

## HERONS ALONG BIG FLAT ROCK RIVER IN RUSH COUNTY, INDIANA

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The occurrence of the heron family in Indiana is not unusual, and certain species are well known inhabitants of the state. This note is not for the purpose of reporting any new species found in the state, but to call the attention of bird students to the increase in number of one of the species during the past few years; to relate an unusual exhibition of several species together in Orange Township, Rush County, Indiana, one day in 1934; and to give a brief introductory report of a heronry located in this state.

The Little Blue Heron (*Ardea coerulea* L.) is one of the more tropical species of this family (*Ardeidae*). It is reported to breed as far north as southern Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Virginia. and, rarely, along the Atlantic Coast as far north as New Jersey. After the breeding season, it wanders regularly as far north as southern New England, and occasionally or accidentally to Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Colorado. Even in the central part of Indiana it has always been regarded as a rare visitor.

On July 20, 1921, one of us observed a flock of about thirty white birds flying in an easterly direction. They were moving nervously just ahead of a severe wind and electrical storm. A few days later, a group of white birds was reported to be fishing along Big Flat Rock River in the northeast corner of Orange Township, Rush County, a distance of about a mile from where the group was seen in flight. These birds were observed and one was shot and carefully examined. They proved to be young Little Blue Herons (*Ardea coerulea* L.). They were observed fishing this stream for about a month and then disappeared.

Nearly every summer since that time these young birds have appeared in this locality and each time in increasing numbers. During the late summer of 1934 they were present in far greater numbers than heretofore. The authors at that time had the opportunity to cover Big Flat Rock River along its course through Rush County. At any point along the river one could, at nearly any time, observe from one to twenty birds. Along this one stream there must have been hundreds of these young Little Blue Herons.

It is rather interesting to note that no adult Little Blues have been seen in this section of the state, although careful and repeated searches have been made for them. It is evident that the young birds have wandered farther than the adults from the nesting places.

Due to the fact that the young of this species are white, they are often mistaken for the Snowy Egret in fall plumage; but they can be

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differentiated therefrom by the slate-blue markings at the end of the primaries.

On August 21, 1934, while tramping along Big Flat Rock River in the above locality, the authors had the opportunity to identify five species of the family *Ardeidae*, subfamily *Ardeinae*, from the same blind and within a span of not more than five minutes. Four of these were seen at the same time by one of us, and they were all fishing in the shallow water. They were separated by not more than fifty yards distance. Seen here together were two Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*, L.), one American Egret (*Casmerodius egretta* Gmelin), one Black-Crowned Night Heron (*Nycticorax naevius* Boddaert), and four young Little Blue Herons (*Ardea coerulea* L.). Within five minutes or less, a Little Green Heron (*Ardea virescens* L.) flew by, but did not stop to visit with his relatives.

The third portion of this note is to report the existence of a very old heronry on the farm of Mr. Vankirk in the extreme northwest corner of Decatur County, which adjoins Orange Township, Rush County, Indiana. This nesting place of the herons is in one of the largest woods of the section and is about half a mile from any farmhouse or road. It was reported that the Big Blue Herons have been nesting in this same place for about eighty years, but as far as can be determined, there is no accurate record of this.

The authors visited this place during the latter part of August, 1934, long after the nesting season, of course. About fifty nests were seen in trees at that time; but, no doubt, there were more since the foliage was dense and the nests were all high. Practically all the nests were in large beech trees and were grouped closely together in only a small section of the woods. As many as eight nests were counted in one tree. Under nearly every tree bearing nests were the remains of nests which had been blown from the tree. The size of many of the nests was phenomenal, some being five or six feet across and two or three feet deep. Since they were built of branches and sticks of considerable size they must have weighed a hundred pounds or more. Some nests seemed to be smaller, and were, no doubt, those of other species of heron, probably the Black-Crowned Night Heron.

Many carcasses of the Big Blue Herons were found under the nests. These were probably of young birds which had fallen from the nests (all seemed to be of full size) or of birds shot from the trees.

The herons were using this same woods as a roosting place at the time the authors visited the woods. An interesting report of the habits of these birds was given by a native of the community. She reported that the birds fished all day, came back to the woods about five o'clock, rested for an hour or two, and then left again. It is more probable that she saw the Big Blues returning in the afternoon and then later in the evening, just at dusk, the Black-Crowned Night Herons were seen leaving for their night of fishing.

Since the visit to this heronry was made after the nesting season was over, a more complete study of conditions there cannot be given. It is the intention of the authors to make a thorough study of this interesting rendezvous of one family of our more common birds next season, after which a more detailed and more accurate report may be given.