

HOW EARLY DOES THE GREAT BLUE HERON NEST IN OKLAHOMA?

BY JACK D. TYLER

Ardea herodias inhabits Oklahoma throughout the year, and although some populations are probably sedentary, "considerable numbers" are thought to migrate into and through Oklahoma in spring and fall (Sutton, G.M., 1967, *Oklahoma birds*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 27). Prior to 1992, the earliest published evidence of nesting activity in the state appears to have been on 15 March 1923, when Vera Gilmore collected four eggs from a nest in Tulsa County (Force and Koons,



GREAT BLUE HERON

FIG. 1. Adult near nest photographed at Hog Island, Aransas County, Texas, by Douglas W. Mock in March 1973.

1930, *Wilson Bull.* 42:119). In the opinion of George M. Sutton, these eggs had been laid "exceptionally early" (Sutton, 1967, *loc. cit.*).

In Delaware County, northeastern Oklahoma, on 16 March 1973, James W. Lish counted 52 nests in a 100-foot sycamore tree (*Plantanus occidentalis*) at the eastern end of Lake Eucha (upper Spavinaw Lake). Some of the herons there were "busy with nest-building, others squatting on what probably were eggs" but Lish commented that "...no data at hand makes clear that eggs ever hatch that early in Oklahoma" (Lish, J.W., 1974, *Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc.* 7:4).

On the afternoon of 6 March 1992, several of my natural history students and I discovered a small rookery in two large pecan trees (*Carya illinoensis*) along a small creek 5½ miles east of Waurika in Jefferson County, south-central Oklahoma. All nine nests were 35-40 feet high, six in one tree, three in the other. Nine adult birds were attending nests, at least two of them apparently incubating, while a few others stood nearby. When we stopped, the big herons flew up and, as we watched from about 300 yards, circled slowly about.

As we proceeded eastward on U.S. Highway 70, we found another small rookery 6 miles east and a mile south of Ardmore in Carter County. Here we counted 18 herons at or near 15 nests that had been constructed near the tops of two huge cottonwood trees. These nests were perhaps 50 feet up, and adults were settled down on six of them.

On 8 March we visited a heronry in a cypress swamp in southeastern McCurtain County. In two exceptionally tall cypress trees (estimated to be nearly 100 feet in height), were six nests 70 to 90 feet up. As we watched, one of the four Great Blues present sailed in with a long, forked stick and positioned it into a nest.

A few days earlier, on 1 March 1992, Sam Orr had noticed Great Blue Herons in Comanche County carrying small limbs into trees along East Cache Creek on Fort Sill. Unfortunately, he failed to count birds or nests.

While the above dates are quite early, they were pre-dated by nearly a month that same year when, on 4 February, Aline Romero and others observed 75 or more adult herons as they worked on nests at an old heronry near Keystone South River Road not far from Keystone Reservoir in Tulsa County, Oklahoma (*The Scissortail* 42 (2):27, 1992). In Texas, Mock (1975, *Bull. Texas Ornithol. Soc.* 8:10) estimated that eggs were laid on or about 1 January 1973 at a heronry on Hog Island in Aransas County after he discovered nine nests there that held either eggs or young chicks on 5 February (see cover photo).

The breeding behavior described herein was undoubtedly facilitated by abnormally mild temperatures during the winter of 1991-92. New highs for many mid-winter dates were set over much of the United States, and Oklahoma was no exception. The normal average highs and lows for December thru February for the Fort Sill Military Reservation in Comanche County since 1940 were 52/32°, 49/28°, and 55/32°F, but for these same months in 1991 and 1992, readings were 50.2/36.4°, 53/32°, and 61.4/39.8°F, respectively. Many days ranged above 70°F.—Jack D. Tyler, *Dept. of Biology, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 17 March 1992.*

GENERAL NOTES

Anhinga nesting update in McCurtain County, Oklahoma.—Nesting of Anhingas (*Anhinga anhinga*) in Oklahoma has been documented seven times. All