

BLUE HERON COLONIES

Few people have been fortunate enough to see a great blue heron colony and few sights are as impressive as these giants of the bird family perched on nests and surrounding trees or wheeling protectively above their home. Except for the great white heron of Southern Florida, this species is the largest of its' family with a wingspan of about 6 feet. It often travels high in its wanderings, aided by telescopic sight in picking out small bits of water at a great distance. A common sight in weedy bays off the beaten path, it can often be seen standing patiently for hours on stilt-like legs waiting for some unwary fish or frog to venture within striking distance of its formidable bill.

There are two known colonies near Manitowadge, one between Loken Lake and Thompson Lake and the other on an island in Dotted Lake. The Dotted Lake colony boasts about 30 nests of which approximately 50% are active. This colony has been active for many years, no doubt attracted by the abundance of food in the form of perch and a small species of sucker which averages 8" - 10", just the right size for herons to swallow. Dotted Lake and adjoining Dead Otter Lake are unique because of the total absence of native game fish, with the sole exception of yellow perch. In an effort to fill this niche, an extensive stocking program in 1967 was initiated with the introduction of 10,000 lake trout and 28,000 rainbow trout. Lake Trout have been known to reach 7 pounds and rainbow 3 pounds or more.

Another interesting facet of Dotted Lake is a small rocky island, smaller than the average living room, which is home to a colony of common Terns. The young of these birds, which also return year after year, are at this time of year mere balls of tan coloured fluff with chocolate coloured spots not unlike the colour of the rocks which comprise their home.

Great blue herons nest in colonies of up to 100 nests or more, the larger colonies being further south. The nests, little more than a jumble of coarse twigs and sticks, are usually built in the topos of large trees, mostly poplar or birch in this region, and are used from year to year. The highly acidic droppings, gradually kill the nest trees and the herons must relocate. Wind also plays havoc with the shakey nests which are often located in rotten trees. Three to five eggs, usually four, are deposited and incubated, by both sexes. This takes about four weeks.

A visit to Dotted Lake, May 7th of this year, found the herons already sitting on eggs.

This is approximately one month later than

for the Lake Erie area. On July 1st, when the location was visited again, many nests were seen to contain bobbing heads, some as many as four. Most appeared to be about 2/3 fully grown but lacked complete feather development, especially the flight feathers.

It is important that these nests be observed only from a distance, preferably by boat, because the herons, like all parents, become extremely agitated by suspected danger to their young in the form of human intruders. In the ensuing confusion and excitement, the young can fall from their nests and be either killed in the fall, eaten by predators or merely abandoned and left to starve. Unwary or adventurous people, foolish enough to attempt climbing a nest tree may find themselves wearing a cast for the summer as a result of a fall from a rotten tree. One may even lose an eye when pierced by the spear-like bill of a diving protective mother.

The federal Migratory Birds Convention Act makes it illegal to destroy this picturesque bird.

L.J. Haas,
District Manager.

