

INTERESTING BEHAVIOUR OF A GREAT BLUE HERON

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In the spring of 1969, I was making underwater observations as part of a walleye spawning study in a small stream in southeast Manitoba. I was swimming downstream, at the surface, wearing a black neoprene rubber "wet" suit, including the headpiece,

Photos by R. J. Gibson

when I saw a Great Blue Heron on the bank, about 25 yards away. I had with me a 35 mm Nikonos underwater camera, and knowing how wary these birds usually are, I thought this worth a picture. I carefully swam down to the bird, taking pictures. Some of these are shown in the accompanying illustrations. The slight blurs on them





were caused by drops of water on the lens. Having approached to within a few feet, I thought the heron would certainly fly, so with camera ready to get the last picture, I swam right underneath the bird, hoping to get a shot of it taking off. Still it did not fly, although obviously concerned. It gave me some very haughty looks, with beak up in the air; it crouched down, as though to fly; it opened and shut its beak; and as it looked straight down at me I hoped it did not think I was a kind of edible fish! I had plenty of time to try different lens openings, and shutter speeds, and finally I used up the remaining film. I swam over to the other bank and climbed out. The heron still did not fly, so I thought it might be trapped or wounded. However, I called to a friend, and as he approached, the heron took off, obviously uninjured.

It is interesting that this Great Blue Heron did not fly from an unknown large animal, and a possible predator, and yet flew from a recognized man. Although this was a single observation, it is worth speculating that other herons may behave the

same way, and if so, could this specific response to man have evolved as an instinct, or would it be learned? It seems unlikely there has been enough time for the former, although some birds act instinctively to some predators, such as ducks to foxes or hawks. If learned, would it be from experience, or from other individuals of the same species? Both could be correct. The latter explanation has been shown to be true for some birds. For example, Konrad Lorenz (*King Solomon's Ring*, 1952), described how jackdaws and crows can communicate to others of the species that individual people might be dangerous to them, so it is conceivable that herons, when gathered together in a heronry, on seeing a man, could communicate to each other the potential danger of man. Perhaps this unusual way of observing a heron will persuade other bird watchers to don diving suits!

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Great Blue Heron

September, 1969