

## *Egretta caerulea* (Little Blue Heron)

Family: Ardeidae (Hérons and Egrets)

Order: Ciconiiformes (Storks, Herons and Ibises)

Class: Aves (Birds)



**Fig. 1.** Little blue heron, *Egretta caerulea*.

[<http://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/little-blue-heron>, downloaded 24 February 2017]

**TRAITS.** The little blue heron *Egretta caerulea* is a small to medium sized heron with yellow eyes (Fig. 1), 60-74cm in length, with a wingspan of up to 104cm. Adult male and female herons are generally similar in appearance, however their young ones differ (Thome, 2001). Breeding adults are recognized by a purplish head and neck, long, blue filamentous plumes, along with dark blue legs and feet, with the rest of the plumage blue-grey in colour. The heron's long, pointed, slender bill is blue or greyish with a black tip. In Non-breeding adults their head and neck plumage are dark blue in colour and they also have paler legs (Wikipedia, 2017). The juvenile herons have a blue bill with a black tip and dull green legs. They are unlike any other heron, because they have all white body plumage (Thome, 2001).

**DISTRIBUTION.** The little blue heron is widespread over northern South America, extending into the amazon basin, and along the coast (Fig. 2). It is also found in the Caribbean region and along the coast of southern North America. They migrate to inland regions of North America to breed. During the winter these herons migrate to Mexico and Baja California (Thome, 2001).

**HABITAT AND ACTIVITY.** These herons usually prefer habitats of freshwater such as swamps, lakes, ponds, marshes and lagoons, but can also occupy dry and flooded grasslands, or marine coastlines in the Caribbean. They commonly nest in colonies with other herons, and can be seen on platforms of shrubs, sticks or small trees in standing water or upland sites. During the winter, these birds migrate to mangroves, lagoons, salt ponds, mudflats, and savannas (All About Birds, 2016).

**FOOD AND FEEDING.** These carnivorous birds mainly feed on fish and crustaceans such as fiddler crabs, crayfish and shrimp. Types of fish preyed upon vary by region, and can include killifish, darters, anchovies, gobies and others (All About Birds, 2016). Supplementary to this, they also consume a variety of amphibians, aquatic insects, spiders, dragonflies and other invertebrates. In droughts or dry habitats they adapt to grassland insects, such as beetles, grasshoppers and crickets. The little blue heron's long legs allows it to wade through water, foraging methodically, in a slow walking motion or standing still awaiting its prey (Fig. 3). Sometimes, they rake the floor with their feet to distract targets into movement, and stretch their long necks to peer into the water, finally using their long beaks to jab and eat the prey (Thome, 2001).

**POPULATION ECOLOGY.** Little blue herons generally forage with other species and are gregarious breeders. They nest in small or large multispecies colonies alongside tricoloured herons, ibises, brown pelicans and other water birds (All About Birds, 2016). *Egretta caerulea* hunt as loners and may chase and attack other members, including their own species in defense of food or nesting territory. These birds can live approximately 7 years in their natural habitat, the greatest longevity obtained by a marked bird was 13 years and 11 months (Nellis, 2001).

**REPRODUCTION.** *Egretta caerulea* can lay 1-6 eggs, but on average 4-5 eggs are laid, usually around March/April. The laying of these pale blue-green eggs takes approximately 5-8 days, because one egg is laid every other day (Fig. 4). Incubation is done by both sexes until the eggs hatch in 22-24 days. Hatchlings are able to raise their heads, but spend most of their time lying on the floor of the nest (Thome, 2001). Both parents feed young ones by regurgitation, they drop food into the nest and later place it directly into the juveniles' mouth. After 2-3 weeks the juveniles are ready to leave the nest, or may practise climbing out of the nest onto nearby branches for short trips. They eventually have the ability to fly and periodically leave the nest within 4 weeks' time. Soon after, within 6-7 weeks these juvenile herons now become independent (Kaufman, 2017). Reproduction by little blue herons can start as early as one year old.

**BEHAVIOUR.** Overall, little blue herons are not energetic birds, they are usually seen walking daintily and slowly along their habitats. Their flight however, is powerful and elegant. Their wing strokes are quicker in comparison to larger herons, flying with their heads downwards and legs extended. These birds are silent, but make low croaking or clucking sounds at times. When fighting, their sounds resemble a screaming parrot (Thome, 2001). When grooming or scratching, these herons have a unique feature of a built in row of teeth along their middle toe mostly used for their head, neck and throat (All About Birds, 2016).

Juvenile little blue herons mingle with snowy egrets because they benefit in their white-coloured state. They mix into these flocks for camouflage, this allows them to gain survival advantages. The immature herons gain extra protection against predators and capture more fish in the egrets' company (All About Birds, 2016). It is said that because of such advantage these herons remain white for their first year.

Before mating the males court the females. Males stretch their necks upwards, point their bills up and then assume a crouched posture. Displays such as neck swaying, vocalizing and bill snapping are included. Once females are impressed, they would approach the male and signs of affection would be shown. These include plumage nibbling and neck intertwining. The male then presents the female with sticks he has gathered while raising his plumes and nibbling at her feathers. Because copulation occurs on the nest platform or around it, the females finishes the nest started by the male (Johnsgard, 2009). The sticks presented to her are placed into a nest structure and the male passes them in an elaborate ceremony (Fig. 5).

**APPLIED ECOLOGY.** Native to multiple countries and very large population size justifies why the species is listed as Least Concern (IUCN, 2017). This means that there is little or no reason to believe that the species is currently threatened or undergoing major threats.

#### REFERENCES

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**Fig. 2.** Little blue heron geographic distribution.

[<https://dcbirds.si.edu/bird/little-blue-heron> downloaded 24 February 2017]



**Fig. 3.** Juvenile little blue heron foraging.

[<http://www.auduboncanyonranch.org/node/1977> downloaded 25 February 2017]



**Fig. 4.** Hatched eggs of little blue heron.

[<http://www.beaconhillparkhistory.org/contents/chapter22.htm> downloaded 25 February 2017]



**Fig. 5.** Little blue herons building nest.

[<http://ameliasanjongallery.com/StoryBook/2012-04-23%20The%20Promise%20of%20Birds.html> downloaded 27 February 2017]