

A Triumphant Return—Bringing The Great Blue Herons Home

By Kristin Walters

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A few miles north of Main Street, where Centerville meets Lino Lakes, there was once a natural habitat the likes of which is found in few places on earth. Peltier Island used to be the home of thousands of herons—a place they returned to each spring, where year after year they built their nests and waited for their chicks to hatch and grow.

These herons are a historic part of Lino Lakes, and Peltier Island's heron rookery was the reason why. Over the years, the birds have become the namesake of a local elementary school and neighborhood road, plus the centerpiece of the city's logo and the focus of an annual community festival.

The herons chose Peltier Island because it provides a perfect balance of everything a heron needs: Enough tall trees for an entire colony to live together, easy access to food and nesting materials, and an isolated, quiet locale where they can raise their families in peace.

Since it was officially "discovered" in 1989 (and much earlier, according to local residents) the rookery on Peltier Island has been nothing short of spectacular. In fact, it was once the second-largest waterbird colony in central Minnesota. Bird lovers found cause for alarm in the late 1990s, however, when the rookery experienced a mass exodus. The number of nests went from thousands to nearly none.

A number of passionate people have spent the last eight years trying to figure out why these birds left, and how to bring them back. The birds are expected to make their annual return this week, and many are hoping this year's numbers of nests and hatchlings will be something to celebrate.

Local resident Wayne LeBlanc is one of those interested parties. LeBlanc has lived on Peltier Lake since 1979, and recalls the herons' heyday. "There were thousands of nests before—think about that, thousands," LeBlanc said. "Now we're talking 30 or 40. It's been on the verge of extinction, so this [expected comeback] is really encouraging."

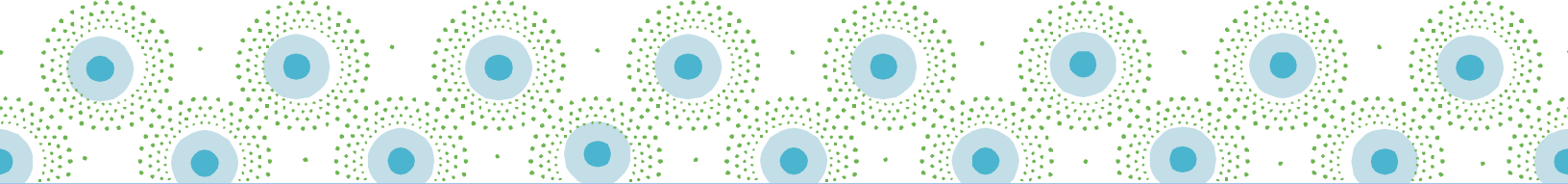
LeBlanc has been around long enough to recall other species that also nested on Peltier Island, like Great Egrets and Black-Crowned Night Herons. According to LeBlanc, the Night Herons are one species that never returned. "Every evening they would fly by, and make this peculiar 'quark' sound," he said. "It's an ancient, prehistoric sound, and I miss it." The potential to lose the herons altogether is just one of the reasons he feels such an urgent need to protect the colony today.

"I've made it my life's hobby to study the lake, the watershed, and what it all means," he said. "We need to preserve it for future generations' enjoyment."

LeBlanc was instrumental in creating the Peltier Lake Association as well as working with the cities of Lino Lakes and Centerville to establish a no-wake zone near the island, protecting both the herons and the water quality overall. He also volunteers on the Heron Task Force and through the Stream Health Evaluation Program (SHEP) in the Rice Creek Watershed District.

LeBlanc is a retired software engineer, and has never shied away from details and data. Recently, he overtook responsibility for monitoring the Great Blue Herons on Peltier Island from Andy Von Duyke of the University of Minnesota's Department of Fisheries, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology. Von Duyke had been leading the observations of the heron population on the island since 2004.

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Von Duyke began studying the herons as a graduate student, in a funded study designed to find the cause of their sudden decline. After carefully installing sensitive time-lapse video cameras into the island's 80-foot high trees, Von Duyke was able to gather video evidence that showed predators like raccoons invading the herons' nests. His research also showed predators like crows and great-horned owls were to blame; however, Von Duyke and others believe that predators weren't the only factor.

In the second year of the study, Von Duyke and a team of volunteers began taking action. They attached metal flashing to the trunks of trees in order to deter raccoons, and also trapped and removed some raccoons and opossums. The next year, they made some adjustments to the flashing to make it even more successful, and continued to remove a small number of predators. These efforts continued through 2007, and the population has begun to bounce back.

Another person who was hired by the DNR to help track heron activity on the island until he passed away in 2006 was Lino Lakes resident Art Hawkins. His daughter, Amy Donlin, accompanied him on a few occasions, as did her daughter and mother, Betty. Hawkins was a waterfowl biologist by training, and during his career was a pioneer of waterfowl surveys in the United States and Canada. "The herons kept him very active and involved up to his 92nd year," Donlin said. "It was a wonderful connection for him."

"Dad would go four or five times per week, quietly park in [Peltier Lake resident Ron Marier's] bean field, and make observations on his clipboard," Donlin said. "He'd watch every bird that left and where they were going... where they were feeding, getting nesting materials, how active they were."

According to Donlin, while Hawkins believed predators like raccoons definitely affected the rookery, he had other ideas about the reasons for the sudden mass exodus in 2000—just before Von Duyke's research began. "They sort of disappeared overnight," Donlin said, noting that the birds left during a time when there was a lot of water-skiing around the island, and also 24-hour road construction nearby. "Everyone was concerned [the reason they left] may have been human activity."

Now that the birds are coming back, Donlin and others, like Peltier Lake neighbor and Heron Task Force participant Barbara Bor, want to make sure that human activity doesn't affect the rookery in the future. They're working together with Eagle Brook Church, which is also located on Peltier Lake, to make sure that having thousands of people—and their cars—so close to the island each weekend doesn't have a negative impact.

"The herons are a major part of the ecosystem around here," Donlin said. "Everyone is worried—we feel so responsible, and we want to keep it viable. If this colony should leave, there are very few places they can go."

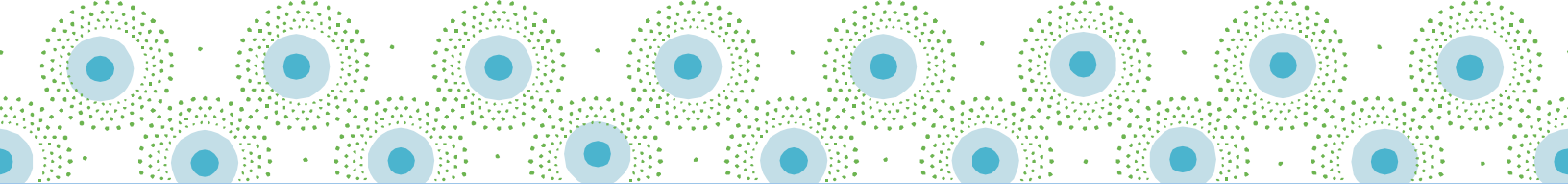
According to Executive Pastor Scott Anderson, Eagle Brook is taking a number of steps to make sure the birds stay, and the colony grows. "Our Environmental Stewardship Team is working with the neighborhood and the other appropriate stakeholders (Department of Natural Resources, Rice Creek Watershed District, the Minn. Department of Agriculture etc.) to make sure that we enhance the possibilities that the heron colony continues to re-establish on the island," Anderson said. "We placed piles of nesting material in the easement area, which will assist the herons in establishing their nests, and are actively recruiting observers from within the church who would be willing to verify nesting activity—especially during the critical months of March and April."

Eagle Brook is also taking other steps to protect the environment in the area of the church, for the enjoyment of all. "We continue to work at re-establishing the original habitat to the 14 acres of property we own that borders on the lake," Anderson said. "In this conservation easement area, we're in the second year of re-establishing the prairie in the open area, and hopeful to add some walking trails and educational signage through the area over the next two years."

On Feb. 21, Eagle Brook participated in a neighborhood meeting about the herons, together with several local residents who had once protested the building of the church. "They knew

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this was my attempt to make peace,” said neighbor Bor, who is pleased that they are moving ahead together in a partnership on behalf of the rookery.

Like all of the other people involved in this project, Donlin is optimistic about the herons’ return. “I really hope people appreciate how rare and unique this waterway is,” Donlin said. “It’s our responsibility to keep the herons coming back every year.”

“I hope we can have that again—the phenomenon of thousands of nests,” she said. “It’s not common, and we were really lucky to have it.”

LETTER TO THE EDITOR in response to this article:

“Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful heron article! Thanks so much for taking the time to research and do the story so well! This is the best article I have seen yet on the herons. Hopefully, more people will become more aware of how sensitive the environment really is. I have been watching for herons in the area but have not seen any yet. Other people are also watching. Some Great Blue Herons have been sighted on the Mississippi apparently but not here yet.”

— *Wayne LeBlanc, Lino Lakes*

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