



Great Blue Heron: The Bird That Dares to Stick Its Neck out



photo by nhptv.org

We are fortunate to have some big, really big, birds living along the Lamprey River. Great blue herons stand about 4 feet tall and have a wingspan up to 6.5 feet. In flight, they tuck their long necks under them to form an “s” and let their long legs trail behind. When hunting, they pull their head close to their body and then ambush unsuspecting fish, frogs, snakes, and occasionally rodents using their razor-sharp yellow beak.

Great blue herons were once nearly wiped out by pollution and hunting, but they have made a strong comeback nationally. Their success has come about for several reasons: 1) The Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 makes it illegal to capture, possess, or cause harm to a great blue heron, its nest, or eggs. 2) Efforts to prevent pollution from reaching waterways have resulted in lower toxicity. 3) People now have a better understanding that wetlands are ecologically and economically critical. 4) People have stopped killing so many beavers. Beavers might seem to be an unlikely ally to these birds, but their dams create new wetlands. As a result, many trees drown. Over time, these standing dead trees provide ideal, safe nesting areas, called rookeries or heronries, for colonies of herons to raise their young.

To help these magnificent birds thrive in our increasingly populated and developed landscape, the best action we can take is to give them their space. The birds require a buffer area of at least 330 feet between them and human activity. From April through May, they will fly away from their nests if humans get as close as 400-600 feet. Not only is their sight acute, but their heron hearing is as well.