



Plume hunters had decimated Great Egret populations by the late 1800's



Startle me and I'll startle you back with a loud, guttural croak

## **Brunswick Wildlife Big Waders, Big Photo Ops**

Always lurking around marshes are wading birds. Some are small and some large. On the coast, they drop by to scrounge up some grub, especially when the tide is low, a time when mud flats are exposed and fish are concentrated into small pools of shallow water called pannes.

The big guys like the Great Blue Heron and Great Egret are so large, numerous, and photogenic that they get a lot of attention. I am pretty sure every Brunswick County resident who owns a camera has taken a photo of one of them. I know I have a few dozen each...but who can resist taking another.

Great Blue Herons are one of the most widespread species of waders in North America. They may be found in most habitats other than deserts, generally nesting in large colonies that may include several hundred pairs. Their nests are built mainly in trees but also in bushes and on the ground. Colonies are usually on islands or in swamps...isolated locations that discourage predators.

They generally forage in shallow water, slowly wading or standing to wait for prey to come to them. They mostly eat fish taken along the shoreline of oceans, marshes, lakes, and rivers; however, they are not picky and also eat amphibians, invertebrates, reptiles, mammals, and birds in fields. Maybe a nice rodent for Thanksgiving dinner?

The Great Blue Heron, equally at home in estuarine environments and freshwater habitats, has adapted well to the impact of humans; however, development is always a threat to its breeding colonies. Nests or entire colonies may be abandoned due to increased human presence.

Great Blue populations suffered in the past from over hunting; however, their populations have recovered thanks to conservation efforts described below and they are still found throughout their original range.

Because Great Blues' eyes are adapted for night vision, they are able to forage day and night. Prey are located by sight, nabbed with a quick thrust of the heron's neck and head, and grasped between its mandibles. Great Blues swallow most prey whole; however, larger fish need to be specially prepared to avoid the fish's sharp armor.

Smaller but just as elegant in its showy plumage, the Great Egret, is also widespread across North America. Though nearly as tall as other large waders, its wingspan (51 inches) is noticeably shorter than the Great Blue Heron (73 inches) and the Wood Stork (60 inches).

Great Egrets are colonial nesters like the Great Blue and inhabit freshwater, estuarine, and marine wetlands plus they also have a high level of adaptability as a generalist. This has contributed greatly to its widespread distribution and recovery from populations decimated due to over hunting.

Great Egrets, Great Herons, and many other wading birds were over hunted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Plume hunters enjoyed a lucrative business, killing waders for their gaudy plumes to supply the demand for adornments for ladies' hats and dresses.

The decimation of waders led to the formation of conservation and environmental organizations and laws to protect them. In 1883 the American Ornithologists Union was founded and it spawned a Bird Protection Committee. George Grinnell, a charter committee member, proposed establishing an Audubon Society.

By 1887, his original society had over 300 local chapters with greater than twenty thousand members. The Smith College Audubon and Massachusetts Audubon Societies were at the forefront of this social activism. Today the National Audubon Society (whose logo features a Great Egret) and other Audubon Societies are still on the front lines.

Watching these two waders forage is highly entertaining. I followed the Great Egret in the photo, watching it plunge its head into the water four times, each time successful.

I've watched Great Blues take larger fish, especially catfish, on many occasions. They juggle the fish so that it is swallowed head first thus avoiding trying to swallow fins the hard way.

In my first such experience the catfish was almost a foot long and the Great Blue held it sideways in its bill. Unfortunately, the heron flew off with its catch before I could tell if its eyes were bigger than its swallowing ability. While they have been reported to have occasionally choked to death on large prey, I suspect this heron speared and shook the fish to subdue it and did not try to eat it whole. Sure hope he made it.

Attitudes have changed over the past hundred years. In addition to formal protection, our appreciation of these big guys posing for us encourages public support for their protection and conservation of their habitats. Now go get your camera and appreciate them more!

John Ennis



**A Great Egret's diet and foraging methods  
are similar to the Great Blue Heron's**

