Great Blue Heron Monitoring
Cuyahoga Valley National Park
Bath Road Heronry and Wetmore Heronry

Summary Report for 2012

In 2012, great blue herons began returning to the nests at Bath Road before winter was half over. It had been a very mild winter, with little snow, and spring would soon prove to be extraordinarily warm. On February 1, 2012, staff at the Akron Water Pollution Control Station, reported seeing the first herons at the nests in the sycamore trees, and the next day park volunteer Rob Bobel noted 27 herons at the nests, some in pairs. The returning great blue herons may have noticed a significant change in the heronry—one of the five sycamores that they had nested in in years past had been cut down in 2011. They were now claiming nests in the four remaining sycamores and would soon run short of nest sites if their numbers proved similar to that of previous years. By mid-March herons began to build nests in a fifth tree, a small non-sycamore (most likely a cottonwood), Tree D, which had been occupied in previous years but with less success than the sycamore trees. The birds also appeared to be building as many nests as possible in Tree E, as it went from having 31 nests in 2011 to 44 nests in 2012.

At Bath Road by February 28 it appeared that some pairs were already incubating. Nest building continued through March and some nests were still being added April 1st, but most pairs by then were incubating. On April 1, the Bath Road heronry had 145 nests, which increased to a high of 151 a few days later, but only 149 appeared to be occupied. Of the 149 nests that were at one time incubating, only 134 produced fledglings.

The weather produced some extremes during the heron nesting season. After a mild winter and the return of the first herons, there was a strong snowstorm February 11-12. This was followed by an extremely hot March, with record heat which the New York Times called "surreal." Between March 14th and March 23rd, record high temperatures were recorded for days in a row. At the heronry it was 75^0 on March 14th, 80^0 on March 19th, and the area had a record 84^0 during the period. As spring turned to summer, the heat wave and lack of rain brought drought conditions to much of the Midwest. 2012 proved to be the hottest year ever in the United States.

By April 13th, it appeared that chicks were hatching as evidenced by the behavior of the parent birds. The first chick in Tree E could be seen on April 15th (a 76^0 day) and it appeared to be at least a week old. By the end of April many chicks had hatched and the heronry got significantly noisier. Chicks at that time ranged from still-fuzzy to "teenagers." By May 18th the trees were well leafed-out, so observing became more challenging. On June 15th ($85^{0)}$ there were many test flights and active fledging.

Below are summaries of nests and fledglings per tree, with comparisons to previous years.

Active Nests at Bath Road:

	2012 nests with incubation	**2012 nests producing chicks**	**2011 nests with incubation**	**2011 nests w/ chicks**
Tree A	23	20	20	17
Tree B	29	26	33	32
Tree C	44	44	38	38
Tree D	9	3	Tree H 16	Tree H 16
Tree E	44	41	31	28
Totals	**149**	**134**	**138**	**131**

Fledglings at Bath Road (Estimated)*

2012	**2012***	**Previous years:**	**2011**	**2010**	**2009**
Tree A	43	Tree A:	38 (est)	42	39
Tree B	55	Tree B:	72 (est)	68	73
Tree C	93	Tree C:	85 (est)	84	96
Tree D	3	Tree E:	63 (est)	78	87
Tree E	87	Tree H:	35 (actual)	34	20
Totals	**281**		**293**	**306**	**315**

* By mid May many of the nests were difficult to see due to thick foliage. The number of fledglings was estimated by observing nests that were still clearly visible in Trees A, B, C, and E, counting the birds seen in those nests, and arriving at an average of 2.12 per nest. Tree D was a bit of an outlier, so the actual number of fledglings observed in Tree D was used in the above chart.

Note that of 149 nests that were observed with incubation occurring, only 134 nests appeared to be successful in producing fledglings. Several factors may have contributed to nest failures. On April 29th we could see that a dead heron was hanging from a branch in Tree A, very near two previously active nests. Photographs of the bird revealed that it had thin line, most likely fishing line, wrapped around its leg and caught on a branch. Another adult heron was frequently seen in the nearby nest above this bird and another in the nest below, and the lower nest had hatchlings, but neither nearby nest fledged any young. Tree D experienced the highest failure rate, with only 1/3 of the incubating nests producing fledglings, unless some escaped our observation. At one point there were 14 nests in the tree; 9 appeared to have incubation; in June, Andrea observed 11 chicks in 5 nests; at the end of the season only 3 nests appeared to have fledglings.

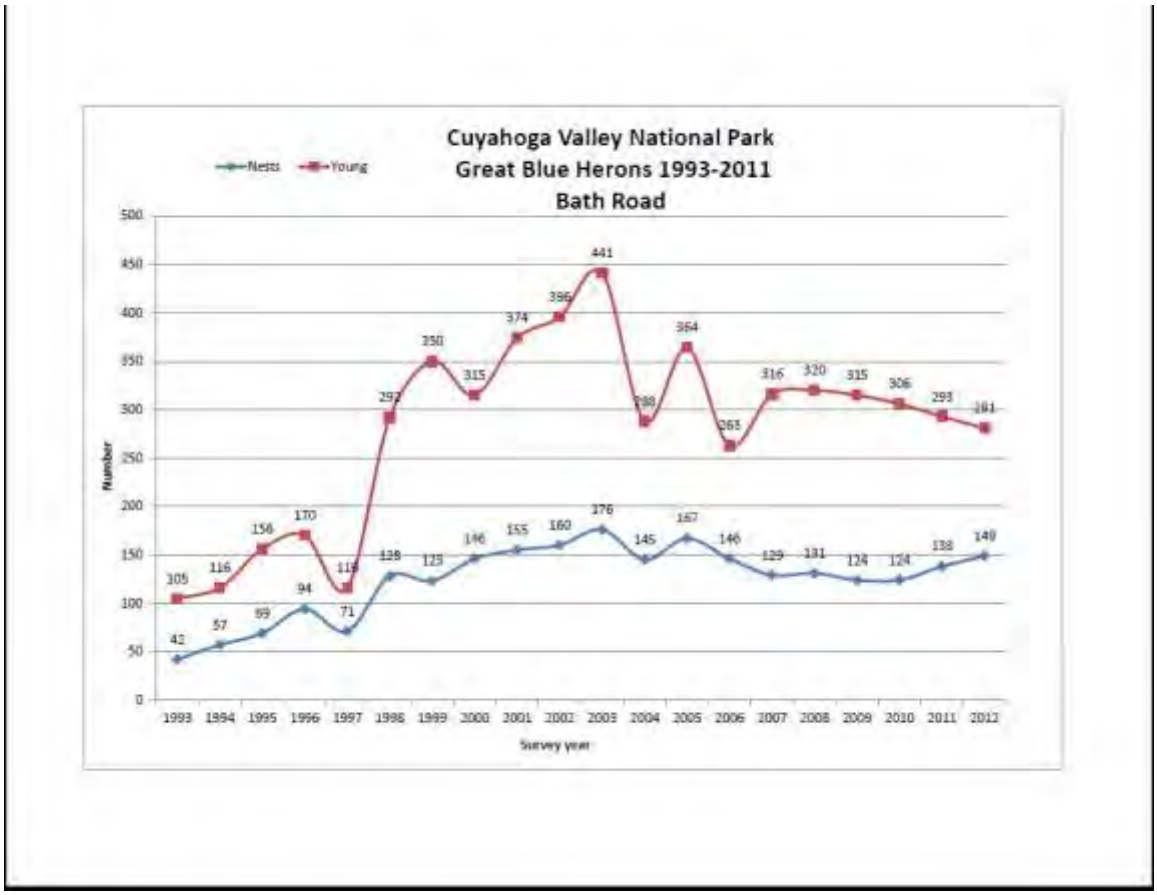
A few of the nests in Trees A, B, and D were extremely small, which may have contributed to nest failure. It is not clear why other nests became inactive, or what role the extreme weather may have played in whether or not the chicks survived.

In mid-May six heron nests were noted in a tree along the west bank of the Cuyahoga River north of Bath Road. By then the trees were pretty much leafed out and it was difficult to follow the activity in those nests. On a visit to that site on February 10, 2013, it could be seen that there were nineteen heron nests distributed among eleven trees, all sycamores, on both banks of the river. Some trees held only one nest, while others held two to four nests. This new nest area (Bath Road North) will be monitored during the 2013 nesting season.

Wetmore Heronry

The Wetmore heronry presents a far greater challenge to monitors than does the Bath Road heronry due to its inaccessibility. Only three trees with nests can be observed from Akron Peninsula Road, and the view is not completely clear. The herons in this location also seem to be dispersed among a number of trees, both dead and living, and are scattered and distant from the road. Also, the area is largely wetland and where it is not wet there are thick multiflora rose tangles.

In 2011 observers could find at least five different trees with heron nests. One of these was clearly a live sycamore and it held the most nests. In 2012, herons were first observed in the area on March 4. Photos taken on March 17 show 10 nests visible from the road, 8 in one tree, the live sycamore, and 2 in another. There likely were more nests deeper into the wetland, but if so they were not visible from any reasonably reached vantage point. A visit in February 2013 found a total of 12 nests distributed in 4 trees, but these may not have all been used in the 2012 season. Due to these factors and conditions, we do not have accurate numbers for this heronry.



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