

NatureNotes



Rupert Evershed's monthly diary of the natural world
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Watch out for our herons

I wonder if you've noticed them as you walk along the River Ver? Maybe you haven't and have simply walked on by, oblivious to their presence. It wouldn't surprise me as, despite their size, grey herons are easily missed.

On rainy days they can look more like a bedraggled commuter, long over-coat drenched, hunched over a briefcase at the bus stop – enduring the elements and waiting patiently. It would be easy to assume an Eeyore-like quality to the heron's disposition, resigned and dejected, but this would be wrong for the heron's patient poise is purposeful and belies the fact that they are a top predator.

If the kingfisher relies on diving 'out of the blue' to catch fish, the grey heron, the 'king of fishers', relies on a lightning strike from the grey. Any fish swimming below, at the heron's feet, must surely look up at the heron's grey and white form and assume it's just another grey English day! But at the end of that long, grey neck a yellow bolt of a beak waits to spear with pinpoint accuracy.

I'm never quite sure whether I consider the grey heron an elegant bird or not. It can at times appear ungainly and gangly-legged. They will usually hesitate to fly if you walk past but are cautious enough to launch upwards with an ugly, grating squawk should you pause and make eye contact.

However, if you do get a chance to get close up and watch a heron fishing they are beautiful birds, not in the sense of a fashionable youth, but more like a stately old lady, full of dignity and with a noble, antique quality. A suggestion of wisdom and solemnity is also implicit in the scientific name for the grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*): *cinerea* is a name for the grey matter of the brain and the Latin root word means ash-coloured.

It is perhaps this sage quality that has made the heron a bird of folklore as far back as Ancient Egypt. The Romans believed a calling heron in flight to give an augury of future events – maybe an ill omen of some approaching evil.

In many places the sighting of a flying heron was simply taken as an indication that a storm was approaching, perhaps not totally unfounded as the heron might well be moving away from muddied storm waters. In Britain, the heron was afforded a different kind of respect and served up roasted at banquets on special occasions!

Today the grey heron is a protected bird in Britain and as a result has prospered, benefiting from cleaner rivers, milder winters and not least our penchant for keeping well



Hérons pictured by Andrew Steele.

stocked and often unprotected fish ponds! Surveys in Hertfordshire have shown that there are now over 150 breeding pairs and in St Albans we are lucky enough to be home to up to 12 of those pairs in Verulumium Park.

Nesting in what look like large rookeries on The Lake's two islands the herons are already back in their 'heronries' busy building nests and laying eggs. Thanks to the dedicated work of the local RSPB St Albans group and BTO bird ringers much is known about our local herons.

Every year the herons are closely watched to monitor their breeding successes and whenever possible new chicks are ringed with unique identity rings around their legs. This means that birds can be identified later in their life providing valuable information about their longevity and distribution.

While it seems many of our herons stay local to the River Ver and Colne other birds find new territories outside the region, one bird in 2011 being recovered as far away as Hale in Greater Manchester.

The Verulumium Park heronry provides the perfect place to see the grey herons at their nests and, over the next few months, hopefully witness the birth of their Pterodactyl-like chicks. You might even see a rare treat in the form of the elegant white little egrets that also bred here for the first time in 2014.

To this end the RSPB St Albans group, supported by other local nature groups including HMWT, VVS and WWA, will have a 'HeronWatch' observation stand at the southern end of The Lake with telescopes and binoculars trained on the heronry every weekend, including bank holidays, from March 18 to May 14.

So why not visit the stand and learn about our local herons – there's plenty of other wildlife too and you might even spot Terry, the local terrapin, sunning himself on the island's edge. Equally, if you would like to join HeronWatch for a couple of hours as a volunteer helper, showing visitors the heronry, please email st-albans-rspb@hotmail.co.uk