

NATURE'S WAY

The Great Blue Heron
(Ardea Herodias)

By BUD SIMPSON

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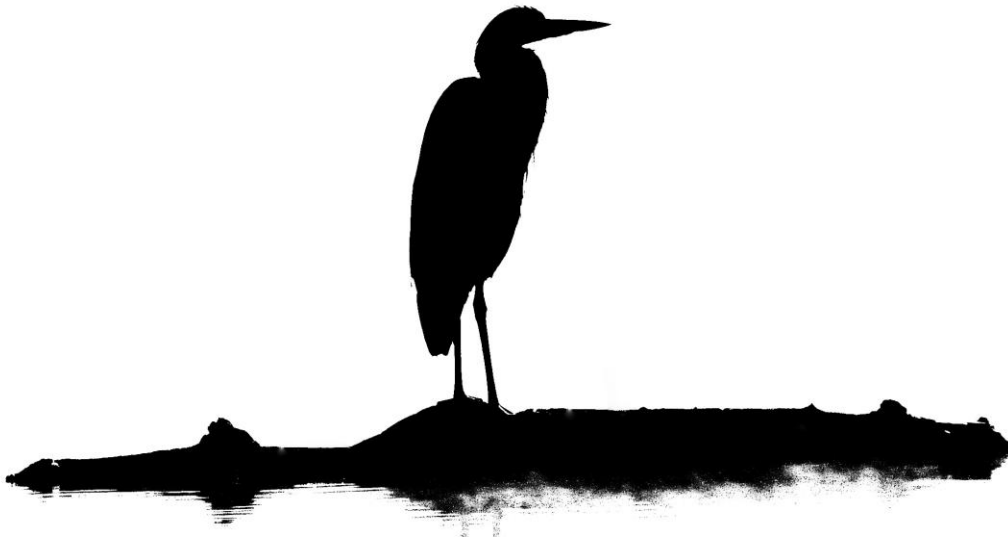
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This small book is dedicated to all who love Mother Nature and all her creatures, but in particular, all its feathered creatures.

*He walks the shallow with an antic grace.
The great feet breaks the ridges of the sand,
The long eyes notes the minnow's hiding place.
His beak is quicker than the human hand.*

From, *The Heron*, by Theodore Roethke
(1908-1963)

INTRODUCTION:



This book is intended as a photographic essay concerning one bird species, the Great Blue Heron. It is not a technical piece by any means. My intent is to let these photographs speak for themselves as much as possible. I might interject my observations into its photographic narration at some points, but only as clarification or to point out an observation of my own pertaining to what these great birds have taught me about themselves. They were the teachers, I was the eager student. They still have much to teach me. I'll never live long enough to know it all. I was amazed to find that I had over 9,000 images of Great Blue Herons in my computer folders. I know I will run across some photographs later on and say to myself: I should have included this one, or that one. I still take more heron photos each time I go to my lake. I can't help myself. Who knows if the next photo will teach me something else about these aptly named birds. I'm almost afraid to check my picture files for all the other species I have photographed. If all goes well with this offering, I may do other books on other species at some point in the future.

Foreword by Paul Knoop

THE GREAT BLUE HERON

Henry David Thoreau, In 1882, made this notation in his notebook: "Scared up three great blue herons in the little pond close by; quite near us. It was a grand site to see them rise, so slow and stately, so long and limber, with an undulating motion from head to foot, undulating also their large wings, and looking warily about them. With this graceful, limber undulating motion they arose, their two legs trailing parallel far behind."

Of all the birds that grace our waterways the great blue heron is perhaps everyone's favorite. While in flight its long legs are stretched out behind and its long neck drawn in - affording a characteristic "S" silhouette against the sky. It is a stately bird, dignified in its bearing, graceful in its movements; an artistic feature of the landscape.

While searching for its prey the great blue heron stands motionless for many minutes at a time knee deep in water. Here it patiently waits with indrawn neck until some luckless fish or frog has ventured near enough. Suddenly, and as quick as lightning, the sharp bill and long neck shoot downward, the wiry body sways forward on reed-like legs and the unfortunate prey, seized in the spear-like bill, soon disappears down the capacious gullet. It is a show not to be missed.

These great birds are social animals and nest in large colonies called rookeries. The nests are placed in the tops of the largest trees, often reaching sixty or eighty feet above the ground. Built of sticks the nests are three or four feet across and a foot deep. To be near a rookery during the nesting season is quite an experience. The adult birds are landing in the treetops on stilt-like legs, wings held high for balance. The young in the nests are emitting loud cackling sounds and the returning adults have gullets full of fish and other prey which they regurgitate into the mouths of the noisy young. In addition there is a musty odor that permeates the air, resulting from large amounts of heron droppings covering the trees below. This so-called "whitewash" is a strong fertilizer and often kills the trees in which the herons nest.

The lives of great blue herons have not always been so tranquil. A bit more than a hundred years ago these birds were being slaughtered to satisfy the millenary trade; their plume-like feathers were placed on women's hats. So many birds were killed that extinction was eminent. Fortunately federal and state protection came just in the nick of time.

All the photographs in this small book were taken by Bud Simpson in Logan, Ohio at wetland areas near his home. To get such intimate photos was an amazing feat considering the time and patience involved. Obviously this was a labor of love and the entire book speaks to the wild beauty that surrounds us.



It all starts here; in the Heron rookery. Many Great Blue Herons gather communally, sometimes filling many trees with what appears to be, loosely built nests of sticks and twigs. The males bring the material to the nest and the female inserts the twigs into just the right spot for a strong structure.



This photograph shows but part of a rookery. Other nearby sycamore trees are not shown here, but still have about the same density of nests as these. These nests are near completion of their yearly refurbishing.