

ABOUT THE COVER: Great Blue Heron

This month's cover depicts the distinctive flight silhouette of a Great Blue Heron, *Ardea herodias*. This is the largest of New England's herons, standing about four feet high with a six-foot wingspan. Great Blues begin arriving in New England in late March and April. Some continue northwards, but some stay to set up localized nesting colonies. The young are fully fledged by late July or August and scatter over the region. Juveniles can be distinguished from adults by their somewhat darker color, entirely dark crown, and the presence of more ventral striping. The bill is slaty with a yellowish lower mandible. From late August until mid-November, the birds are migrating southward. Some stragglers may remain through the winter wherever there is open water, usually along the coast.

The principal food of Great Blues is whatever fish is available from shiners to horned pouts. They fish by night as well as day and still-fish more often than stalk. Standing in shallow water like a post, they wait until a fish swims within reach. Then faster than a birder's blink, they grab a wriggling fish sideways, flip it in the air, and swallow it head first. Larger fish are speared and then pounded before going down the gullet. This heron is also quite at home on dry land where it pursues such prey as field mice, shrews, grasshoppers, and other insects.

Great Blue Herons have long nested in Massachusetts. Although apparently unknown to Forbush, a colony of up to twenty nests existed in Harvard Forest in Petersham and was well documented from 1925 until it was destroyed in the hurricane of 1938. According to unpublished data (Blodget and Cardozo of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife) the state's nesting population of Great Blues has steadily increased and expanded with the center of abundance in Worcester County. In 1984, 229 nests were counted in twenty-three active heronries, which varied in size from one to 48 nests.

The nests are built near the tops of tall trees, usually in dead or dying trees that have been drowned by man-made or beaver impoundments. Although new nests of the year may be so sparse that the eggs can be seen from below, older nests are larger and thicker, having been added to each year. The accumulated excrement of each season often damages the foliage of the nesting tree but helps to cement the nesting sticks and debris together until massive platforms are created.

Seasoned birders, with eyes alert chiefly for the rarer or more exotic herons, may pay scant attention to Great Blues. But, leave it to the words of Arthur Cleveland Bent, printed in 1926, to remind us how stately a bird this great heron is.

In its native solitudes, far from the haunts of man, it may be seen standing motionless, in lonely dignity, on some far distant point that breaks the shore line of a wilderness lake, its artistic outline giving the only touch of life to the broad expanse of water and its background of somber forest. Or on some wide, flat coastal marsh its stately figure looms up in the distance, as with graceful, stealthy tread it wades along in search of its prey. Perhaps you have seen it from afar and think you can gain a closer intimacy, but its eyes and ears are keener than yours; and it is a wise and a wary bird. But even as it takes its departure, you will still stand and admire the slow and dignified strokes of its great, black-tipped wings, until this interesting feature of the landscape fades away into the distance. A bird so grand, so majestic, and so picturesque is surely a fitting subject for the artist's brush.

J. B. Hallett, Jr.

MEET OUR COVER ARTIST

WILLIAM E. DAVIS, JR. (Ted) is professor and chairman of the Division of Science at the College of Basic Studies, Boston University. He is a member of the board of directors of *Bird Observer* and a frequent contributor of drawings and articles. Specializing in pen-and-ink, Ted has published artwork in *Naturalist Magazine*, *American Birds*, and *Colonial Waterbirds* and has done more than sixty illustrations for the forthcoming breeding bird atlas of New Hampshire. He is very active in ornithological circles and is currently editor of the *Colonial Waterbird Society Newsletter*, vice president of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, and president of the Association of Field Ornithologists.

Ted wishes to thank David C. Twichell for the use of his magnificent slides of herons, egrets, and ibises. They have served as models for numerous drawings, including this month's cover illustration.

Inquiries concerning artwork available for purchase should be addressed to his home: 127 East Street, Foxboro, MA 02035.