

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

Great Horned Owl Predation of Great Blue Heron: In May 1984 I discovered a colony of Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*) nesting at King's Bay State Game Area in the northeast corner of Clinton County, NY. I later was informed that the N.Y. State Department of Environmental Conservation already was aware of this heronry. Their people had discovered it a year earlier while doing a timber inventory of the area.

In the winter 1984 I mapped the colony and did an initial census. The heronry is located in a deciduous wooded swamp and measured 2.3 hectares (300 by 825 feet) in area. It stretches from the shoreline of Catfish Bay through a swampy area to an upland area of oak. The initial census found 44 nests in 21 trees. The trees are the largest white oaks, red maple and ash in the area. Each of the nest trees was marked with numbered aluminum tags. A census of the heronry is done annually after the nesting season.

On 21 April 1985 I observed male herons bringing fine twigs to the nest which the female then arranged in the nest. There was considerable activity in the heronry at that time. I repeatedly viewed the heronry from the periphery through late April and May and found surprisingly little activity. By June I became concerned that the heronry had been abandoned. On 14 June I walked through the middle of the heronry and did not see a single heron. Further observation that year led me to believe that at most only one or two nests were productive. On 1 August, I saw two Great Horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*) flying near the heronry. The December census of the heronry found the colony to be down to 34 nests.

The following year I suspected that the heronry had been disturbed again. On 6 June 1986 while near the periphery of the heronry I noticed considerable white guano on the ground along with many large gray feathers. Looking up into the branches of the large white oak in front of me, I saw two young Great Horned Owls. The young still had downy feathers on much of their body. I followed the trail of large feathers back into the heronry. Bent (Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey, Part Two, 306) says "The great horned owl is a ravenous feeder on a great variety of animal life . . . and will take what is most available and most easily caught." The heronry apparently provided the food source for this opportunistic feeder. Bent (*op. cit.*, 308) continues to say that, "The list of birds eaten is a very long one and contains many large species including Canada goose, swan, American bittern etc."

After a second year of predation at the heronry, the winter census indicated a further reduction of nests in the colony down to 25 nests. Five of those nests were very small and ready to fall to the ground. The remaining nests are an indication of just how well built and sturdy these nests can be after repeated use over many years. It is possible that the owl used one of the nests in the heronry for its own. However, I was not able to find any evidence.

It remains to be seen whether the herons will return to the heronry again this year and whether the Great Horned Owls will use it for the third year as a convenient food source.

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