

The Little Blue Heron is found throughout the southeastern United States.

Although it often lives near salt water, it is mainly an inland bird, preferring freshwater areas such as ponds, lakes, marshes, and swamps. It may also sometimes occupy flooded and dry grasslands and marine coastlines. It is present at Corkscrew every month of the year, but its numbers around the boardwalk decrease during dry downs.

The Little Blue Heron is the only heron species in which first-year birds and adults show dramatically different coloration: first-year birds are pure white while adults are blue. The first year birds can and do breed while white, but they are generally not as successful.

Adult Little Blue Herons are about two feet tall with a wingspan of around 40 inches. The bill is blue gray (bright blue during breeding) at the base with a black tip. The eyes are yellow (green when breeding), legs and feet are gray to greenish gray (very dark, almost black, during breeding). The sexes are similar but the female is slightly smaller.

The Little Blue Heron breeds in various freshwater and estuarine habitats. Courtship is simple.

Prior to mating, males stretch their necks upward with the bill pointing up, and then assume a crouched posture. Movements include bill snapping, vocalizing, and neck swaying. If a female is impressed, she approaches the male.

Their first encounter can be very aggressive but after a while, this is replaced with signs of affection such as feather nibbling and neck crossing. The male then gathers sticks to present to the female, raising his plumes and nibbling her feathers as she places the sticks into a nest structure.

The Little Blue Heron nest is a platform of long sticks in trees or shrubs, lined with green vegetation. They nest in colonies with other herons and only produce one brood per year.

Eggs are laid in April; four to five eggs are typical. This process takes 5-8 days, with one egg being laid every other

Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea*



day. Both sexes incubate the eggs until they hatch in 22-24 days, and then the parents quickly remove the egg shells from the nest.

It may take about five days for all of the chicks to emerge. Although the young can raise their heads, they spend most of their time lying on the nest floor. Both parents feed them by dropping food into the nest and later placing it directly into the chicks' bills.

At around three weeks, the young leave the nest for short trips along surrounding branches. At one month, chicks are able to fly and periodically leave the nest area. Soon after, at six to seven weeks, the young are on their own. Little Blue Herons have been recorded as living more than seven years in the wild.

While hunting, adults are loners, but they nest together in small or large monospecific colonies at the edges of colonies of other species.

Little Blue Herons feed mainly during daylight hours. They are carnivorous, their diet consisting of fish, frogs,

lizards, snakes, turtles, and some crustaceans such as crayfish and shrimp. They eat more insects than the larger herons, especially aquatic insects and spiders. They will also walk in branches looking for anoles and treefrogs. When swamps and marshes become dry, they live on grasshoppers, crickets, beetles and other grassland insects.

Adult herons usually forage alone while immatures tend to feed in groups. The white plumage may signal a good foraging place to distant birds.

Little Blue Herons are not energetic birds. They may sometimes walk quickly or even run, but they usually walk slowly and daintily.

Their long legs enable them to wade into the water, where they walk along an area in order to locate prey. They often retrace steps or stand motionless. Foraging is slow and methodical, walking, peering, moving along to a new spot, and stretching the long neck to peer into the water. The long bill is used to jab and eat the prey. The heron's prey capture success rate is about 60 percent.

They are usually silent, but sometimes make a low clucking or croaking sound. Their sounds during fighting are much different and resemble the screams of parrots. Generally, the call is a single harsh croak.

Cool facts

The Little Blue Heron's middle toe has "teeth" along one side which are used as a comb to scratch its upper neck, throat, and top and sides of its head.

The Snowy Egret tolerates the close proximity of white Little Blue Herons. A white Little Blue Heron catches more fish in the company of Snowy Egrets than when alone. This relationship may be one reason why young Little Blue Herons stay white for a year.

Another advantage of white plumage is that young Little Blue Herons are more readily able to integrate into mixed-species flocks of white herons, thus gaining a measure of protection against predators.