

Animal Life Cycles: Grey Herons



Have you ever spotted a grey heron flying over Tatton Park, or standing still in the water? Several grey herons nest in the parkland and it is exciting to see their chicks grow into adults.

Here are some facts about grey herons and a few fun activities for you to try in the classroom or at home.

- Grey herons are large birds; they can be 1 metre tall and weigh between 1 and 2 kilograms. They have a long neck and two long legs.
- Their heads and necks are white with a black crest of feathers, and their bodies and wings are grey with black specks.
- Grey herons like wetland so Tatton Park's two meres (lakes) are perfect for them, but they can also be found by rivers, ponds, marshes and the coast.
- They eat aquatic creatures like fish and amphibians, and also small mammals and insects. Herons stand very still in shallow water, striking prey with their dagger-like bills.
- Grey herons breed in the spring in colonies (groups of nests) called 'heronries', high up in trees near to water. The male brings sticks for the female to build the nest.
- A male grey heron makes a loud croaking call to attract a mate to his chosen nesting location. The two take part in a noisy ceremony before settling as a pair to mate.
- The female lays three to five eggs. The parents take turns to sit on them, to keep them warm (known as 'incubating'), for about 25 days before they hatch. The eggs are blue/green and around 6 centimetres long, which is a bit bigger than a hen's egg.
- Both parents feed their chicks food which they have regurgitated. After seven to eight weeks the chicks should have grown enough feathers to fly (this is called 'fledging').
- When fully grown, their wingspan is 1 ½ to 2 metres, and they fly slowly, with much flapping.
- Only a third of grey herons survive their first year, and go on to live for about five years.



Activity 1: Grey Heron Quiz

Have a go at answering the following questions about the grey herons at Tatton Park. Have you spotted one? Try to get a photo, or do a quick sketch.

- 1) What do grey herons eat?
- 2) Explain what incubating and fledging mean.
- 3) If 12 grey heron chicks are born at Tatton Park this year, how many will still be alive after a year?

Activity 2: Hunting Herons Game

Grey herons stand very still before stabbing their prey, so channel your inner heron while playing this game. It is based on 'Grandmother's Footsteps'.

Choose someone to be the prey to stand at one end of the room with their back to everyone else (the hunting herons). The herons should stand at the other end of the room and sneak up on the prey without being heard. The prey can turn around any time they want and when they do, the herons have to freeze. If the prey sees anyone moving after they have turned around, the moving heron has to go back to the start. The first heron to put their hand on the shoulder of the prey without them looking is the winner!

Activity 3: Nest Cakes

Try making your own heron nests. You can eat these - yum!

Method

- 1) Break 200g milk chocolate into pieces and melt in a small bowl over a pan of barely simmering water (ask an adult to help). Or use a suitable bowl in a microwave for a minute or two, on a low setting.
- 2) Crush 85g shredded wheat (or cornflakes or rice krispies) and stir in the melted chocolate.
- 3) Spoon the mix into 12 cupcake cases and chill in the fridge until set for an hour or two.

Activity 4: Makeover

Grey herons are a mix of white, grey and black feathers.

For a change, give a heron a makeover. Colour in the drawing using brightly-coloured paint, pens or pencils.

