Great blue heron
*Ardea herodias*

Great blue herons hunt patiently. Standing still for long periods of time while waiting for their prey, they can be almost invisible. Their slim, elegant four-foot figure mimics the reeds and branches of the shoreline. They peer intently into the water, seeking to spear fish, their favorite prey. They stride slowly and deliberately, webbed feet keeping them from sinking into the muddy water as they hardly disturb the surface. Herons forage in rivers, ponds, marshes and wet fields for fish, amphibians, invertebrates, reptiles, insects, birds and even small mammals. They swallow their prey head first and whole.

Worldwide, there are about 60 species of herons. They can feed in salt or fresh water and live in every habitat except very dry deserts, very high mountains, and our planet’s polar regions. The great blue heron, the largest heron in North America, is found only in the western hemisphere. Great blue herons are extremely adaptable, their varied diet accounting for their ability to winter farther north than other smaller herons.

In contrast to their lonesome style of hunting, they nest in noisy colonies called rookeries, usually in the tops of trees, on islands or in swamps that offer some protection against ground predators. Rookeries can consist of just a few great blue herons or hundreds of pairs, sometimes along with several other wading birds including great egrets and black-crowned night-herons.

In early spring, the adult great blue heron carries sticks nearly as long as its body length to build a nest or repair one used last season. If herons are successful in raising young, they’ll return to the same spot to nest each year. A heron rookery can be a noisy place with young herons hollering for their dinner.

Great blue herons are frequently seen along the entire length of the Chicago River and its tributaries. Three active rookeries in the nearby suburbs are to be found at Baker’s Lake in Barrington, Busse Woods in Arlington Heights, and at Almond Marsh in Grayslake. Some of these rookeries have nesting structures built on poles to substitute for the original trees.

Whitford Pond is the only site in the city of Chicago known to have an active great blue heron rookery. Herons were discovered to be nesting there in 2010. The property is owned by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District and was to be leased to The Chicago Police Department as the site for an outdoor firing range. Several organizations, including the Chicago Audubon Society, have worked to protect the site for herons and other wildlife. Not only do great blue herons nest at Whitford Pond, but there is evidence of great egrets, state-endangered birds such as the black-crowned night-heron, and even eagles. The property is isolated; surrounded by landfills on three sides and was used as a staging area for the deep tunnel construction. Nearby Hegewisch Marsh is the nature area where the proposed Ford Environmental Center is to be built.