



Blue Cranes In the Trees

We have reached one of my favorite times of the year on the Chippewa National Forest: spring migration. That special time when the mornings become noisy again, so full are they with the sounds of our returning birds. You can hear them as you lay in bed with your window open. Despite the damp and chilly weather, it's worth having that window cracked, even if ever so slightly, just so you can hear the sounds of spring.

Covering the bird feeders, and littering the ground below them, are our early returning migrants. The juncos, purple finches, grackles, blackbirds, fox sparrows, mourning doves, and others join the goldfinches, chickadees, woodpeckers, and grosbeaks we were already feeding. Occasionally a sharp-shinned hawk speeds through, in hopes of a fresh, feathered meal.

Dipping and rising over the wet field beyond is a northern harrier, and on warmer evenings, a snipe begins its aerial display. To my great delight, there is a pair of Sandhill cranes in our neighborhood this year. I do so hope they nest successfully!

I have been on a birding bender. My mother and I made the trip down to the Platte River in Nebraska to see the great migration of the Sandhill cranes. As we caught the sounds of the first birds, I told her it was time for the joy to begin.

Dodging spring snowstorms, I returned to the Chippewa to lakes still frozen hard and barely open rivers, just in time to check out one of the heron rookeries I know. I did not think the birds would be back yet, but as an eagle soared past the tops of the red pines, a ruckus arose and thirty or so herons got up from the trees, swirling in protest.

Great blue herons, or as my husband likes to refer to them, Blue Cranes, are a relatively common sight on the Chippewa National Forest. Mostly, people see them along the edges of water, quietly wading along stalking their prey. An interesting bird, they stand about 4 feet tall and have a 6 foot wing-span, but only weigh in at perhaps 6 pounds, due to their hollow bones. Primarily a fish-eater, these herons will also eat almost anything within striking distance, including frogs, snakes, small mammals, birds, and insects. They will use their long, strong bill to impale larger fish, giving the spiny ones a shake to break or relax their sharp spines before they gulp them on down.

Great blue herons nest in colonies known as rookeries, generally in the trees. On the Chippewa, rookeries are often found in flooded timber, and this species is benefitted by the activities of

beavers. Water underneath their nests helps to cut down on predation of the eggs and baby birds, at least from the kinds of predators that come from the ground and climb trees. Eagles are another story. Eagles, ravens, and crows are all known to prey on heron eggs and nestlings. Bald eagles are also capable of taking adult herons. So it is intriguing to me that this particular rookery occurs within plain view of an eagle nest. I wonder if the relatively dense tops of the red pine they are nesting in help to provide a level of protection for the rookery. I also wonder if the eagles let up when the ice goes out and fish become an abundant food source for all.

Male herons arrive first at the colony, and settle on the nest sites, from whence they court passing females. The pairs are mostly monogamous during the breeding season, but choose new partners every year. Nesting in a group improves the chances that any given pair will be successful. After all, there is a chance that the eagle will eat someone else's offspring rather than yours. I find it interesting that despite nesting in groups, when the birds are away from the colony, they defend their feeding territories from other herons.

The nests are built of sticks, which are collected mostly by the males. They gather the sticks from the ground, trees, and unguarded or abandoned nests. I guess it pays to stick close to your nest. The male presents the sticks to the female, who does most of the actual nest building, lining it with pine needles, moss, reeds, dry grass, and the like. The birds trade off incubating the eggs and feeding the young. As the young get older, they get less and less attention at the nest site. Poor weather can lead to hypothermia and death of the nestlings.

We have tracked rookery sites on the Chippewa while doing eagle nest surveys from an airplane. Herons are very messy nesters, and the trees can be littered with egg shells, uneaten fish, and the whitewash of the birds. Heron droppings are very acidic. Eventually, even if the trees that support the rookery were alive when the colony began, they will die and decay. I notice that a few of the red pines at this particular rookery are starting to show stress. Sometimes tree death seems like the reason a colony moves; other times it may relate to disturbance by people or predators. In some areas of the country, high eagle predation can lead to colony abandonment. Sometimes there seems to have been little reason why the colony suddenly changes location.

We made a few trips to the bay that is the home of this rookery. It's a fun place to sit down with a pair of binoculars, because as the water opens up, it brings so many creatures together. You can sit and watch the herons, the local pair of eagles, quite a variety of ducks, some pelicans, a few Canada geese, and the



trumpeter swans. I have seen otter and muskrat there; this year a beaver made his presence known a couple of times with heavy slaps of his tail. All of this is against the backdrop of the noise and bustle of the rookery. From across the bay come the strangest, almost prehistoric sets of yelps, croaks, and calls that are the heron's vocal repertoire.

The herons at this rookery occur in what is known as the Chippewa Plains Important Bird Area. This IBA covers the Chippewa National Forest, as well as some lands to the east and west of the Forest, and incorporates a variety of Federal, State, County, Tribal, and other lands. A voluntary, science-based program, the IBA program works to identify, monitor, and conserve the most essential habitats for birds. IBAs are international in scope. In partnership with the Minnesota DNR Nongame Wildlife Program, Audubon Minnesota began implementing the IBA program in Minnesota in 2003.

The diversity of our habitats is what makes the Chippewa Plains IBA special. It is rich in public ownership, and mostly forested. We are blessed with a large number and variety of lakes and wetlands, several river systems, and forest communities which vary in stand size and age. Large wild rice beds provide food used by many kinds of waterfowl. We host at least 244 bird species. The area is important to forest interior species, those birds that do not do well in primarily open landscapes where forest cover is fragmented. A waterfowl breeding and migration corridor, in 2011 there were 160,000 ring-necked ducks and 30,000 lesser scaup counted here.

IBAs are not regulatory. It is well recognized that the lands within this IBA are an important economic resource involving timber, fishing, hunting, tourism, wildlife watching, and other recreational pursuits. The wise conservation and use of our natural resources is part of the economic base of this special area.

My latest recreational pursuit involves digging out a bicycle I have not ridden for at least 10 (15?) years, as I've been told it will not only work my heart, but strengthen my core, and heaven knows we could all use a little of that. Also, someone suggested to me that it is a great way to connect with the birds. What could be better?

I was eager to check out how much fun this could be, so this past Sunday after we finished worming the livestock and trimming sheep hooves, dressed in my quilted barn pants and ratty barn coat and still wearing my muddy boots, I took off on a little ride. I recall that the guy at Physical Therapy said that you should start this activity slowly. Just let me assure you that due to the presence of gale force winds and a bike that seems to now have only 2 gears where there used to be 20, you could say that I was not setting any records for speed, distance, or endurance. But the tires held their air, so that was good. If you were among the folks who drove past me that day, I appreciate that you kept your mirth inside your vehicles, and did not feel the need to honk and wave. I have to admit that I did not really notice any birds; maybe next time.

