



Heron Colony Nesting Timeline

Arrival (late Jan - Mid Mar)

The first few birds arrive. Often they sit on buildings nearby watching the area for days and weeks prior. Males are often the first to return to claim the best nests with females arriving shortly after. Start dates from Jan 14 to Mar 12 have been documented in Stanley Park.



Initiation period (late Jan - Mid Mar)



Pairing and courtship, called the 'initiation' period is defined as the period of courtship before eggs are laid, and can last for over two months. Copulation takes place soon after the nest site is

chosen, sometimes before the nest is built. Males and females bob up and down clapping their bills together and showing off their long, skinny chest feathers. These feathers are special because they show the other bird how healthy and attractive they are, like a lion's mane or a peacocks tail feathers.



Nest Building

(late Feb – mid Mar)

After a pair has formed a bond, the male searches for sticks in nearby trees and brings them to the female who decides if the stick is good enough to use in her nest.

If the stick is not quite right she tosses it out of the tree but if she accepts it, she carefully weaves it into a nest high up in the branch of a tree. The nest must be strong and large because it may hold up to four chicks which grow to nearly the same size as their parents

Egg laying (late Feb – mid Mar)

Nest building and egg laying happens within days or weeks of first arrival. Approximately 10 days after copulation, the female begins laying eggs. The adults take turn incubating an average of 4 pale blue eggs, which are laid about 1-2 days apart.

Generally males incubate during the day and females during the night.



Hatching (late Mar – mid Apr)

After incubating for 28 days, the first fuzzy grey chicks are heard. Tik-Tik-Tik sounds are heard from below the colony, and cracked egg shells can be found on the ground below the nests. These hatchlings are comical because they have grey mohawks on their heads and they sway their necks as if they have no control over them.



Chicks: 1-3 weeks (Late Mar- mid July)



Since the herons do not all arrive at the same time, and because some have multiple nesting attempts, chick rearing takes place for many months. Once hatched, chicks are fed by both parents for 60 days before fledging (leaving the nest). The small hatchlings cannot regulate their body temperature, so parents must take turns

brooding (sitting on) the young. They are fed by the parents who regurgitate directly into the open beaks of their young.

Chicks: 3-4 weeks (Late Mar- mid July)

Parents begin to leave chicks alone at the nest. This makes them particularly vulnerable to predators and the elements. Feeding time for chicks is a flurry of activity as fights between siblings break out and loud squawking fills the air.



When the adults return to the nest, the chicks flap their wings violently and make horrible screeching sounds as they stick their whole beak right inside the parents' mouth to receive their mushy meal.

Chicks: 4-8 weeks (Late Mar- mid July)



Chicks are growing fast. Younger, smaller chicks may not survive this period if there is not enough food to go around. As they get larger, there is a lot of wing flapping, moving around the nest, and venturing to walk along branches around the nest.

Chicks: 8-10 weeks (mid May – mid July)

Chicks take their first clumsy flights between branches and nearby trees. Their first flight will often be a quick circle around the trees and a quick return to the nest. They still are fed at the nest until they finally leave. Chicks often glide to the ground before they are ready to fledge and must be wary of cars and predators.



Fledging (mid July-Sept)

By 10 weeks of age the young will leave the nests and follow their parents to feeding grounds to begin the process of independent life. Fledging is usually complete by July or August, but young birds have been observed in the nests and trees as late as the second week of September. The herons disperse to local feeding grounds such as Lost

Lagoon, Beaver Lake, the Stanley Park shoreline, Coal Harbour, False Creek, and the coastline from Jericho to Wreck Beach. In winter, adult and juvenile herons can be seen feeding around the shoreline and in agriculture fields around the Fraser Delta. Fewer than 25% of juveniles survive their first winter and it takes 22 months for the juvenile herons to mature to reproductive age, when they may again join the colony.



Text by Robyn Worcester

Photos by Martin Passchier