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Herons at Home

BY WILLIAM L. FINLEY

WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY HERMAN T. BOHLMAN

FIFTEEN miles below Portland, Oregon, in the heart of the fir forest, is a village of two hundred houses. It has an area of about three acres. Every home is a sky-scraper. Not a single house is less than a hundred and thirty feet up, and some are a hundred and sixty feet high. The inhabitants are feathered fishers. They hunt the waterways of the Columbia and the Willamette for miles. Each owns his own claim, and there's never a dispute as to possession.

It takes the biggest reserve of nerve and muscle to reach this village, but one may sit on the wooded hillside far below and watch the life there in full swing. From two to five brush-heap houses, the size of a washtub, are carefully balanced and securely fastened on the top limbs of each tree. Gaunt, long-legged citizens stand about the airy doorways and gossip in hoarse croaks. Residents are continually coming and going, some flapping in from the feeding ground with a craw full of fish and frogs, others sweeping down the avenues between the pointed firs with a departing guttural squawk. This is the home of a colony of great blue herons.

The great blue heron or "crane" is one of the picturesque sights of every fish pond and along the bank of every river and lake in the country. I look for him, along the shallow sandbars and sloping banks as I look for the background of green trees. He is always the solitary fisher. He is the bit of life that draws the whole to a focus. Watch him, and he stands as motionless as a stick. He is patient. A minnow or frog swims past and there is a lightning flash of that pointed bill as he pins it a foot below the surface. Disturb him, and he deliberately spreads a pair of wings that fans six feet of air, and dangles his long legs to the next stand just out of range.

Nature has built the heron in an extremely practical way. She dressed him in colors of sky and water. She did not plant his eyes in the top of his head, as she did the woodcock's, because he is not likely to be injured by enemies from above; but she put them right on the lower sloping side of his head, so he could look straight down at his feet without the slightest sideturn. She let his legs grow too long for perching conveniently on a tree, just so he could wade in deep enough to fish. She gave him a dagger-shaped bill at the end of a neck that was long enough to reach bottom, as well as to keep his eyes high above water so he could see and aim correctly at the creature below the surface.

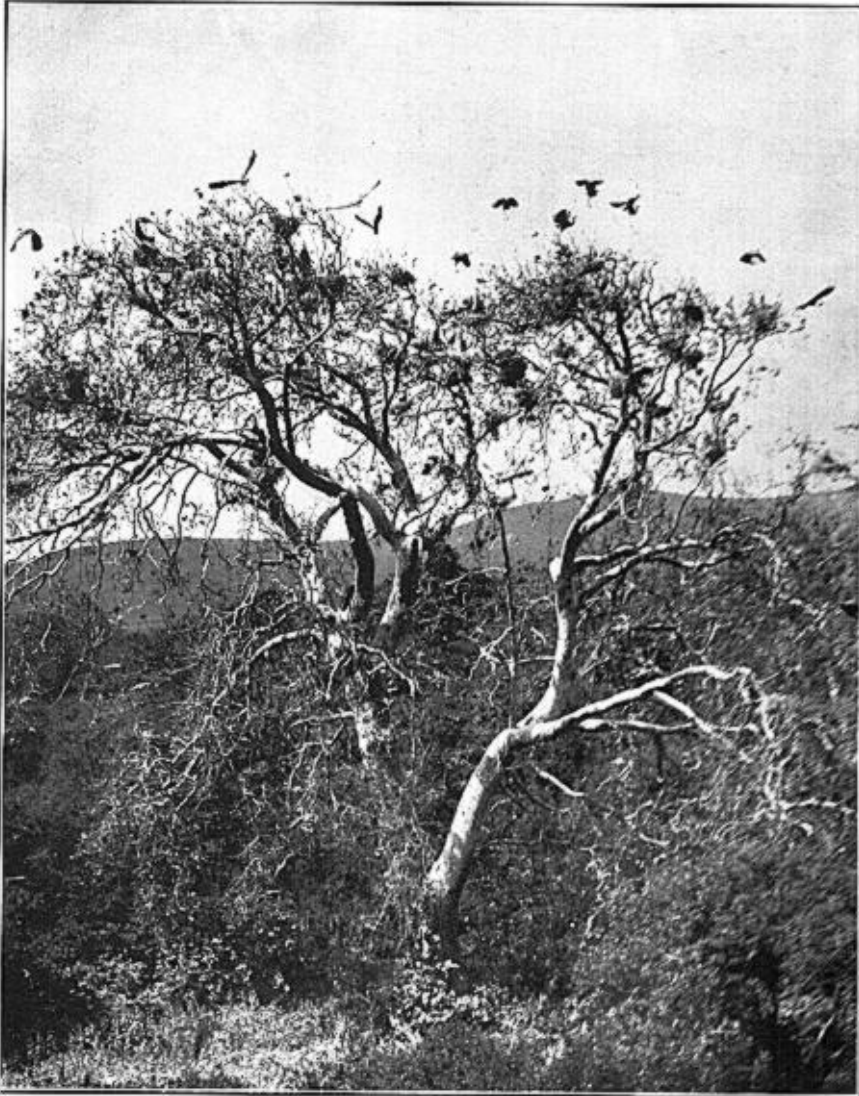
The great blue heron is a remarkable fellow in adapting himself to circumstances. In a bird of such long legs and of such proportions one would naturally think his nesting place would be on the ground, and in regions where they have been undisturbed this is his favorite site. In the lake region of Southern Oregon we found the colonies of great blue herons nesting on the floating tule islands, surrounded on all sides with gulls, cormorants, pelicans and terns. In other parts of Oregon and in California we have found colonies of these same birds living in the tallest firs deep back in the forest, or in the sycamores and willows in the midst of a swamp.

During the summer of 1904, while in California, we made several different trips to a heronry not very far distant from the densely populated district about San Francisco. This heronry was in the center of a narrow wooded belt reaching out into the swamp for about a mile. When we approached this thicket we saw the trees were well loaded with nests. We skirted the edge of the belt looking for an entrance, but to our surprise each place we tried to enter was barred with a perfect mass of tangled bushes and trees. We crawled thru in one place for a few feet, but over all and thru all was a mass of poison oak and blackberry that one could not penetrate. There was not the sign of a path. After hunting for two hours, we went to the point opposite the largest tree and decided to push and cut our way thru. The first few yards we crawled on hands and knees, pushing our cameras or dragging them behind. Unable to crawl further, we had to clear a way and climb a ten-foot brush heap. For a few yards we ducked under and wiggled along the bed of a ditch in the mire to our knees. I never saw such a tangled mass of brush. Fallen limbs and trees of alder, swamp-maple and willow interlaced with blackberry briers, poison oak and the rankest growth of nettles. All the while we were assailed by an increasing mob of starving mosquitoes that went raving mad at the taste of blood. We pushed on, straining, sweating, crawling and climbing for a hundred yards that seemed more like a mile.

We forgot it all the minute we stood under the largest sycamore. It was seven feet thick at the base, and a difficult proposition to climb. But this was the center of business activity in the heron village. The monster was a hundred and twenty feet high and had a spread of limbs equal to its height. In this single tree we counted forty-one blue heron nests and twenty-eight night heron nests: sixty-nine nests in one tree. In another tree were seventeen of the larger nests and twenty-eight of the smaller.

We made the first trip to the heronry on April 21, and found most of the nests contained eggs. There were about 700 nests in the whole colony, of which the larger number were black-crowned night herons. The great blues and the night herons occupied the same trees, nesting side by side. The larger nests were built almost entirely in the tops of the sycamores, while the night herons set their platform nests at the very upturned tips of the sycamore's limbs and in the lower surrounding willows and alders.

When I first climbed in among the nests of a smaller tree with my camera, it sounded as if I were in the midst of a gigantic henhouse. Some of the birds were clucking over their eggs that were soon to be hatched; others were wrangling and squabbling, so that there was a continual clattering fuss above which one had to yell his loudest to be heard. I sat straddling a limb, with my notebook in hand.



THE LARGEST TREE IN THE HERON VILLAGE, CONTAINING 69 NESTS, 41 NESTS OF THE GREAT BLUE HERON AND 28 OF THE BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON

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About me, seemingly almost within reach, I counted thirty-six sets of blue eggs. I was high above the tops of the alders and willows. Set all about below, in the background of green, were the platforms each holding several eggs of blue. The trees were dotted with them in every direction. I counted over 400 eggs in sight.

The black-crowned night heron (*Nycticorax naevius*) is a very different looking bird from the great blue (*Ardea herodias*). It has a shiny black patch on the top of the head, a gray body with a black back. The short but thick neck and short legs are just the opposite to the blue heron.

Great blue herons perched lazily in the tops of all the trees. Looking in one direction I counted over a hundred of them. They were sailing in continually



HALF-GROWN BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON, SHOWING LONG ANGULAR TOES WHICH ARE WELL ADAPTED TO CLINGING IN THE TREE TOPS

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and departing. The night herons fluttered about in a jerky, labored flight, lighting in the willows and hovering over their nests.

A night heron's, or, as often called, a *squawk's* nest, looks to me like a mere botch. Some of them are not hollowed in the least, but just rough platforms. In a wind, the eggs would roll off if the mother did not sit to hold them on. There is not much trouble after the eggs are hatched, for the youngsters seem to kick them-

selves loose from the shell with one foot, while they wrap the long, angular toes of the other about the nearest twig.

The next time I sat in the tree-top the place sounded more like a big duck ranch. Above all the squawks of the parents there was a steady quacking clatter of the hundreds of young herons, that never ceased. The sound grew more intense in spots, as here and there a mother swept in from the feeding ground and fed her children. As I sat watching, an old blue heron sailed in and lit on a branch above her nest in the adjoining tree. The three youngsters twisted in



YOUNG NIGHT HERONS HANGING DEAD 20 FEET ABOVE THE GROUND, AND PHOTOGRAPHED EXACTLY AS FOUND

The left-hand bird has fallen and caught by its foot in a crotch, thus hanging itself. The right-hand bird has merely the chin hooked over the limb; its right foot shows how in the death struggle it was clutching for a limb.

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ecstatic contortions as the mother stepped awkwardly along the limb. Each reached up in full height to grasp her long bill. She sat on the nest, calmly looking about. The young continued to catch her long beak and pull it part way down, endeavoring to make her feed them. When she got ready, she disgorged a mess of partially digested fish down the throat of each nestling and left as leisurely as she came. In another case, where the young were older, I saw the mother bird disgorge into the nest. The mass of undigested fish in her craw seemed to form into small portions and come up as the cud of a cow does, and each youngster

pitched into the meal with a vigor and energy that would have amazed a litter of young pigs.

When you climb anywhere near a nest after the youngsters have had a good meal, they will begin to "unswallow" as fast as they have gobbled it down. On account of this habit, especially common among the young night herons, we found it always safe to keep out of the way as much as possible, or at least not approach a nest full of young birds from below.

A young night heron is well adapted to climbing from limb to limb by reason of his long, angling toes and the ability to hook his neck or bill, over a limb and draw himself up as a parrot does. Not so with the young blue herons; they are as awkward about the limbs of the trees as their parents are stately in moving thru the air. When overbalanced on a limb, they often fall to the ground.

The young birds of both species seem instinctively to know that falling from the trees to the ground below means death. Not because they are hurt in the least by the fall, but because the old birds never descend to the ground beneath the nest-tree. The ground under the trees was strewn with the dead bodies of young birds. The young are fed only in the tree top and those below starve in the very sight of their parents.

Several times we saw young night herons hanging dead in the branches of the trees. In one tree we found two of these youngsters hanging side by side only a foot apart. In walking about the limbs, the larger of the two birds had caught its foot in a crotch and hung itself head downward. That, in itself, was not unusual, but the second bird hung by the neck only a few inches away. It seems that this smaller heron had hung himself dead, rather than fall to the ground; he had fallen or overbalanced on the small limb and, as is the custom, had hooked his chin over the branch to keep from falling to the ground. His clutched right foot showed that the death struggle had been a reaching and clutching to gain the limb. The head was not caught between the branches as the other bird's foot, but was simply hooked over a bend in the twig. Had he thrown his head back a trifle, he would have dropped to the ground. We demonstrated this by turning the bill to an angle of forty-five degrees and it dropped to the bushes twenty feet below. How the bird could have held the rigid position of the neck thruout its death struggle, I do not understand, unless it was a case where the force of instinct was strong even to death.

Portland, Oregon.

The Hermit Warbler in Washington

BY J. H. BOWLES

AN experience covering eight years in northwestern Washington has convinced me that the hermit warbler (*Dendroica occidentalis*) is a regular summer resident. The bird student however, must consider himself doubly fortunate if he can find some easily accessible location where he can study these birds at any time thruout the summer, for it is far from common even in the most favored districts and is exceedingly local in distribution. As an example, I may quote Mr. S. F. Rathbun, of Seattle, who tells me that *D. occidentalis* is practically unknown in his locality. On the contrary, around Tacoma the birds are of regular occurrence as summer residents, altho the two places are only twenty-five miles apart, and are situated at the same altitude and on the same body of water.