

Going on pond time

by Deborah Stone

It took me twenty-three years to see a great blue heron catch a fish. It's not that I have such tremendous patience, mind you. In fact, I failed to see a heron do its thing all those years precisely because I don't have much patience, or rather, because I assumed my patience was no match for a heron's so I never really gave it a serious try.

Last summer I determined to wait out a heron at a backwoods beaver pond and sure enough, I saw one bird make four catches inside of an hour. Since then, I've seen heron catch fish and frogs many times. I've even seen the resident great blue at a tiny sanctuary in Boston catch its lunch—five

small fish in less than ten minutes. Maybe city birds have to work faster, just as city folk live faster than us country folk.

What I've learned from heron-watching is that seeing nature's drama doesn't require patience so much

as time travel. Fortunately, leaving the human time zone is not something I had to learn. It just happens whenever I sit at the beaver pond near our home.

The other day, I spent about two hours on the boulder that serves as

my main lookout. I don't know exactly how long I was there because I had forgotten to put on my watch that day. With Barkley, our frenetic terrier, I entered the path from the dirt road to the pond, moving slowly and shushing

Barkley so as not to scare up the inhabitants. My good intentions failed, because just as I pushed through the hemlock branches to a clear view of the pond, I saw a great blue heron rising from a spot close to me, flapping its wings in that slow,

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exaggerated way that herons do, as if to say, "Regret it, buddy. I'm out of here and you're not going to take your eyes off me." The heron was right. Mesmerized, I followed its long, lazy circle overhead until it landed in a tree at the far end of the pond.

I scanned the three heron nests with my binoculars to do my daily chick count. Ten days before, I had counted six chicks, distributed two, three and one among the three nests. The following day and every day since, I could find only five. I feared one had gotten the old sibling heave-ho. On this afternoon of the long watch, I saw only three – two in one nest, one in another. Are we really so far down? At its peak several years ago, this rookery had nine nests, but so many trees have fallen that for the last three years, we've had only four nests. This summer, one of the nests is unoccupied, so we're effectively down to three. I don't like this slow diminishment. I monitor the nests as if my rooting could help the team. Who knows? Maybe caring does help.

It was mid-afternoon of a slow, sunny July day with just enough breeze to keep the mosquitoes down. I knew there wouldn't be much action, so I decided to just scan and pay attention to whatever I found. A family of seven Canada geese paddled around somewhere close to the base of the heron rookery. There was a larger bird on either end of the straight line, herding five goslings that I took to be teenagers because they already had their white chin stripes and distinctive Canada goose color pattern and they were not much smaller than the adults.

Just to the left of the geese, I found a juvenile double-crested cormorant standing penguin-like on a low stump. I've seen a cormorant on this pond only once before, so it took me a minute to "get it," especially as this was a juvenile with a buff chest and neck, not the slick, black creature I'm used to. But when it held its wings out as if making a clothesline from

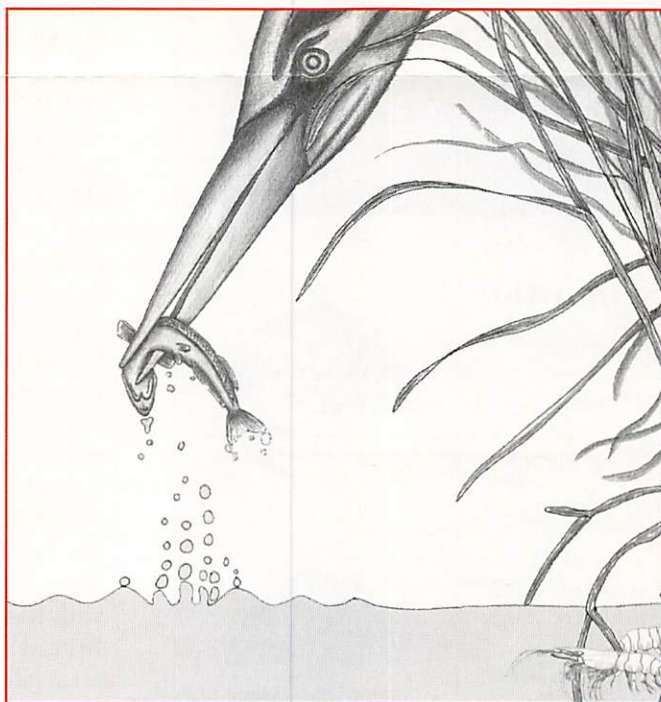


Illustration: Ethan Nedeau, www.biodrawversity.com

which to hang its feather laundry, I knew.

Soon after finding the geese and the cormorant, I noticed four nondescript small, fuzzy brown ducklings swimming, also in a straight line, apparently orphans. I wondered if they were the offspring of the common mergansers that I had seen earlier in the season. Mostly though, I worried more about their security and how they'd learn the ropes than I did about their identity. The brave little band made its way down to the south end of the pond, then back slowly toward the north end. Twice I saw the orphan ducklings pass close by the goose family. I willed the goose parents to take the ducklings under their wings, but it didn't work.

The geese could have cared less. And every time I checked, the juvenile cormorant was still on its stump, airing its wings and occasionally flicking its tail side-to-side, as if to give it a good shake-out. It took no notice of the ducklings, either.

While watching the ducks and the geese, I caught sight of a great blue heron standing on the far shore, not doing much of anything, not even looking for food as far as I could tell. That heron stayed on its rock for about 45 minutes, then flew along the shoreline to a tree branch about 15 feet above the water, where it sat for another 45 minutes, actively preening. I could even see its feathers raised and separated, as if spread out to dry. Below the heron, a large doe emerged from the woods, came to the water's edge to drink, gazed around, then retreated through the trees.

Meanwhile, I'd sighted another heron poised on a snag in the middle of the water at the other end of the pond. That heron neither hunted nor preened, just sat still for a good hour, taking it all in – rather like me. If I were trying to see lots of action, I would have been frustrated, but by then I was firmly on pond time. I could feel my metabolism slowed to a crawl. And when I remembered that Barkley was with me, I realized that he two had gone onto pond time – he was stretched out behind me on the boulder, basking like a turtle.

I like this feeling of living in slow-motion and I think I go to the pond to bliss on it as much as I go to see wildlife. When I go to the pond, I'm deliberately stepping outside of my life time zone, the zone of to-do lists, appointments and never-enough-time. At the beginning of every pond watch, I have to struggle to separate myself from clock time. "I'll just stay five or ten minutes," I tell myself. Or,

"Remember, this is just a short break." Or, "I have to go back so I can get to the post office before it closes."

Mostly I do return to normal time, but often enough I let myself sink into what feels like an addictive high and then I go deeper into watching and wondering. It's as though when my ego phones, I hang up on it and go back to pond time. Then I am in a sort of trance, how I imagine meditation is supposed to feel but never has for me—in the

now. And of course, on pond time is always when I see nature's amazing dramas.

During pond time the other day, an adult heron flew to the nest that had one chick. I saw a second chick rise up out of the nest, flap its wings and fight for its place in the food line. (That makes four of them – yes!) I saw the adult stretch back its head, elongate its neck, perform some esophageal ripples, and then lean forward to regurgitate the meal.

I heard sounds more like roaring than the shrill cackling I expect from heron chicks. On the periphery of my binocular field, I saw yet another chick fly into the formerly empty nest. I held my breath and took another chick count. Five of them – phew! A long while later, another (or perhaps the same) adult came in and fed the one chick who'd been off-campus and apparently unable to fish for itself. That left two chicks in the highest of the three nests yet unfed, at least on my watch.

It was sometime after the two feedings when the statuary heron on the dead snag finally roused itself and flew to somewhere else. The chicks had sight of her (I imagine it was a she) and the two hungry ones clearly thought it was their turn and she was coming to them, because they stood up tall, squawked, and flapped, crying, "Here! Here! Us! Us!" in all but English. But she landed far short of the nest, high in a cedar tree on the shore. Ever hopeful, or perhaps still believing in justice, the two chicks kept flapping and squawking. One jumped to the very top of the dead tree in which its nest sat, faced the errant adult, and I'm sure called her, begged her, to come with food. The adult ignored them. Instead she did something I've never seen. She stretched out her neck and began plucking morsels from the tree branches. Berries? Insects? I couldn't make it out, but she was plainly eating. Herons feeding in trees – that's a new one on me.

I worry a lot about the young life in the pond, and I wanted that heron to mind her responsibilities and tend to the chicks. Pond watching brings out my maternal instincts, I guess. But at that moment, I felt a certain kinship with the free-spirited adult sating herself on juicy bits from a tree, in sight and earshot of her needy children. After all, I wouldn't have been there to see it all if I hadn't told my own ego to hush.

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