

Nesting success is highly dependent on spring weather conditions and food abundance. Both parents attend to the nest and feed their young. Eggs will be laid in April and incubated for a month before hatching. Once the juveniles leave the nest at the age of 2 months, they will no longer be fed by their parents. Life is very challenging for young herons; it is estimated that on average, only a quarter of them will survive their first year.

Heron history at Colony Farm

In the 1970s, a heronry of over 160 nests was reported on First Nations land next to Colony Farm. By 1992, only four nests remained although eleven nests were reported at the mouth of the Coquitlam River. During that same period, herons attempted to establish a colony at DeBoville Slough but abandoned their efforts in 1994. That spring, the heronry at the mouth of the Coquitlam River suddenly grew to 54 nests so naturalists surmised the herons at DeBoville moved to the mouth of the Coquitlam River.

By 1995, the provincial government protected the land at the mouth of the Coquitlam River as a Wildlife Management Area and Colony Farm as a Regional Park with some fields designated for wildlife use. Since then, the heron colony at the mouth of the River has grown in size most years and is now thought to number over 100 nests, making it one of the larger heronries in the lower mainland. Colony Farm continues to be a very valuable feeding area for herons and provides outstanding heron viewing opportunities throughout the winter months.

As urban development proceeds in the lower mainland, it is becoming increasingly difficult for herons to find suitable stands of trees that

can support a large colony. The colony at the mouth of the Coquitlam River is one of only four large heron colonies in the lower mainland. Other such colonies are located at Point Roberts, Stanley Park and Chilliwack.

Volunteers provide support

Every winter, volunteers count and monitor the herons at Colony Farm from October to April. The information they collect provides data on field use and guidance for field management. If you are interested in helping with this project, please contact the Colony Farm Park Association at 604-520-6442.

Habitat at Colony Farm is important for many wildlife species

Many other species also rely on the valuable habitat at Colony Farm including roughly 200 species of birds as well as amphibians and mammals. These include several species-at-risk: barn owl, short-eared owl, American bittern, rough-legged hawk, green heron, olive-sided flycatcher, peregrine falcon, Caspian tern, barn swallow, band-tailed pigeon, double-crested cormorant, purple martin, western bluebird, western meadowlark and the red-legged frog.



Townsend's vole. *Townsend's voles range in size from 17-24 cm including a short tail.*



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Photography

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BMN holds meetings with a guest speaker on topics of natural history on the second Tuesday of each month except June, July, and August at Como Lake United Church, 535 Marmont Street. These meetings are free and open to the public.

Colony Farm Park Association
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If you have specific comments on Colony Farm regarding trails, wildlife observations, etc., please submit them to colonyfarm@gmail.com

We encourage you to report unusual sightings of wildlife to us. Your observations will contribute to our knowledge of the local environment.

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COLONY FARM PARK ASSOCIATION

The Great Blue Herons of Colony Farm Regional Park

Great blue herons are one of our most elegant birds. Standing approximately one metre tall and with a characteristic long and curvaceous neck, great blue herons can often be seen at Colony Farm as they stalk their prey in the fields and watercourses. Although they appear to be abundant

locally, their decreasing numbers elsewhere in BC have resulted in their listing as a species-at-risk. These herons rely on the valuable habitat at Colony Farm Regional Park for feeding and they nest nearby in a large colony at the mouth of the Coquitlam River.



Adult plumage



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The herons at Colony Farm are members of a unique subspecies found only in the coastal southwestern corner of BC. Unlike other great blue herons across Canada, our herons do not migrate south in winter. Colony Farm is especially important for these birds because it provides rich feeding opportunities and roosting areas during the cold winter months.

What's the difference between a young and mature heron?

Mature male and female herons look alike with a white crown over a black "eyebrow". Males are slightly larger with a somewhat longer bill. In addition to a small black shoulder patch on their wings, adult herons have attractive long plumes on their neck, chest and back. In full breeding colour, their bills become a yellowish orange. Juvenile herons lack the long plumes and have a darker crown on their head. Herons reach breeding age at two years.

Hérons have specialized vertebrae in their necks which allows them to recoil their necks into an S-shaped curve which helps them to strike out quickly at prey. Herons (unlike cranes and egrets) characteristically retract their necks in flight and sometimes roost with their necks in this position, presumably, to conserve heat.



Characteristic s-shaped neck in flight

"Few other animals better symbolize a vision of conservation for the Strait of Georgia ecosystem than the great blue heron.

It lives year-round on the shores of the Strait, wades on its beaches and in its streams, rivers, marshes and hunts in its grasslands...

Conserving the heron and its environment would go a long way toward ensuring the conservation of much of the quality of life in the Strait of Georgia."

Dr. Rob Butler, wildlife biologist and author of "The Great Blue Heron" (1997)



Where do herons feed?

Hérons can often be seen standing in shallow water quietly waiting for their prey to swim within striking distance. Although herons excel at catching a variety of small fish, these fish are not abundant year-round so herons must rely on other food sources during the winter months. While eel grass beds in intertidal areas are excellent areas for herons to forage for fish, none are located close to Colony Farm. However, every spring eulachon swim up the Fraser River to spawn near the Coquitlam River. Although eulachon runs have been much reduced in past years, these small oily fish can be a rich source of food for herons during the nesting season. Herons also catch other small fish including sculpin, stickleback, salmon fry and perch. Experienced herons catch their prey between the mandibles of their bill, throw the fish into the air and swallow it headfirst.

It takes considerable practice for a heron to learn how to fish successfully. Juvenile herons lack these skills so they must rely on the voles of Colony Farm for food during their first year. In addition to small mammals, herons also catch frogs. Colony Farm has

two species of non-native frogs, the bullfrog and green frog, both of which are quite large and probably provide a good heron-sized meal.



This heron has speared a fish

In the winter when fish are less abundant, herons rely on the fields of Colony Farm for food. There, they stalk small mammals such as meadow mice, shrews and voles. The fields at Colony Farm provide excellent habitat for the small Townsend's vole which create tunnels in the long grass. After a winter in which snow covers the fields, vole tunnels are revealed when the snow melts. A number of other birds including hawks, owls and harriers also rely on the Townsend's vole as one of their main sources of food.



Vole tunnels revealed in the spring

Where do herons nest?

Hérons establish nesting colonies ideally located no further than 3 km from feeding areas. They build nests out of twigs about 15 metres off the ground in stands of tall trees. In the Georgia Basin, herons tend to nest in large established colonies whereas elsewhere in BC, herons nest in much smaller groups. Great blue herons are known to abandon their colonies if disturbed. Disturbances can include people who approach too closely, tree removal and sometimes, harassment by predators such as eagles.

Both herons and eagles require tall trees -- preferably close to water -- for nesting so they often compete for the same sites. Recent studies indicate herons sometimes tolerate an eagle's nest close to the colony. It is possible that having a single eagle's nest close to the colony provides a degree of protection from other eagles. The large heron colony at the mouth of the Coquitlam River has an eagle's nest close by.



Nesting herons

Courtship begins in March with large aggregations of herons gathering in open areas close to the nesting site. This is usually the best time to view herons at Colony Farm. Herons usually lay 3 - 5 eggs but typically only 1 or 2 juveniles will be successfully reared.