

The Migration and Distribution of the Great Blue Heron (*Ardea Herodias Herodias*) in Illinois

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In this paper I will discuss the migration of the Great Blue Heron, with special emphasis on the record in the Quincy region, and some flight maneuvers of migrating flocks of this bird. Under distribution, I will discuss the location of nesting colonies in West-Central Illinois and some of the habits observed there.

The average date of the first record in the spring for the Great Blue Heron is March 16, with March 10 being the earliest and March 23 the latest. I have one record of a track made in a light snowfall on March 22.

My records for the fall are not so complete, due to the fact that the opening of the duck shooting season drives the herons south earlier than usual.

Near sunset, on October 22, 1935, there was a southward flight of Great Blue Herons along the Mississippi River near Quincy. As I sat among the willows along the river, I observed eight small flocks flying southward. The size of the flocks varied from two to sixteen, with an average of four. The flight formation of flocks of seven or more was a V. The flight formation of smaller flocks formed only one side of the V. That is, a straight line oblique to the line of flight.

I also observed a very interesting flight maneuver. As the Herons were migrating they called at frequent intervals. A flock of three was passing over. They were followed by two at a distance of two or three hundred yards. Those to the rear called several times and the three leaders flew in a large circle allowing the stragglers to catch up with them. They immediately assumed the oblique line formation described earlier. There were two Great Blue Herons feeding along a nearby sandbar. Just after sundown these two arose in response to the calls of a flock of four which was passing over, calling as they flew. This flock also circled, waiting for the laggards to catch up with them, and then they resumed their southward flight.

I observed this circle maneuver four times; however, it was indulged in by the small flocks of two, three and four and never by the larger groups. The size of this circle varied with the distance needed for the birds in the rear to catch up, but the average size was about 40 yards in diameter. They flew around this circle but once, which allowed the stragglers to join almost at a tangent to the circle.

The nesting colonies of the Great Blue Heron were formerly located in most sections of the state where water and timber conditions were right. However, in so far as I can find, drainage and the clearing of timber have reduced these to a few colonies along the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. There are two small colonies on islands north of Quincy, one of about 20 nests on Long Island, and one of about 80 nests on Taylor Island. Occasionally the commercial fishermen shoot out one of these, claiming that

the Herons destroy many fish. The most important colonies are located in Central Illinois along the Illinois River from Havana to Ottawa. There are about twelve colonies varying from probably fifty nests at Lake Senachwine to perhaps four hundred nests at Depue.

In the colonies usually more than one nest is found in a tree. At Duck Island, I counted eleven nests in one giant cottonwood; however, this was unusual, two to five being the usual number. While visiting the colony at Duck Island in 1933, I kept a record of the feeding habits of these birds. Ninety per cent of the fish regurgitated by the young when excited were hickory shad. The rest were frogs, crayfish, and carp. I found only one cat fish and no bass, crappie or sunfish. There was also an abundance of small material which was probably refuse from other water life such as insects, snails, etc.

In order to get information concerning the location and extent of nesting colonies I have written to many ornithologists throughout the state. I wish to express my appreciation for the help given me by the ornithologists and should any of them desire a complete list of the sites, as reported, I shall be glad to furnish the same, upon request.