestling dates from May 24 to July 17. Of 75 New York nests, 40 contained 5 eggs; the range was 3 to 6 eggs per nest.

These herons, like all wildlife species, will suffer if their breeding and feeding areas are not protected. Firewood cutting could threaten woodland heron rookeries; maintenance of wetland habitat is crucial. This species was on *American Birds'* Blue List in 1980 (Arbib 1979) and in 1981 (Tate 1981); in 1982 the *American Birds* report consid-

ered Great Blue Heron populations stable, but human disturbance at or near nest sites poses a constant threat, and the species is still listed on *American Birds'* Blue List as a Species of Special Concern (Tate and Tate 1982). McCrimmon (1982) suggested that reforestation of agricultural land increases the available nesting habitat for nesting Great Blue Herons. At this time Great Blue Heron populations appear to be stable in Vermont.

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