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THE ARTISTIC HERON OF OUR SHORELINES

by

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The great blue heron has no rival as a picturesque feature of our landscape, or oftener the waterscape. Standing motionless on the muddy flats with bill rigid and pointed, or flapping slowly over the scene, he lends just that touch of life that pleases the eye. For centuries, the Japanese have shown appreciative<sup>insight</sup> of the values of outdoor life for their decorative work, and the heron has been one of their most striking subjects.

This heron, commonly called crane, is a common sight around ponds, lakes, and rivers in all parts of our country. He is a part of Oregon's shallow sandbars and sloping banks like a background of green trees. As a solitary fisherman, he is the bit of life that draws the whole to a focus. One sees him standing as motionless as a stick. He is more patient than any angler. A minnow or frog swims past, and there is a lightening flash of that pointed bill as he pins it a foot below the surface. Disturb him, and he deliberately spreads a pair of wings that fans six feet of air and dangles his long legs to the next stand just out of range.

When a fisherman along some water course glances at a heron or kingfisher and jumps at the conclusion that these birds should be peppered with a shot gun, it is a good indication that he is not a real sportsman. Birds are a part of nature's beauty and they live for a purpose. A true sportsman is a lover of the woods and streams, fields and flowers, fish, birds and mammals. Even if an angler had the proof that a heron caught a trout though it is almost always a conclusion jumped at, the study by bird

experts shows that the heron lives on slow-swimming fish of no economic value. His menu consists largely of tadpoles, suckers, salamanders, and even mice and gophers.

To be sure, sometimes where a fish hatchery is located and a pond is full of fingerlings, a heron may discover <sup>the</sup> abundant supply of food. He is no different from any other hunter. He may be compared with a hen that hops over a fence into a new planted garden, or a cow that gets a chance to slip into a corn field.

Years ago a few miles north of Portland, there was a heron village of two hundred houses in a fir forest on the hillside above the river. Every home was a sky-scraper. Not a single nest was less than a hundred feet up. Some were nearly a hundred and sixty. These were the feathered <sup>fishers</sup> that used to hunt the Columbia and Willamette for many miles. Then when people began to move in, the heron colony changed to another fir forest just outside of the city limits. With the spread of the residential section, the herons had to seek a wilder wilderness area. A difference of opinion must have arisen among the heron leaders. The colony divided and some moved south to start a new village in the forested area across the river from Jennings Lodge.

In the middle of summer, one sees few herons around this settlement in the day time. The birds fly off to the north where they can find plenty of young carp in the shallow waters around Sauvies Island. Each day with the setting of the sun, one hears the clattering call of the young herons begging for food, and in the silence of the night the continuous clacking reverberates across the river.

Of all the sights and feelings of a bird lover, the most

lasting perhaps, is when he first steps from the quieter woods scenes and suddenly emerges into the very heart of a busy bird town. The eyes pop as wide and the pulse beats as fast as that of a backwoods boy when he first walks into the midst of a modern three-ringed circus in full swing.

With the lack of elevators, it takes the biggest reserve of nerve and muscle to reach this village, but one may sit on the wooded hillside far below and take in the busy scenes of family life. From two to five brush-heap houses, the size of a wash-tub, are carefully balanced and securely fastened in the top limbs of each tree. Gaunt, long-legged citizens stand about the airy doorways and gossip in hoarse creaks. Residents come and go, some flapping in from the feeding grounds with craws full of fish and frogs. Others sweep down the avenues between the pointed firs with departing guttural squawks.

One of the most difficult and dangerous feats of bird photography ever done in a tree-top was in the old heron colony down the river from Portland. H. T. Bohlman had selected the most climbable-looking stronghold in the heronry where the nearest nest was up a hundred and thirty feet. He wanted a picture of the nest and eggs. After the long arduous ascent of the tree, he found the nest contained newly hatched birds. Just fifteen across in the branches of an adjoining tree, was a nest containing four eggs. The photographer strapped himself carefully in the branches and wrapped his legs about the trunk. With a rope he lassoed the broken end of a limb on the other tree and by slipping the cord back and forth, worked the rope back to the trunk. A slow steady pull and the tops of the two trees bent closer together. The tension became

stronger and stronger between the ~~xxx~~ trees until at four feet it looked like a huge catapult that might suddenly be sprung and shoot the climber backward into space. In another instant an aerial bridge was formed in the tree-tops, and the cameraman secured his prize.

Mother Nature has built the heron in an extremely practical manner. She dressed him in colors of sky and water. She did not plant his eyes in the top of his head as she did the woodcock, because he is not likely to be attacked by enemies from above. She placed them right on the lower sloping side of his head so he could look directly down at his feet without the slightest movement. She let his legs grow too long for perching conveniently in a tree- just so he could wade in deep enough to fish. She gave him a dagger shaped bill at the end of a neck that was both long enough to reach bottom as well as to keep his eyes high above water, so he could see and aim accurately at the creature below the surface.

It is said that occasionally a pair of great blue herons will build an isolated nest, but I have never found one. As a rule, herons like a remote fishing preserve of their own, but they love to live in a small village community to which they can return each evening and enjoy the social life among neighbors and dwell in mutual protection.

A heron adapts himself to circumstances. One would naturally think that a bird of such proportions and with such long legs would find a nesting place on the ground. In the lake region of southern Oregon, we did find the great blue heron nesting on the ground, surrounded on all sides by gulls, cormorants, pelicans, and terns. But in other portions of our country a colony of these birds will select the tallest firs deep in the forest or other trees in the midst of a swamp.