

Great Blue Heron

Ardea herodias

Throughout the 20th century, Great Blue Herons have been increasing within Ohio. Between 1918 and 1935, Hicks (1935) reported 61 colonies in 33 counties with an estimated statewide population of 1500–2000 pairs. Except for one heronry in Warren County, most of these colonies were confined to the northern half of glaciated Ohio and along the unglaciated plateau in eastern Ohio as far south as Tuscarawas County. However, not all of these colonies were extant at the same time and Hicks was also unaware of some newly established colonies. A large heronry near Fremont was composed of 1118 nests in 1935 (Campbell 1968), indicating that Hicks' population estimate was probably low.

Ohio's population of Great Blue Herons increased in subsequent decades, although this expansion was poorly documented. Only Robbins, C. S., et al. (1986) reported a significant increase in Ohio between 1965 and 1979 based on data obtained from the Breeding Bird Survey routes.

The current distribution of Great Blue Heron colonies within Ohio was initially surveyed during 1980 and 1981 by the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves. The results of this preliminary survey were expanded during the Atlas Project to produce records of 89 colonies scattered across 52 counties; only these colonies are exhibited on the accompanying map. Every colony was not necessarily active each year, particularly small colonies with 10 or fewer pairs. Additionally, a number of small colonies may have been overlooked. The distribution of breeding Great Blue Herons has expanded along the unglaciated Allegheny Plateau where they are more widely distributed than reported by Hicks (1935) and Peterjohn (1989a). Colonies were scattered along the plateau south to Jackson and Athens counties during the Atlas Project and a new heronry was discovered in Pike County during 1989. Within the glaciated counties, a similar range expansion was evident only along the Scioto River south of Columbus. In the western counties, their breeding range has contracted since the 1950s. Great Blue Herons were formerly sporadic breeders in the Cincinnati area with nesting records from Butler and Warren counties (Hicks 1935, Kemsies and Randle 1953). They regularly nested in the Dayton area into the 1960s, including established heronries in Greene and Champaign counties (Mathena et al. 1984). Breeding herons are not currently known from the Illinoian Till Plain and other southwestern counties north to Preble, Montgomery, Champaign and Fayette, although sporadic observations indicate that a few small colonies may be overlooked in these counties, as evidenced by the 1990 report of a small heronry in Clinton County.

Breeding Great Blue Herons are most numerous along western Lake Erie where more than 1000 pairs nest on West Sister Island and other large colonies are located near Sandusky Bay. Large colonies are locally distributed elsewhere in Ohio; heronries with 150–200+ nests are known from Ashtabula, Trumbull, Mahoning, and Huron counties, Buckeye Lake, Senecaville Lake and the Scioto River in Pickaway County. However, most inland heronries are composed of 75 or fewer pairs.

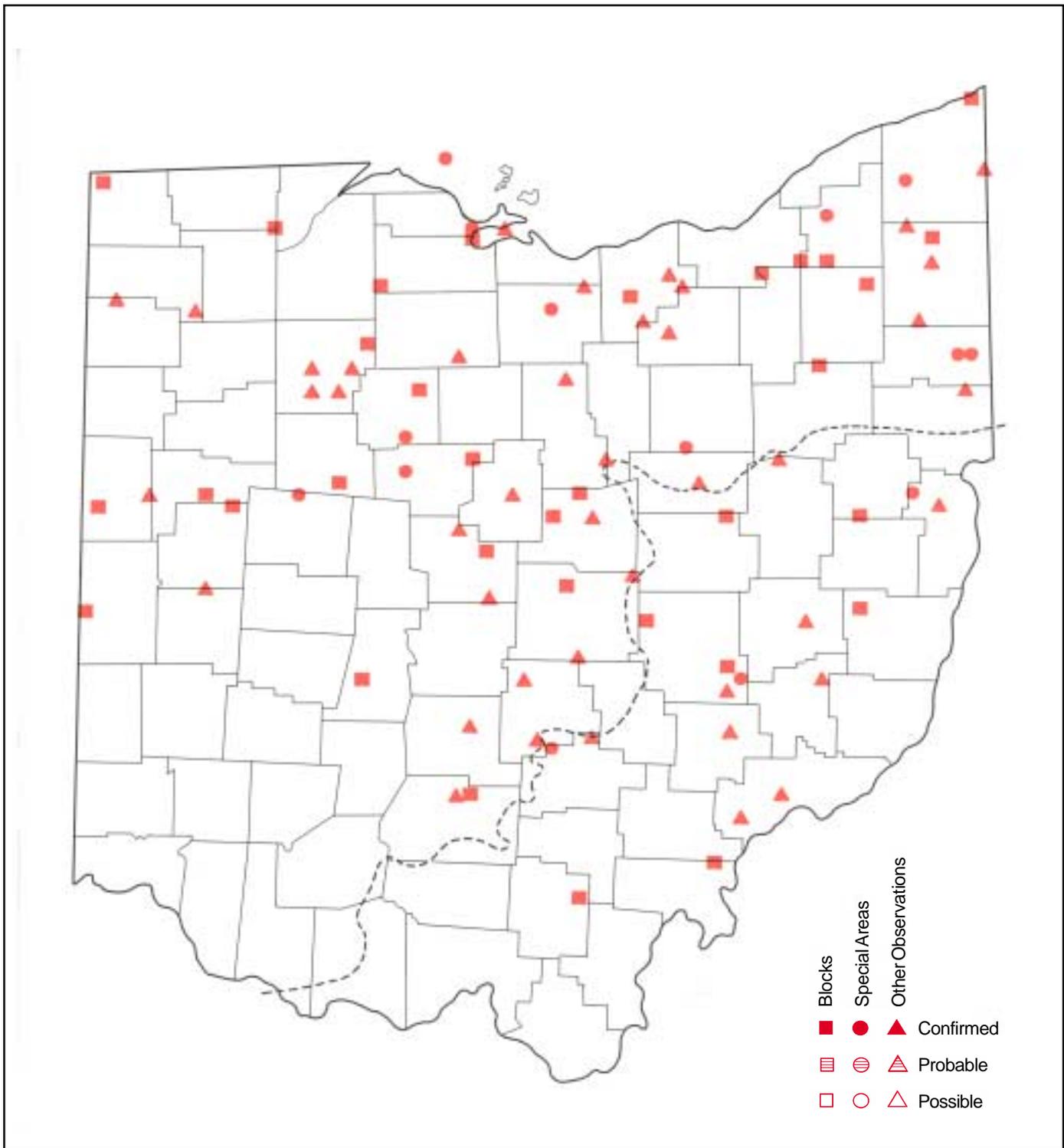


Mike Williams - ODNR Photographer

Great Blue Heron colonies may be located adjacent to lakes, rivers, and marshes, although inland heronries are frequently found in isolated woodlots several miles from any water. Most colonies are placed within large undisturbed woodlots, but Great Blues are also known to utilize scattered dead trees in the middle of lakes. Their nests are invariably placed in the tops of tall trees, frequently at heights of 30–50 feet. Undisturbed large colonies may be occupied for decades while small colonies tend to be unstable and may shift locations every two or three years.

Each spring, male herons are the first arrivals at established colonies and immediately stake their claims to last year's nests. They may appear anytime between late February and mid-March depending upon weather conditions. These males may wait for several weeks until the females return, patiently standing on their nests in all but the most inclement weather.

Once the females return, Great Blues quickly initiate their nesting activities. Nest construction activities occur throughout March and into the first half of April, continuing even when the eggs are being incubated. Nests with eggs have been recorded in central Ohio as early as March 12 but most clutches are not laid until March 25–April 15. By May 10–20, most eggs have hatched and the adult herons are observed making regular visits to the colonies to feed their young. In the central and southern counties the first young herons may leave their nests during the second half of June. The first fledglings appear along Lake Erie by mid-July. Renesting attempts may produce fledgling herons through mid-August.



Analysis of Block Data by Physiographic Region

Physiographic Region	Total Blocks Surveyed	Blocks with Data	% with Data	Regional % for Ohio	Ave. # Individ per BBS Route (1982–1987)
Lake Plain	95	4	4.2	12.1	5.4
Till Plain	271	13	4.8	39.4	0.8
Ill. Till Plain	46	–	–	–	<0.1
Glaciated Plateau	140	9	6.4	27.3	7.6
Unglaciated Plateau	212	7	3.3	21.2	0.4

Summary of Breeding Status

No. of Blocks in Which Species Recorded		
Total	33	4.3%
Confirmed	33	100.0%
Probable	–	–
Possible	–	–