

WHERE TO FIND HERONS

by Bird Observer Staff

The coastal and inland wetlands of eastern Massachusetts are the haunts of a variety of herons and heron-watchers. Everyone has a favorite place for observing these birds, so beautifully adapted for a predatory life in fields and marshes. As with many kinds of colonial-nesting birds, casual visits to the nesting colony can have disastrous effects on the eggs or young and are therefore to be discouraged. But there are some sites in this state which afford excellent opportunities for the heron-watcher. A few of these selected sites are described below by members of BOEM staff.

Plum Island

Parker River National Wildlife Refuge on Plum Island is one of the best places in the state to see nearly all of the herons which occur in Massachusetts. The best time to find maximum numbers of these herons is at high tide when they are forced up out of the marshes, such as the marsh just south of Old Pines. In milder winters, Great Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night Herons, and an occasional American Bittern will overwinter. Early spring arrivals include Snowy Egret and Glossy Ibis, soon to be joined by Great Egret, Louisiana Heron and Little Blue Heron. During the summer, herons can be seen feeding in the Salt Pans, the marsh behind the field across from the New Pines, the impoundments at Hellcat Swamp, the pools just south of Cross Farm Hill, and Stage Island Pool. Least Bitterns can be seen, if one is patient, in the cattail marshes at Hellcat and Stage Island Pool, particularly in July when they are feeding young. The best vantage point for seeing these birds is the tower at Stage Island. Green Herons will be seen flying about anywhere on the island during spring and summer and can be found feeding along the edges of any water bodies such as the small pond at the Warden's.

Fall, mid-August to late September, is the most spectacular time to see the herons as the young have fledged and the herons congregate in the marshy areas to feed. Late in the evening around sunset, the Snowys, Little Blues, Greats, Louisianas and Glossy Ibis fly to favored night roosts where they tend to concentrate in numbers up to 1000. In the last few years they have used Stage Island Pool for roosting; in other years they have used the cattail marsh in the north impoundment at Hellcat. Their flight down the island and concentration in one area provide the observer with a good opportunity to see all of these birds together and in good numbers, e.g., 400-1000 Snowys, 8-16 Greats, 10-40 Great Blues (mostly immatures), and 50-100 Glossy Ibis. Immature Little Blues can be readily discerned by the lack of yellow at the base of the bill and around the eyes, the pale blue bill with a dark tip, and the pale legs.

Directions: Follow Water Street in Newburyport to the Plum Island Bridge; take a right after the bridge and proceed down the refuge road. The observation tower at Stage Island Pool is accessible from parking lot #6. (See BOEM, December, 1978, and June, 1979, "The Four Seasons at Plum Island," Parts I and II.)

Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, Concord

At the refuge impoundment off Monsen Road in Concord, the breeding species of herons are the Green Heron, the American Bittern, and the Least Bittern. Records of Least Bittern have been irregular over the last ten years, but the species was present during the summers of 1980 and 1981. In 1981, at least two individuals, male and female, were seen regularly along the dike between the two pools, and one or more immature birds were observed. Post-breeding herons start to arrive around mid-July. The population of Great Blue Herons peaks in early fall (September or October), with possible counts of 20 or more. The population of Black-crowned Night Herons peaks in late August, with counts of 20 or more likely; these usually depart by mid-September. The night herons are most evident during their noisy dusk flights. Post-breeding Snowy Egrets and Great Egrets also occur in small numbers. Both Great Blue Heron and American Bittern (rarely) can be present at the refuge through late fall and into winter, as evidenced by Concord Christmas Bird Count records.

Directions: Follow Route 62 east from Concord Center to Monsen Road, a left marked by a small sign. (See BOEM, September-October, 1973, "Autumn Birding at Great Meadows," by Peter Alden.)

Belle Isle Marsh, East Boston

Belle Isle is one of the most accessible places in the Greater Boston area from which to watch a variety of herons. By mid-April numbers of Black-crowned Night Herons, Snowy Egrets, and Glossy Ibises begin utilizing the marsh for feeding and resting. The Snowys feed primarily in the pools behind the New England Casket Company and at the far end of the MDC Park; at low tide they might be found in the creeks and ditches or in Belle Isle Inlet. Glossy Ibises and night herons are dispersed more randomly; night herons often roost in the cottonwoods east of the Casket Company or in the thick Phragmites across from the Suffolk Downs Racetrack.

At this time, American Bitterns and Great Blue Herons in ones and twos also appear in migration to inland breeding grounds. Other herons such as Great Egret, Little Blue Heron and Louisiana Heron may show up; presumably these nest with the Snowys on some of the island colonies in Massachusetts Bay. Finally, Green Herons are seen frequently in the marsh throughout spring and summer which leads to the speculation

that they breed in swampy thickets within a few miles of Belle Isle.

Mid-summer is the time to begin watching the dawn heron flights. Adult and young Snowy Egrets from the Spectacle Island heron colony roost on the island at night and disperse to various marshes and tidal creeks of the city by day to feed. When high tide coincides with dawn the birds need to travel rather long distances to the upper reaches of marsh creeks where the water is shallow enough for them to feed. Those that choose to come to the northern sector of the city to feed in the marshes of Chelsea, Medford, Somerville, Saugus, and Revere, fly in dense flocks to Belle Isle, then disperse radially to these other locations. Dawn flights in late August of 1981 totalled nearly 250 birds of which the vast majority were Snowys although four Great Egrets were also recorded in these flocks.

Take a Second Look (TASL) is organizing a series of dawn censuses of Boston Harbor herons for the 1982 season. Anyone interested in this project should contact the coordinator: Soheil Zende, 380 Broadway, Somerville 02145 (628-8990).

Directions: From Bennington Street in East Boston turn southeast on Leverett Street; then take a right on Lawn Avenue and park near the marsh pool on the left. Or park at Belle Isle Reservation entrance on Bennington Street just south of the Revere city line, and walk to the back of the reservation to look over the marsh pools there. (See BOEM, December, 1976, "Revere-Winthrop Revisited," by Soheil Zende.)

Hemenway Landing, Eastham

The great marsh at Nauset in Eastham is a fine place to watch herons on Cape Cod. From Fort Hill and other lookouts atop the bluff one can often see a variety of these waders flying about or stalking prey in the marsh below. A daily event of particular note from mid-July on is the evening heron flight, best observed from Hemenway Landing, just north of the Fort Hill area. About an hour before sunset the diurnal herons begin flying from the marsh overhead and into the trees and tangles behind the landing, where they roost for the night. As many as 25 to 30 Snowy Egrets and 80 to 100 Green Herons, as well as lesser numbers of other species are involved in this flight. As dusk approaches the night herons stage a reverse flight; their "quoking" shapes can be seen and heard flying into the marsh until the last glimmer of light fades from the cape sky. High counts of 70 to 80 Black-crowned and 4 Yellow-crowned Night Herons are possible.

Directions: About one quarter-mile north of Fort Hill on Route 6 in Eastham turn right on Hemenway Landing Road. (See BOEM, October, 1979, "Birding Orleans and Eastham," by Robert Prescott.)



Snowy Egret

Photo by David C. Twichell