

This resource is based on the following source:

Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

This resource can be cited as:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. 2003, January 6. Florida's breeding bird atlas: A collaborative study of Florida's birdlife. <http://www.myfwc.com/bba/> (Date accessed mm/dd/yyyy).

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*

The Great Blue Heron is a familiar sight to most Floridians. It is a permanent resident of wetlands throughout the state, often seen along ponds, lakes, and canals in housing developments or loafing on boat docks or fishing piers waiting for handouts from anglers. As its name suggests, the Great Blue Heron is our largest "dark" heron, although it is frequently mislabeled a "crane" by the public. Great Blue Herons nest throughout much of North America and winter south to northern South America.

Habitat. Great Blue Herons typically breed in colonies, from a few pairs to hundreds of nests. However, they are known to nest alone and do so, almost exclusively, in the central Everglades (Winegarner 1983; Frederick 1994; S. Rowe, pers. commun.; B. Pranty, pers. obs.). They frequently nest with other wading birds, Brown Pelicans, Anhingas, and Double-crested Cormorants. Great Blue Herons build a large stick nest in a bush or tree, placed from near ground level to 30 m (100 ft) above the ground or water (Howell 1932).

When foraging, Great Blue Herons exploit all types of wetlands and, occasionally, even upland habitats. They feed on a variety of prey, including fish, insects, crustaceans, amphibians, snakes, young birds, and rodents (Howell 1932). Great Blue Herons often feed at nig



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The light-bluish eggs, numbering 3 to 4, are incubated by both adults for 28 days. The young are capable of flight at 60 days of age (Ehrlich et al. 1988). Great Blue Herons are single-brooded, but they have an extended breeding season in Florida.

Seasonal Occurrence. Increased numbers of Great Blue Herons from October through April in Florida suggest spring and fall migration (Hoffman et al. 1990). Eggs may be laid anytime from mid-September to late May (Stevenson and Anderson 1994), but pairs in south Florida typically initiate nesting much earlier (January to March) than pairs farther north.

Status. The breeding range of the Great Blue Heron in Florida has not apparently changed since Howell's time (1932). This species remains common as a breeder throughout the state, although it is considerably less common in the Panhandle than in the peninsula. In Florida, the distribution of this species seems closely related to the availability of suitable habitat. Statewide surveys from 1976 to 1978, counted 9,500 birds, and more than 10,000, from 1986 to 1989 (Nesbitt et al. 1982; Runde et al. 1991).

Bill Pranty

Great Blue Heron

