

# Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson  
Pocahontas County Naturalist



August 31, 2016

The 2016 Summer Olympics are in the books – which events and athletes were your favorites from Rio? The 2016 Summer Conservation programs are also in the books. Combining nature and the sporting world, we presented several Animal & Bird Olympic programs at venues around the county. Kids of all ages enjoyed competing against some of the many superstars found in the animal kingdom.

The favorite athlete of many was the Great Blue Heron. These wading birds can stand on one leg with their eyes closed for over an hour before striking like lightning to grab an unsuspecting fish or frog for dinner. And while a couple drill team members excelled in this event, most of us lost our balance after only a few seconds.

The Great Blue Heron, *Ardea herodias*, lives by both saltwater and freshwater throughout the Americas along the coasts, marshes, river banks, lakes, and backyard ponds. One of our most common wading birds here in the prairie pothole region of Iowa, this summer I've spotted them at our dredge ditch, the Varina Wetlands, even flying over the grove at the Wiegert Prairie Farmstead.

The Great Blue Heron is the largest heron in North America with a length of 38-54 inches and a wingspan of 65-80 inches but weighs only 5-6 pounds. Most are gray-blue in color with a black stripe extending above their eye, although there is a white morph found in Florida. Breeding adults have yellowish bills and ornate plumes on their head, neck, and back.

Great Blue Herons share nest building duties. The male collects sticks which the female weaves into a platform and nest cup in which she lays 2-6 pale blue eggs. Often breeding grounds are home to large colonies of over 500 nests.

Great Blue Herons will eat most anything – fish, amphibians, reptiles, small mammals, insects, and birds. Did you know they can hunt both during the day and night? Their eyes have a high percentage of rod photoreceptors which improve their night vision.

Great Blue Herons have specialized chest feathers that grow and fray. They comb this “powder down” with a fringed claw on their middle toes and use the down like a washcloth to remove fish slime and other oils from their feathers.

One of my favorite early morning sights is the slow wing beats, tucked in neck, and long trailing legs of a heron emerging from the fog over the peat as if arising out of a prehistoric swamp. While Great Blue Heron populations remain fairly stable, like many wetland species they are susceptible to habitat loss, chemical pollutants, and poor water quality. I trust the magnificent Great Blue Heron will endure and continue to weave its spell for those who follow.

I'll close with this advice from Your True Nature and the Great Blue Heron:  
Wade into life. Keep a keen lookout. Don't be afraid to get your feet wet. Be patient. Look below the surface. Enjoy a good reed. Go Fish!

