

First Record of Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) in British Columbia.

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Introduction and Distribution

The Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) is a species found throughout the Old World as both a resident and as a migratory species in its breeding range (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). This species is resident in Europe from Great Britain, parts of Spain, France, through Belgium, Holland and Germany, southern parts of Norway and Sweden (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). There are migratory populations in Europe breeding across Scandinavia, from south and eastern parts of Germany, east across to Russia (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). Where the Gray Heron doesn't breed, but winters, extends from North Africa and across the entire Mediterranean region to Bulgaria, Greece, western Turkey and into the Middle East (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). There are resident populations of the Gray Heron throughout all of Africa (Clements *et al.* 2015). The Gray Heron is also found as a resident in areas of eastern Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, most of southeast Asia as far south as Malaysia and western parts of Indonesia, China, and Japan (Clements *et al.* 2015). The more northern migratory populations extend across Russia into Siberia as far east as Sakhalin Island (Clements *et al.* 2015). These more migratory birds winter from southern Iraq, southern Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, throughout India, throughout South-East Asia, including the Philippines, and Taiwan (Clements *et al.* 2015). This species is a regular vagrant to Iceland and Greenland (Gantlett 1998, Shanahan 2000).

There are 2 subspecies of Gray Heron. The first subspecies of Gray Heron is the nominate (*Ardea cinerea cinerea*) which is widespread from Eurasia to Manchuria, India, Africa and Comoro Islands (Clements *et al.* 2015). The second subspecies of Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea jouyi*) is found in Asia from Japan, China, Indochina, Malaya, Sumatra and Java (Clements *et al.* 2015). Some authorities show the following as species and others have these as subspecies of Gray Heron. We follow Clements *et al.* (2015) which splits Madagascar Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea firasa*) into its own species as it is found only on the island of Madagascar and Mauritanian Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea monicae*) into its own species as this is found on the Islands off Banc d'Arguin, Mauritania.

The Gray Heron is either an accidental or casual vagrant to the Caribbean with records from Montserrat, Trinidad, Martinique, and Barbados (Raffaele *et al.* 1998). Many of these records involve immature birds banded in France that have turned up in the Caribbean region (Gantlett 1998, Shanahan 2000). This even includes a single individual bird that had been banded in France and was found in Bermuda (Cramp 1984). There are likely more records, but a lack of

observers and the similarity of the Gray Heron to Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) clouds the actual frequency of vagrancy in this part of the world (Raffaele *et al.* 1998).

The Gray Heron is an accidental vagrant to North America with a record from October 1999 in Newfoundland and Labrador, a good sight record from August 1, 1999, at St. Paul Island, a photographed record from October 1-2, 2007 also at St. Paul Island, and another photographed from April 29 – May 2, 2010 on Shemya Island, in the Outer Aleutian Islands (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The only record south of Alaska is a recent report from 2015 of an adult bird photographed from the Queen Charlotte Islands (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). There are no accepted records for Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC), Oregon (OFO 2012) or from California (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). The numbers of records across North America will likely increase as our understanding about identification of the Gray Heron increases (Shanahan 2000).

Identification and Similar Species

The Gray Heron is not featured in most standard North American field guides and requires observers to check either European or Far East Asian field guides. Due to the similarity of Gray Heron to our Great Blue Heron, it is possible that the Gray Heron occurs more frequently in North America than current records indicate because many observers are not familiar with how to easily distinguish the two species (Shanahan 2000). The Gray Heron measures 84-102 cm, with a wingspan of 155-175 cm, and weighs 1,002-2,073 grams (Brazil 2009, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The only species that looks similar to this species in North America, and British Columbia is the larger Great Blue Heron that measures 117 cm, has a wing span of 183 cm, and weighs 2,268-3,629 grams (Brazil 2009, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). It is recommended that observers read Gantlett (1998), Shanahan (2000) or Lethaby and McLaren (2003) for a detailed account on how to separate these two similar species.

The following is a portion of the written account taken directly from Shanahan (2000) and gives a very comprehensive account on separating Gray Heron from Great Blue Heron.

Adult Gray Herons are essentially gray, black, and white birds, while Great Blue Herons are usually more colorful. Gray Herons are normally gray on the sides of the neck and when showing a pink-lilac cast on the neck-sides tend to exhibit shades much lighter than those seen on Great Blue Herons (Gantlett 1998). Most Great Blue Herons have chestnut or rufous-coloured thighs, although an adult that showed up on Tenerife in December 1998 had white thighs (Clarke 1999). The marginal wing coverts (the leading edge of the inner wing) of Great Blue Herons are normally chestnut/rufous as are two distinctive areas distal to the carpal joint or bend in the wing. The first rufous area is produced by the carpal coverts and the second by

portions of the primary coverts. This produces the distinctive "headlight-effect" seen on the wings of approaching birds. The plainer Gray Heron normally has white or grayish-white thighs and white marginal wing coverts. White carpal coverts and white portions of the primary coverts produce a characteristic white "headlight effect" (Gantlett 1998). The "headlight" feature can often be seen, at least partially, on the folded wings of standing birds. The longer legs of Great Blue Herons usually offer a better look at their chestnut thighs (Gantlett 1998). These differences, while consistent, are not infallible due to individual variation across the species.

Juvenile and immatures of both species are duller versions of the adults. As in many birds, separation of immatures can be problematic because of much variation in plumage colour and sequence of feather growth. Juveniles of both species lack head plumes, have a dark gray crown, a bicoloured bill (dark above and yellow below), and may show a brownish wash to their gray upperparts. However, most juvenile Great Blue Herons show some chestnut/rufous colour on the thighs, and at least partially, on the leading edge of the inner wing. It should be noted that some juvenile Gray Herons can show a lighter version of this colouration on the thighs and on parts of the inner wing (Gantlett 1998). In most cases, however, juvenile Gray Herons show whitish thighs, and some white along the leading edge of the inner wing (Gantlett 1998).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Gray Heron is an accidental species that was recently added to the avifauna of British Columbia when Peter Hamel and Margo Hearne found and photographed an adult bird at Kilkun Bay, Sandspit, Queen Charlotte Islands on May 5, 2015 (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). It is impossible to know if this bird had wintered in the New World and was migrating north, or if this bird had incredibly made it across the North Pacific Ocean on massive, fast moving Low Pressure Weather Systems (M. Meredith Pers. Comm.). As with most mega-rarities found on the Queen Charlotte Islands, the Gray Heron was only a one-tide wonder (P. Hamel Pers. Obs.). Only a week before the discovery of the Gray Heron, a Common House-Martin was found near Masset on April 27, 2015 by the same two observers (Hamel *et al.* 2016). The lack of records of Gray Heron in North America is most likely due to the overall similarity of this species with that of the common and widespread Great Blue Heron (Shanahan 2000). As more observers become aware of the subtle differences between these two species, it is likely that more records will be found in the future (Lethaby and McLaren 2002). It is clear from Heron records in the Caribbean and the East Coast of North America, that herons can cross the ocean and in some cases will hitch a ride on ships (Gantlett 1998, Lethaby and McLaren 2002, Mactavish 2003). The smaller size and cleaner look of the Gray Heron should be a giveaway to observers that are aware of its differences. With a bird this overlooked and rare for anywhere in British Columbia, observers

lucky enough to find one should get photographs and try to have other observers see the bird as fast as possible. Given the highly migratory nature of the Gray Heron, it is possible more will be found along the west coast of British Columbia again in the future.



Figure 1 & 2: Record #1: Gray Heron adult found at Kilkun Bay, Sandspit, Queen Charlotte Islands on May 5, 2015. Photos © Margo Hearne.

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