



## Fact Sheet: Herons



Herons, or more correctly, Grey Herons are the largest of the European herons. We have six or seven resident in the Park but others pop in from time to time from other sites along the Ouse valley.

### Description

The heron is a very big bird; the largest you will see in the Park apart from Swans. It is medium grey above and light grey below. It is characterized by its very long legs and neck. It has a large powerful and long yellowish grey bill. If you are lucky you, may catch sight of a small plumb of feathers from the back of the head.

**Height** = 84 – 102 cm with neck extended    **Wing span** = 155 – 175 cm

### Where to see them

The birds can be seen in various poses either above the lakes or on the island. Most commonly, they can be seen standing on the edge of the water or in it. But equally you might spot them in a tree at or near their nesting site. The most dramatic view of the heron is when it's in flight. Then it holds its neck retracted and points its long legs straight out behind it. In this pose it can look like a long slender dart.

### Habitat

Lake shore, edge of reed beds, trees on the island, shoreline of the island and along the Ouse river bank.

### Food



Herons mainly eat fish which they catch by stalking their prey near the water's edge or in shallow water. They can stand motionless for some considerable time finally stabbing their prey with a lightning movement of their head and long neck.

During periods of extremely hard winter weather, adult herons have been known to eat young waterbirds.



Hérons will also eat water voles, frogs, moorhen chicks, ducklings and grass snakes; in fact, they will also stalk frogs through long grass on land.

## Breeding

Hérons like to breed in colonies and we are lucky enough to have one on Heron Island where there are three breeding pairs. Their nests are located on the edge of the area where the cormorants have their nesting colony.

Hérons nest in the tops of trees, building a flat basket-like structure out of sticks which can be used over a number of years. Three or four eggs are laid in early Spring and can take up to a month to hatch.



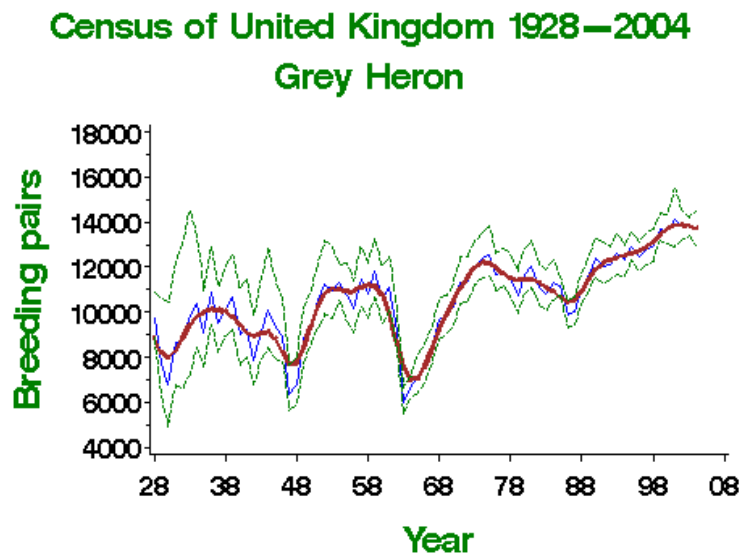
## Relatives of the Heron visiting the Park

A rare and exciting relative is the bittern that can be heard booming in the reeds sometimes in the winter or during migration times.

A small, pure white version with green legs is the little egret – the first one in Bedfordshire was recorded here and was reported in the Guardian. They tend to visit the small lake and upset the herons.

## National numbers

The national population of Herons is currently fairly stable but is liable to periodic fluctuations as indicated by the graph below.



Source: British Trust for Ornithology <http://www.bto.org/survey/heron.htm>