



Latin Name *Ardea cinerea*

What do they look like?

When a Grey Heron flies overhead with neck curled back, you could be forgiven for thinking that you are back in the time when the dinosaurs ruled the earth, they look so different from the other birds we have in the Dell.

Firstly, they are big birds, they are in fact Britain's tallest bird. They have grey upperparts and dark grey flight feathers. They have long yellow legs, a stout swordlike, yellow beak and a black crest on their heads.

Click here or copy the link into a web browser http://www.arkive.org/species/ARK/birds/Ardea_cinerea/ to enter the ARKIVE website to see a moving picture of the Grey Heron.



Photograph © Paul Burrows

Vital Statistics

Eggs: Feb May 3-5
Incubation: 24-26 days
Maximum lifespan: 25 years
Length: 90-98cm
Wingspan: 175-195cm
Weight: 1-2kg
UK breeding: 13,000 pairs

Where do they live and nest in Healey Dell?

Grey Herons nest in what are called heronries in the woods around meadow lodge, and live in that area. They make a flat nest of sticks high in the trees and use the same nest site year after year. This means that an old nest can sometimes get up to 1 metre across! The nests are easy to identify as beneath them you will find lots of pellets made up the indigestible bits of the heron's food.

When herons are getting ready to breed, they put on some spectacular displays. These range from chasing each other across the sky, tilting from side to side to diving down through the air. They also display to each other on their nest platform, where the male lowers his head over his back and claps his bill.

It is the female who builds the nest, adding fresh grass and bracken to make the lining. The area in which she lays her eggs is a spoon shaped depression in the middle of the platform. During breeding season, the male vigorously defends his territory and threatens any approaching male by straightening his neck, fluffing out the plumes on his head, throat and back, and snapping his beak. If the intruder continues with his threat, the resident male may then lunge at him viciously.

What do they eat?

Heron use both stealth and speed when hunting and will wait, poised and silent like a statue, at the water's edge, or standing in the water, waiting for their prey to approach. When it comes within reach, the heron strikes extremely quickly with a stabbing motion, to grab hold of the prey.

Small fish are swallowed whole, head first so that the spines or fins do not get stuck in the bird's throat; whereas larger ones are brought to land and broken up into more manageable pieces.

Heron eat other things as well as fish as they will take young water birds, and small mammals, including the water vole.



What do they sound like?

Hérons make loud very unmusical sounds rather like a harsh 'fraank' which they make whilst they are flying. To hear a heron, either follow the link from the red button or copy it into a web browser.



<http://www.garden-birds.co.uk/birds/greyheron.htm>.

What are their eggs like?

Hérons lay 4 or 5 pale blue eggs which both parents incubate. Newly-hatched chicks are covered in long, blackish-brown down which sticks up on the top of their head giving them funny little crest. They are noisy chicks, keeping up a constant call to their parents for regurgitated food. The eggs hatch at different times, so in years when there is a shortage of food, the biggest chicks survive and the smaller ones starve. In plentiful years the whole brood will be successfully reared.

Sources

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/>

<http://www.garden-birds.co.uk/>

<http://www.bto.org/birdtrends2004/wcrgrewa.htm>

http://www.arkive.org/species/ARK/birds/Ardea_cinerea/ This web site has visual clips of the grey heron

<http://www.birdsofbritain.co.uk/index.htm>

<http://www.yptenc.org.uk/>