

## Great Blue Heronosaur

While many of our locally breeding birds have abandoned us to spend winter around the equator, a few stalwarts remain behind. The most majestic is the great blue heron. This wader, almost five feet tall and weighing up to eight pounds, is pretty much a can't-miss sighting on the canal or the banks of the Potomac, even for non-birders. As long as there is free flowing open water where they can stalk small fish—their main prey—they will brave the occasional blizzard.

Great blue herons have become so habituated to strollers and joggers along the towpath that they seem to ignore us. If spooked, they do fly off—often with a harsh croak that sounds like disgust personified and a slow flapping of their giant wings. What a breathtaking exit.

Our imaginations might also take flight from the here and now to ponder: How far removed is our local giant heron from the aerial dinosaurs portrayed in last year's film, *Jurassic World*? The massive wings, the long spear-like beak, the snake-like neck folded back when it flies; the great blue heron practically shouts prehistoric.

The Pteranodons filling *Jurassic World*'s skies are technically flying reptiles descended from a non-dinosaur lineage. According to a new consensus among paleontologists, modern birds like our great blue heron, however, derive ultimately from theropod dinosaurs. The first bird, *Archaeopteryx*, had many reptilian features. So in this case, if the heron looks like a dinosaur, flies like a dinosaur, paleontologists give us the leeway to call birds modern-day dinosaurs.

Among the 64 species of herons and egrets worldwide, ours is a contemporary monster. Only two are larger, the Goliath heron of sub-Saharan Africa and the white-bellied, a highly endangered heron of Bhutan, numbering now less than 200 in the wild. I have been privileged to see both and many others in my travels around the world. As a family, herons are truly cosmopolitan. For some reason still unknown to biologists, the black-crowned night heron (see *Village News* for November 2013) is found in almost every country on Earth.

The great blue heron ranges widely across North America and further south. It even comes in colors: there is an all-white version (sometimes called the great white heron), for example, that is found throughout the Florida Keys. There is also an intermediate model called Würdemann's heron, also resident in Margaritaville. Würdemann's heron has the head and neck of the great white and the back end of a great blue.

Many species, like our great blue heron, feed at night. Others hunt in daylight. Two of the most striking members of the family, the black heron of East Africa and the tri-colored heron of North



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Great Blue Heron

America, have a diabolical hunting technique to nab fish. They bring their wings up around them and stand motionless, waiting for the fish to swim to a safe spot in the shade under the faux-umbrella created by the birds. Then the shade vanishes and the last thing a fish sees is a flash of sun and a beak. Some tropical herons toss bits of fruit and insects into the water to lure in fish and then spear them. Bait-and-switch and slight-of-wing are but two of natural selection's magical tricks.

Just as storks and cranes have mythological associations—the former delivering wealth and babies, the latter a symbol of happiness and eternal youth—so do herons. Most Native American tribes viewed the heron as especially wise and a curious and determined stalker. The Iroquois considered a great blue heron sighting as a good omen for a successful hunt.

To those of us who hurry along in life, the great blues we see wading patiently can serve as a simple reminder: to slow down, pause, and look carefully under the logs and stones of life. Of course, there may be another explanation for why you see herons standing still in the day time with their feet in the water: they could simply be groggy, as they tend to hunt at night.

You typically find the great blue heron standing alone, away from others of its kind. In this they may serve us as another reminder as well: being alone much of the time is not the end of the world. After all, great blue herons have been living in relative isolation from one another for millions of years and are still going strong. —