

= Grey heron =

The grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*) is a long @-@ legged predatory wading bird of the heron family , Ardeidae , native throughout temperate Europe and Asia and also parts of Africa . It is resident in much of its range , but some populations from the more northern parts migrate southwards in autumn . A bird of wetland areas , it can be seen around lakes , rivers , ponds , marshes and on the sea coast . It feeds mostly on aquatic creatures which it catches after standing stationary beside or in the water or stalking its prey through the shallows .

Standing up to a metre tall , adults weigh from 1 to 2 kg (2 @.@ 2 to 4 @.@ 4 lb) . They have a white head and neck with a broad black stripe that extends from the eye to the black crest . The body and wings are grey above and the underparts are greyish @-@ white , with some black on the flanks . The long , sharply pointed beak is pinkish @-@ yellow and the legs are brown .

The birds breed colonially in spring in " heronries " , usually building their nests high in trees . A clutch of usually three to five bluish @-@ green eggs is laid . Both birds incubate the eggs for a period of about 25 days , and then both feed the chicks , which fledge when seven or eight weeks old . Many juveniles do not survive their first winter , but if they do , they can expect to live for about five years .

In Ancient Egypt , the deity Bennu was depicted as a heron in New Kingdom artwork . In Ancient Rome , the heron was a bird of divination . Roast heron was once a specially @-@ prized dish ; when George Neville became Archbishop of York in 1465 , four hundred herons were served to the guests .

= = Description = =

The grey heron is a large bird , standing up to 100 cm (39 in) tall and measuring 84 ? 102 cm (33 ? 40 in) long with a 155 ? 195 cm (61 ? 77 in) wingspan . The body weight can range from 1 @.@ 02 ? 2 @.@ 08 kg (2 @.@ 2 ? 4 @.@ 6 lb) . The plumage is largely ashy @-@ grey above , and greyish @-@ white below with some black on the flanks . Adults have the head and neck white with a broad black supercilium that terminates in the slender , dangling crest , and bluish @-@ black streaks on the front of the neck . The scapular feathers are elongated and the feathers at the base of the neck are also somewhat elongated . Immature birds lack the dark stripe on the head and are generally duller in appearance than adults , with a grey head and neck , and a small , dark grey crest . The pinkish @-@ yellow beak is long , straight and powerful , and is brighter in colour in breeding adults . The iris is yellow and the legs are brown and very long .

The main call is a loud croaking " fraaank " , but a variety of guttural and raucous noises are heard at the breeding colony . The male uses an advertisement call to encourage a female to join him at the nest , and both sexes use various greeting calls after a pair bond has been established . A loud , harsh " schaah " is used by the male in driving other birds from the vicinity of the nest and a soft " gogogo " expresses anxiety , as when a predator is nearby or a human walks past the colony . The chicks utter loud chattering or ticking noises .

= = Taxonomy and evolution = =

Heron is a fairly ancient lineage and first appeared in the fossil record in the Paleogene period ; very few fossil herons have been found however . By seven million years ago (the late Miocene) , birds closely resembling modern forms and attributable to modern genera had appeared .

Heron is members of the family Ardeidae , and the majority of extant species are in the subfamily Ardeinae and known as true or typical herons . This subfamily includes the herons and egrets , the green herons , the pond herons , the night herons and a few other species . The grey heron belongs in this subfamily and is placed in the genus *Ardea* , which also includes the cattle egret and the great egret . The grey heron was first described in 1758 by the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus who gave it the name *Ardea cinerea* . The scientific name comes from Latin *ardea* " heron " , and *cinerea* , " ash @-@ grey " (from *cineris* ashes) .

Four subspecies are recognised :

A. c. cinerea ? Linnaeus , 1758 : nominate , found in Europe , Africa , western Asia

A. c. jouyi ? Clark , 1907 : found in eastern Asia

A. c. firasa ? Hartert , 1917 : found in Madagascar

A. c. monicae ? Jouanin & Roux , 1963 : found on islands off Banc d 'Arguin , Mauritania .

It is closely related and similar to the North American great blue heron (*Ardea herodias*) , which differs in being larger , and having chestnut @-@ brown flanks and thighs , and to the cocoi heron (*Ardea cocoi*) from South America that forms a superspecies with . Some authorities believe that the subspecies *A. c. monicae* should be considered a separate species . It has been known to hybridise with the great egret (*Ardea alba*) , the little egret (*Egretta garzetta*) , the great blue heron and the purple heron (*Ardea purpurea*) . The Australian white @-@ faced heron is often incorrectly called a grey heron . In Ireland , the grey heron is often colloquially called a " crane " .

= = Distribution and habitat = =

The grey heron has an extensive range throughout most of the Palearctic ecozone . The range of the nominate subspecies *A. c. cinerea* extends to 70 ° North in Norway and 66 ° North in Sweden , but otherwise its northerly limit is around 60 ° North across the rest of Europe and Asia eastwards as far as the Ural Mountains . To the south , its range extends to northern Spain , France , central Italy , the Balkans , the Caucasus , Iraq , Iran , India and Myanmar (Burma) . It is also present in Africa south of the Sahara Desert , the Canary Islands , Morocco , Algeria , Tunisia and many of the Mediterranean Islands . It is replaced by *A. c. jouyi* in eastern Siberia , Mongolia , eastern China , Hainan , Japan and Taiwan . In Madagascar and the Aldabra Islands , the subspecies *A. c. firasa* is found , while the subspecies *A. c. monicae* is restricted to Mauritania and offshore islands .

Over much of its range , the grey heron is resident , but birds from the more northerly parts of Europe migrate southwards , some remaining in central and southern Europe , others travelling on to Africa south of the Sahara Desert .

Within its range , the grey heron can be found anywhere with suitable watery habitat that can supply its food . The water body needs to be either shallow enough , or have a shelving margin in which it can wade . Although most common in the lowlands it also occurs in mountain tarns , lakes , reservoirs , large and small rivers , marshes , ponds , ditches , flooded areas , coastal lagoons , estuaries and the sea shore . It sometimes forages away from water in pasture , and it has been recorded in desert areas , hunting for beetles and lizards . Breeding colonies are usually near feeding areas but exceptionally may be up to 8 kilometres (5 mi) away , and birds sometimes forage as much as 20 kilometres (12 mi) from the nesting site .

= = Behavior = =

The grey heron has a slow flight , with its long neck retracted (S @-@ shaped) . This is characteristic of herons and bitterns , and distinguishes them from storks , cranes , and spoonbills , which extend their necks . It flies with slow wing @-@ beats and sometimes glides for short distances . It sometimes soars , circling to considerable heights , but not as often as the stork . In spring , and occasionally in autumn , birds may soar high above the heronry and chase each other , undertake aerial manoeuvres or swoop down towards the ground . The birds often perch in trees , but spend much time on the ground , striding about or standing still for long periods with an upright stance , often on a single leg .

= = Diet and feeding = =

Fish , amphibians , small mammals and insects are taken in shallow water with the heron 's long bill . It has also been observed catching and killing juvenile birds such as ducklings , and occasionally takes birds up to the size of a water rail . It may stand motionless in the shallows , or on a rock or sandbank beside the water , waiting for prey to come within striking distance . Alternatively , it

moves slowly and stealthily through the water with its body less upright than when at rest and its neck curved in an " S " . It is able to straighten its neck and strike with its bill with great rapidity .

Small fish are swallowed head first , and larger prey and eels are carried to the shore where they are subdued by being beaten on the ground or stabbed by the bill . They are then swallowed , or have hunks of flesh torn off . The bird regurgitates pellets of indigestible material such as fur , bones and the chitinous remains of insects . The main periods of hunting are around dawn and dusk , but it is also active at other times of day . At night it roosts in trees or on cliffs , where it tends to be gregarious .

= = = Breeding = = =

This species breeds in colonies known as heronries , usually in high trees close to lakes , the seashore or other wetlands . Other sites are sometimes chosen , and these include low trees and bushes , bramble patches , reed beds , heather clumps and cliff ledges . The same nest is used year after year until blown down ; it starts as a small platform of sticks but expands into a bulky nest as more material is added in subsequent years . It may be lined with smaller twigs , strands of root or dead grasses , and in reed beds , it is built from dead reeds . The male usually collects the material while the female constructs the nest . Breeding activities take place between February and June . When a bird arrives at the nest , a greeting ceremony occurs in which each partner raises and lowers its wings and plumes . In continental Europe , and elsewhere , nesting colonies sometimes include nests of the purple heron and other heron species .

Courtship involves the male calling from the chosen nesting site . On the arrival of the female , both birds participate in a stretching ceremony , in which each bird extends its neck vertically before bringing it backwards and downwards with the bill remaining vertical , simultaneously flexing its legs , before returning to its normal stance . The snapping ceremony is another behaviour where the neck is extended forward , the head is lowered to the level of the feet and the mandibles are vigorously snapped together . This may be repeated twenty to forty times . When the pairing is settled , the birds may caress each other by attending to the other bird 's plumage . The male may then offer the female a stick which she incorporates into the nest . At this , the male becomes excited , further preening the female and copulation takes place .

The clutch of eggs usually numbers three to five , though as few as two and as many as seven eggs have been recorded . The eggs have a matt surface and are greenish @-@ blue , averaging 60 mm x 43 mm (2 @.@ 36 in x 1 @.@ 69 in) . The eggs are normally laid at two @-@ day intervals and incubation usually starts after the first or second egg has been laid . Both birds take part in incubation and the period lasts for about twenty @-@ five days . Both parents bring food for the young . At first the chicks seize the adult 's bill from the side and extract regurgitated food from it . Later the adult disgorges the food at the nest and the chicks squabble for possession . They fledge at seven to eight weeks . There is usually a single generation each year , but two broods have been recorded .

The oldest recorded bird lived for twenty @-@ three years but the average life expectancy in the wild is about five years . Only about a third of juveniles survive into their second year , many falling victim to predation .

= = = City life = = =

Grey herons have the ability to live in cities where habitats and nesting space are available . In the Netherlands , the grey heron has established itself over the past decades in great numbers in urban environments . In cities such as Amsterdam , they are ever present and well adapted to modern city life . They hunt as usual , but also visit street markets and snackbars . Some individuals make use of people feeding them at their homes or share the catch of recreational fishermen . Similar behaviour on a smaller scale has been reported in Ireland . Garden ponds stocked with ornamental fish are attractive to herons , and may provide young birds with a learning opportunity on how to catch easy prey .

Heron have been observed visiting water enclosures in zoos , such as spaces for penguins , otters , pelicans , and seals , and taking food meant for the animals on display .

= = Predators and parasites = =

Being large birds with powerful beaks , grey herons have few predators as adults , but the eggs and young are more vulnerable . The adult birds do not usually leave the nest unattended , but may be lured away by marauding crows or kites . A dead grey heron found in the Pyrenees is thought to have been killed by an otter . The bird may have been weakened by harsh winter weather causing scarcity of its prey .

A study performed by Sitko and Heneberg in the Czech Republic between 1962 and 2013 suggested that central European grey herons host 29 species of parasitic worms . The dominant species consisted of *Apharyngostrophia cornu* (67 % prevalence) , *Posthodiplostomum cuticola* (41 % prevalence) , *Echinochasmus beleocephalus* (39 % prevalence) , *Uroproctepisthmium bursicola* (36 % prevalence) , *Neogryporhynchus cheilancristrotus* (31 % prevalence) , *Desmidocercella numidica* (29 % prevalence) and *Bilharziella polonica* (5 % prevalence) . Juvenile grey herons were shown to host fewer species , but the intensity of infection was higher in the juveniles than in the adult herons . Of the digenean flatworms found in central European grey herons , 52 % of the species likely infected their definitive hosts outside central Europe itself , in the pre @-@ migratory , migratory , or wintering quarters , despite the fact that a substantial proportion of grey herons do not migrate to the south .

= = In human culture = =

In Ancient Egypt , the bird deity Bennu , associated with the sun , creation , and rebirth , was depicted as a heron in New Kingdom artwork .

In Ancient Rome , the heron was a bird of divination that gave an augury (sign of a coming event) by its call , like the raven , stork , and owl .

Roast heron was once a specially @-@ prized dish in Britain for special occasions such as state banquets . For the appointment of George Neville as Archbishop of York in 1465 , four hundred herons were served to the guests . Young birds were still being shot and eaten in Romney Marsh in 1896 . Two grey herons feature in a stained glass window of the church in Selborne , Hampshire .

The English surnames Earnshaw , Hernshaw , Herne , and Heron all derive from the heron , the suffix -shaw meaning a wood , referring to a place where herons nested .