

Great Blue Heron

Ardea herodias

Whether poised at a river bend or cruising the coastline with slow, deep wingbeats, the Great Blue Heron is a majestic sight. This stately heron with its subtle blue-gray plumage often stands motionless as it scans for prey or wades belly deep with long, deliberate steps. They may move slowly, but Great Blue Herons can strike like lightning to grab a fish or snap up a gopher. In flight, look for this widespread heron's tucked-in neck and long legs trailing out behind.



Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Largest of the North American herons with long legs, a sinuous neck, and thick, daggerlike bill. Head, chest, and wing plumes give a shaggy appearance. In flight, the Great Blue Heron curls its neck into a tight “S” shape; its wings are broad and rounded and its legs trail well beyond the tail.

Color Pattern

Great Blue Herons appear blue-gray from a distance, with a wide black stripe over the eye. In flight, the upper side of the wing is two-toned: pale on the forewing and darker on the flight feathers. A pure white subspecies occurs in coastal southern Florida.

Behavior

Hunting Great Blue Herons wade slowly or stand statue-like, stalking fish and other prey in shallow water or open fields. Watch for the lightning-fast thrust of the neck and head as they stab with their strong bills. Their very slow wingbeats, tucked-in neck and trailing legs create an unmistakable image in flight.

Cool Facts

- Thanks to specially shaped neck vertebrae, Great Blue Herons can curl their neck into an S shape for a more aerodynamic flight profile and to quickly strike prey at a distance.
- Despite their impressive size, Great Blue Herons weigh only 5 to 6 pounds thanks in part to their hollow bones—a feature all birds share.
- The oldest Great Blue Heron, based on banding recovery, was 24 years old.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 38.2 - 53.9 inches (3.2 - 4.5 feet)
- Wingspan - 65.7 - 79.1 inches (5.5 - 6.6 feet)
- Weight - 74.1 - 88.2 ounces (4.6 - 5.5 pounds)