

Getting to know the great blue heron



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

My daughter sent me a picture she snapped of a great blue heron. The bird was entertaining her and the kids while they were fishing on the river. The big bird stood on a rock and watched the shallows for small minnows to swim past, oblivious to the fact that death is waiting just above the water's surface.

The picture of that bird brought back a pleasant memory from days gone by in the Florida Keys. I was coming home, in my skiff, from a very successful morning. The outgoing tide was running hard for several hours and the fishing was fantastic.

I had kept a half dozen mangrove snapper for supper. We had long ago realized it is best to keep only what you want to eat that night, as anything that goes to the freezer gets wasted. Fresh fish is too prevalent for us to ever eat frozen when you live in the tropics.

The searing heat showed no mercy on my sun-bleached carcass, and the humidity was so thick that fish swam in it. As I rounded the last bend in the canal, I looked at my dock for my old friend, the one who helps me clean fish on hot afternoons. Not my wife, as she is way too smart to be outside in this heat. She will wait to greet me from

the A/C when the dock chores are finished.

My old friend is a great blue heron. He will stand next to me as I clean fish, waiting for me to toss him the scraps. Piece by piece, he eats his fill, then without saying a word, he flies off to somewhere else, content with a full belly of easily captured seafood.

He became more trusting as time went on. At first, he would stay 10 yards away, but eventually, he would stand right next to me and I would pass him his share. If I was too slow with the tidbits, he would give out a grating, explosive scream, to show his displeasure with my tardiness.

Hérons are members of the Ardeidae family, which are large wading birds with long bills, necks, and legs. There are 60 species of them, six of which are native to Colorado. The one you are most likely to encounter, and the largest of the species, is the great blue heron.

The great blue heron is very large, standing up to 4 feet high, and one might reach 8 pounds in weight if he is not counting calories. Their wings are equally enormous, reaching out 7 feet in span.

The great blue heron, known on the street as Ardea Herodias, can be found all over North America, with many migrating to Colorado in the spring, often returning to the same nesting sites every year. These birds prefer wetlands, such as marshes, swamps, and riverbanks between 4,000 and 9,000 feet in elevation.

Easy to recognize, the great blue heron is a grayish-blue overall color, with a long orange-yellow bill, and a black crown with head

plumes. An immature bird is colored in the blue form, grayish-blue with a pale belly, dark streaks on the neck, and brown feathers mixed throughout. The bill is long with a dusky color.

Like the bird my daughter watched on the riverbank, their diet primarily consists of fish. The great blue heron is a stealthy fisher, wading very slowly in shallow waters, and nailing unsuspecting baitfish with their long bills. To watch one fish is a treat, as they can stand perfectly still for very long periods and move so slowly that movement is almost not visible.

The great blue heron is not a social animal. You usually only see a solo bird in an area. The only time the birds pair up is to nest and mate. While they do not mate for life, they do go through some incredibly difficult courtship rituals that help pairs form strong bonds. Their mating displays include bill snapping, neck stretching, moaning calls, preening, circular flights, shaking and exchanging small twigs, and the occasional crest raising and duels with their bills.

The average lifespan for a great blue heron is around 15 years, the oldest known one reaching 23. As with most animals, they are most vulnerable when they are young. More than half of the great blue herons born in one year will die before celebrating their first birthday.

Due to human development and contamination of their nesting sites, great blue herons are a threatened species in Colorado. Estimates place around 1600 nesting pairs remaining in the state. In other parts of the country, they are doing well and classi-



My daughter, Sarah Rackay Watkins, snapped this picture of a great blue heron while on a hike with her kids. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

fied as a species of least concern, meaning their population is increasing.

The great blue heron carries much symbolism and spiritualism with him, especially with the North American Native tradition. His long legs show how one does not need to rely on the support of massive pillars for stability, but rather one's own feeble strength is sufficient to stand firm in the journey of life.

Other Native tribes look at the heron symbol as signs of patience and good luck. This belief takes root in the Northwest Coast,

where people believe that Native American fishermen spot a heron, it means good luck with them, and they will have a successful fishing trip.

My great blue heron buddy in the Keys brought me good luck fishing most of the time too, and it must have been an equitable relationship because he stayed with me for many years. It must have been equitable, because when I had good luck fishing, he got an easy dinner. Thanks to my daughter for sending me that picture and triggering a special memory.

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WOLVERINES

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CPW hasn't yet sourced any wolverines for relocation and is still fleshing out particulars — everything hinges on the legislation passing — but has looked at other places whose landscape is similar to Colorado's, and that have similar food sources, such as marmots, as well as similar predators, such as mountain lions.

CPW used population viability analyses to determine how many wolverines might be needed for

restoration to succeed.

A "guesstimate" pointed to perhaps 100, but, Ivan said, it would be "kind of crazy" to try for that amount. Instead, the working figure is about 20 females and 10 males to start with. To determine the numbers, biologists use a process Ivan likened to tossing a coin and rolling a dice: They account for random events that could affect first-year survival rates and from that, metaphorically toss a coin as to how many wolverines might produce a litter, then "roll the dice" to guess at

the number of kits that will be born and survive. That would give a rough total of individuals for the first year of reintroduction — then the model is taken out for 50 years to establish a possible trajectory, and from that, a summary figure.

This modeling was used to predict population viability. Ivan said for first year of reintroduction, the agency is contemplating 10 females and five males, and to repeat that number in the following two, for a total of 45 to start with. However, it might take

longer than that to reestablish the species.

About 94% of proposed habitat is on public land, including in federally designated wilderness. It was not clear whether any of the proposed habitat would stretch into Montrose County.

If legislators give the green light for wolverines to come back, the translocated mammals would first likely be held at the Frisco Creek Wildlife Rehab Center for treatment, exams, to determine which females are pregnant, and to be

fitted with GPS collars. Males and non-expectant females would be released after sufficient time at Frisco Creek and, ideally, into prepared, deep-snow dens, provisioned as needed.

"To me, this is the definition of a soft release," May said, noting the animals would be kept in a rehab and acclimated prior to being set free with a den nearby.

He and the other commissioners seemed to view wolverine restoration with favor, with James Tughton and Reading saying they

wanted to make certain the Ute tribes are part of the conversation.

"It's really good to see something that started 25 years ago actually coming forward. I look forward to seeing what does happen," Commissioner Marie Haskett said.

Senate Bill 171 passed the House Appropriations Committee on Wednesday, when it was referred to the Committee of the Whole.

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