

Camera-Shooting the Great Blue Heron

The Most Thorough-going Student of Beasts and Birds in Canada Goes After the Odd Tree-top Colonies of the Pacific Coast and Northern Ontario

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Photographs by the Author



Four Nests and Three Great Blue Herons, One Sentry on the Peak, Another Nesting, and the Third in Full Flight.



Fritz on His Way, Like a Small Black Bear, up to the Heron's Nest. This Tree Was Very Wiggly.

THE Kwakiutl said we could make it. From my bow seat it looked impossible. The surf ahead roared like a bull. Instinctively I snapped the big camera at it and with trembling fingers hastily plunged the machine back into its rubber bag. There was a terrible howl upon our left and I faced about to see an immense surf wave form the "hollow chamber." This wave was fully half a mile long and about fifteen feet high. As the crest tumbled ahead it spun over and left a long, glass-green, air-filled space, for all the world like a titanic glass-blower's work. In this space there was ample room for all the thirty-foot cedar canoes of all the tribes of Indians on this wild coast. This hollow wave burst with a crash ahead of us that did not assure a dry, safe passage.

"Hyas, paddle!" yelled Laskit.

"Ugh! Ugh!" grunted the other three Coast Indians. I grasped a pointed paddle and worked for dear life. We were on the crest of the surf and to fall back was to roll along the beach in the afterdrag and perish miserably. Along we rode on our wild steed, swaying and tipping, curving and rolling, faster than ever canoe sped with me before we surged along.

"Kla-how-yah" (good-morning), laughed the steersman Laskit, as a tail of the comber half smothered us with its overfall. We were now within a canoe's length of high tide mark, so powerful was this late spring wind and tide. There came a grating, rushing, crashing sound, an Indian yell, a leaping overboard of five dusky paddlers, and lo! we were in calm, smooth water across the bar and behind the spit.

It took a few minutes to paddle-splash out the wet gifts the ocean had flung at us. I, on my front thwart, had been a sort of buffer to the crew, and was most thoroughly soaked, but a glowing sun beat on this little British Columbia river and we stripped to the buff and soon dried out. Ahead of us rose many a mountain range that fed this un-named stream. A marsh bit showed ahead. Here we should find the herons, and, as if to prove it, we caught up with an Indian with a big, greyish-blue bird in his canoe, the first heron I had seen on the Northern Pacific Coast.

"Kla-how-yah!" we called, and he told my men, who, in broken English, translated to me how he had shot the poor bird near the place where they nested. We passed on, and my Gordon setter Daisy, neglected until this moment, took a hand in the game. She started to point. Up went her delicate nose, out went that vibrating tail, and I turned just in time to see the game. The Indian's dog evidently had scented mine, he had leaped to his feet, and the partially stunned heron had instantly taken wing and was now flapping its way swiftly over the trees that lined the river's bank. We gave a shout and a laugh and then an intervening corner hid the little comedy.

To give you a good definition I must use a picture taken from the specimens in the museum at Victoria, B.C. You will notice the full plumage of these birds, exactly as we have them on the eastern side of the continent. Fanning, of excellent memory, divided these birds into great blue and Northwest Coast Herons, as did Mrs. Bailey. With all due deference to my co-workers in that great western field I can find but one Great Blue Heron from Coast to Coast, or, according to the older naturalists, on either North or South America. The rain spoiled my camera work on that trip, so come with us to the Otonabee, the Crooked River of the Mississaugas in Ontario, some three thousand miles from that surf-ridden scene, where some two or three hundred of these great birds have their Heronry in a drowned land ash swamp.

NO mighty waves to threaten us, only the purring of the little engine in the Mowich as she took us swiftly up this winding river, truly it is called Crooked. At times we ran directly for the sun, at others we ran directly away, but we did get there finally and anchored off the mouth of the creek that led to the swamp. We anchored our little launch and piled the cameras into the big sixteen-foot cedar board canoe. What a light, delicate craft after our use of the mighty cedar log canoes of the Kwakiutls, canoes thirty to seventy feet in length, canoes in which whole families journey many days out of sight of land, sleeping and living on the wild surface of that misnamed Pacific Ocean in these mighty hollowed logs.

Along the rush and flag lined creek we sped, disturbing big, repulsive-looking black snakes and parasite-covered, huge snapping turtles. The deep swamp ahead, with its drowned, skeleton-white ash trees, is never an inviting place, even less so when



A Great Blue Heron Reversing Its Flight, and Caught in the Act by the Nimble Graflex-Reflex up a Tree.

these great birds establish their evil-smelling, immense nests upon the big, dead branches. All this drowned land reeks with decay, and the rising wind made some of the tall whitened trees sway ominously. As we paddled in we saw numerous male birds standing on the branches beside the nests, but not until we were almost directly beneath the trees did the females poke their long necks and staring eyes over at the intruders. Our paddles clattered and all the gaunt-looking birds stood up on the big rafts of branches they use for nests. Some of these were regular stacks, huge masses of limbs and branches rebuilt and built upon year after year until they attain a weight of over a hundred pounds. I have tried to lift a fallen nest; it was about six feet across even in its half-crushed condition.

Above our heads, pandemonium. Several hundred huge Herons were trying all at once to express to us their feelings at this unkind intrusion—right in the middle of their busy season, the eggs being well on in incubation, as it was now early in May. In fact, we found in places the two chipped blue halves neatly inserted one within the other by the big mother. These were lying at the foot of the nesting trees, either upon the black, evil-smelling muck, or in the shallow weed-strewn waters.

"Looks like a hard climb," quoth Fritz.

"Try it if you think it best," I answered. He set me and the camera on the top of a treacherous black root which at once began to settle with me. We had to try several others before we found one that would bear the weight of a human being, so general was the decay beneath these old, dead, ash trees. We were watching carefully, as we feared the wind might rise, and this is no place to linger