

Creatures of Candlewood

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There is a stalwart guardian on the shores of Candlewood Lake that can be sometimes heard but seldom seen, as it blends into the brush to hide from predators and prey alike. The Graceful Great Blue Heron is the first entrant into this ongoing column from the Candlewood Lake Authority introducing some of the beautiful and interesting wildlife that also call Candlewood Lake home. The Great Blue, as it is affectionately called, is an appropriate inaugural representative due to both its striking appearance and emblematic nature. This largest of the herons begs to be a symbol for Candlewood Lake's natural grace and beauty, as well as its sporting nature.

The population of Great Blue Herons might be the best sport-fishers on Candlewood Lake, though there are many residents that give them a run for their money. These herons will wade quietly along the shores of the lake, doing their best impression of a tree or weed springing up from the lake bed. With the stillness of the plant that they are imitating, they will wait until an unsuspecting fish swims by, at which time they'll quickly snap their long neck and beak into the water and deftly snatch the fish, swallowing it whole. Following such success, they will quietly wade through the shallow water to a new fishing location and repeat the same process, gathering food either for themselves or to take back to their young.

These herons don't always stay grounded and will take off dramatically when disturbed. Their tall size (up to 4.5 ft) and impressive wingspan (5.5-6.5 ft) make them obvious as they glide through the air. When they take to the wing, the blue heron can conjure an image of the even more imposing pterodactyl: a flying dinosaur that is long extinct. Not everything about the Great Blue Heron is as graceful as its appearance however, as some lake residents might be acutely aware. Their call is somewhere between a loud bark and a growl and can carry over the water extremely long distances. Boaters who disturb these birds' quiet fishing might be greeted by their less than pleasant squawking as they take to the skies.

Though solitary hunters, great blues will nest in "colonies" of up to 15 birds and will set up their homes in tall trees or shrubs. The female herons will normally produce somewhere between two to seven eggs every year, which are protected and incubated by both parents. When un-guarded however, these eggs can be the prey of other Candlewood creatures like foxes and crows. The Great Blues are a year-round resident of Candlewood Lake, as well as most of the contiguous United States. They do migrate from the northern reaches of their breeding range in Canada and Western US and travel down to Florida and the Caribbean for the winter, but many remain and tough out the winters here in Connecticut.

Great Blue Herons have a roughly 15-year lifespan in the wild, and their population is growing – both here at Candlewood and nationwide. On a summer day, careful birdwatchers would be hard pressed not to find a great blue stalking the shores of Vaughn's neck, or quietly sitting atop a nearby dock. These peaceful neighbors serve the ecosystem in many ways, helping to effectively control the fish population as well as feeding the important plants and fungi around

the lake with their droppings. The presence of a heron in your yard can also ward off one of the more troublesome “Creatures of Candlewood”, the Canada Goose.

Though it was created by humans, Candlewood Lake now both serves and relies on the natural services provided by the organisms that live on and in its waters. It’s important for us as residents and users of the lake to recognize that we’re not the only ones who have come to depend on it. The beautiful and stalwart great blue is just one of the many creatures of Candlewood we hope to highlight in this continuing column. To learn more about how to protect both the lake and the creatures who we call our neighbors, please visit our website at: candlewoodlakeauthority.org. And next time you see a Great Blue Heron standing on our shores, we hope you’ll take a moment to appreciate its beauty, and the part it plays in helping to make Candlewood Lake the amazing place we know and love.