

Patience of the great blue heron

Light levels are kept low in the museum storage rooms of Black Canyon National Park and Curecanti



Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

National Recreation Area. Among other duties, I'm the curator for both parks. Archival materials, historic objects going back 100 years and more, and plant and animal specimens, are protected in the cabinets and on shelves in these rooms.

It's quiet in the storage area where one of the specimens is located; a great blue heron. It's motionless; silent; just as if it were alive and hunting. They typically wait in shallow water, completely still, for fish or other prey to arrive. Their stoic stance suggests a patience completely alien to our human world.

The species ranges across much of North America; you'll find them along the shore of gentle waters (ponds, lakes, rivers) and in wetlands. They can stand up to nearly four feet, but their wing span reaches six feet across. In flight, the neck is retracted, and the wings flap in laborious flight.

Descended from dinosaurs, their flight seems like a throw-back to pterodactyls of the Jurassic period. They are closer to T-Rex, but that's another story. Whether hunting or flying, they seem deliberate, imperturbable, and with a calm view of the task to be done.

Some researchers have described them as "casual winter residents" for our area, but sightings have been made over the past few weeks. Perhaps lingering here for the winter gives them a jump on the

nesting season, which begins in February.

If you were a great blue living along the Gunnison or Uncompahgre Rivers, you would want to pick your home where there are lots of neighbors. You want to be in the crown of tall trees (where everyone else is), preferably cottonwoods. And you want a fixer-upper, not a flimsy new nest; let the late arrivals start from scratch.

Heron colonies can host hundreds of birds with a raucous atmosphere similar to a middle school cafeteria. The preferred nest needs repair before eggs can be placed.

Picture yourself getting ready to impress your sweetheart. You want the right home with opportunities to make improvements. If you're the male, you approach the nest with a stick in your bill. If you're the female, you've been waiting for him awhile, and you bow for him. Your greeting is a loud howl. Then you might take the stick from him.

The home improvement process takes time. The birds put a stick here, another one there. They fill in a floor hole, maybe some brush to spruce up a corner. You get the idea. This unhurried effort contrasts with the boisterous atmosphere in which it's built.

This level of patience in hunting, flying, and nesting really flies in the face of the world in which we live. Instant gratification is the catchphrase for our society. We have instant banking, instant shopping, instant entertainment (just do a download). And more; instant news (believable or not), instant insults, immediate pain relief. How about drive-up food, drive-up alcohol, overnight delivery, drive-through flu shots. You get the idea.

Our level of patience registers as zero on the same meter that measures the great blue heron. One morning, dressed



Great blue heron nests are perched in a gallery of old cottonwood trees near the Uncompahgre River. Over time, the nests might grow to four feet across, and more than 3 feet deep. That's big for a nest, but reflects diligence in home-building. (Photo courtesy of National Park Service)

for the cold so I can take my time, I walk down along the Uncompahgre River looking for these herons. The frigid dry air provokes mist off of the water.

I've seen them before at the river's edge. One stands without movement. The dagger-like beak is ready to strike a fish, harpooning it into submission. This is the living world where species are quick to seize their existence, and pour their energies into the makeup of life. Tolerant of time, the birds seem indifferent to the rush of the human world, though planes, trucks, and the rush of traffic are audible all around.

Their patience when hunting, knee deep in water, is unmatched. Patience gives them time to look at options, or

reason a better way. It carves out time to reflect and to think things through. It keeps them from missing something.

Is it possible for us to take a page out of the heron's playbook? Could patience help us to see hidden options or think things through in a more thorough way? We are not born impatient, but... you get the idea.

Great blues will soon be nesting again. In spite of their rowdiness, their call to us is that we, too can live a life of patience.

Paul Zaenger has been a supervisory park ranger at Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park since 1993. Other park assignments include Mount Rushmore National Memorial and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

Don't overlook a good pair of gloves

I mentioned to my wife that perhaps I need a new pair of gloves. My Jack Russell pups got a hold of my normal winter pair and the gloves now look like a failed medical experiment.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

My wife responded that I should just look in my warehouse for another pair. "There must be a dozen pairs of gloves in there."

She tends to exaggerate when it comes to my outdoor equipment. The "warehouse" she refers to is actually a spare bedroom that I store some of my extra equipment in. The "dozen pairs" she refers to may not be an exaggeration but I might keep that tidbit to myself.

Any outdoor person will accumulate more gloves, over a course of a lifetime, than they may ever realize. Without digging into boxes, I see winter gloves, hunting gloves, glove liners, mid-weight gloves, camouflage gloves, leather gloves, gardening gloves, welding gloves ... you get the idea.

I never throw out winter gloves

when they are replaced with something I think is better. The old gloves may become "truck gloves" or an extra pair in the pack. I only discard gloves when they wear out and die of natural causes. The latest pair was murdered and was

given a proper burial. The perpetrators are still at large and under the protective custody of my wife.

Since I am in the market for a new pair of warm weather gloves, I thought I would share some guidelines I learned over the years. Hands in the outdoors must stay dry in order to be warm. Dry from perspiration as well as snow or rain.

Start out with choice of materials as the first consideration. Say no to cotton. Cotton really does not have much of a place in the outdoor world other than lounging around at backyard barbecues.

Cotton absorbs moisture and loses all insulating ability when



When you head outdoors during the winter months, make certain you have gloves up to the task of keeping your hands protected from the cold, and, expect the unexpected. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/Mark Rackay)

wet. Cotton gloves absorb perspiration and will quickly be useless for warmth. Fortunately, there are very few cotton gloves on the market anymore.

Wool, Thinsulate, PrimaLoft and synthetic fleece all make great

insulation for winter gloves, especially in wet conditions. The outer layers of gloves should be water resistant as well. Here is another place where Gore-Tex and similar materials are your friend.

Well-made winter gloves are

expensive; there is no arguing that. The better gloves will have sealed seams to keep out the wind and moisture. It does little good to have a glove made of a

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