



The female heron leaving the nest. Heron wingspan can reach 5'10"

A wide spectrum of wildlife, both local and migratory, depends on the rich, natural environment of the Florida Keys, but for most of us, their presence goes largely ignored. Small discoveries, usually while in the presence of "naturalist" friends, led to my interest in writing about nature and often I get alerts regarding wildlife from neighbors.

In late February I got an email from former photography student Mary Lou Krause: "Carol... there is a Great White Heron nesting on the island near our condo. At this time she has her babies. Might be a nice picture."

The island Mary Lou was referring to is a native outcrop of mangroves next to a protected mangrove forest. It lies a hundred yards offshore of Pumpkin Cay condominium complex. Though it has no official name, the neighbors call it "Pumpkin Cay Island" because of where it is located. Her condo is a great viewing spot for observing marine life such as bottlenose dolphin, sting-rays, turtles, brown pelicans and this pair of Great White Herons and three babies in their nest.

Pumpkin Cay Island checks all the appropriate boxes for ideal nesting bird habitat; it has sturdy branches to build a nest made of sticks, and is surrounded by water, with a seagrass bottom full of fish and crustaceans. Nesting birds feel safe there because of the distance created by the channel between the mangrove island and the sea-walled shoreline. There is some human traffic... small boats tied to cleats, a few fishing stations, the



A male heron and three babies in the nest at early morning. Both parents take turns feeding the babies.

occasional dog walker... but this doesn't seem to bother the herons.

The tidal flow from the ocean through Pumpkin Creek provides clear, clean water essential for wading birds, who very slowly forage in the shallow water, waiting for a fish to spear with their sharp bills. Herons will hunt during day or night; the most important factor is the varying tidal depth of the water.

Mindful not to get too close for fear of disturbing the birds, I set up my camera with long lens a hundred feet behind the seawall. There was one very large adult heron visible in the nest. It was late afternoon and the soft light lit up its feathers in contrast to the green mangroves. I didn't see the babies right away, but soon noticed yellow beaks and

Critters in Our Midst: Nesting Herons

by Carol Ellis



Two babies climb higher in the nest and become more visible. A third baby hides low in the nest.

black eyes popping up from beneath the adult's long light yellow legs. First I saw one rather bold baby, climbing up to the rim of the stick nest, its fluff feathers lit by the sun, then a second came into view, and the finally a third, clearly the most elusive, occupied the lowest portion of nest.

For the next few days I visited the herons during morning and late afternoon, and was fortunate to get photographs of both adults, in their natural environment, going about their everyday duties. This Great Blue Heron (white morph) nest on Pumpkin Cay Island is in the northernmost range for these birds, exclusively found in the Florida Keys and the Everglades.

One morning I could see momma heron patiently waiting on the nest for her partner to return with food, and to give her a break from tending the nest. Moments before he arrived, she rose up in the nest, stretching her long neck. Soon her mate swooped in and they stood close with necks and chest touching. After a little "mutual

Nesting Herons... CONTINUED



The female (at left) enthusiastically greets the male returning to the nest.

appreciation" time, the female flew over to the seawall. As she perched on the seawall, she turned her head in the direction of the camera, with one leg raised, outstretched claws, and looked straight at me, as if to say "Can't I get a moment of peace?"

I loved this photo (right) so much that I printed it life-size, and placed it where I would frequently walk by it, make eye-contact and say "Hi!" This is the largest heron in North America, 39"- 52" tall with a wingspan of 5'10".

The heron made me smile, and it needed more of a name than "big bird."

What better way to get a name than display the heron at an event full of children and adults? I held a contest at the Eco Fair at Ocean Reef, where I was doing a book signing for "Critters in our Midst".



This heron was printed life-size, and featured in a "Name the Bird" contest. It received the name "Pumpkin" since it lives at Pumpkin Creek.

See "Conch Characters" on page 23 for pictures of the naming event and winner.

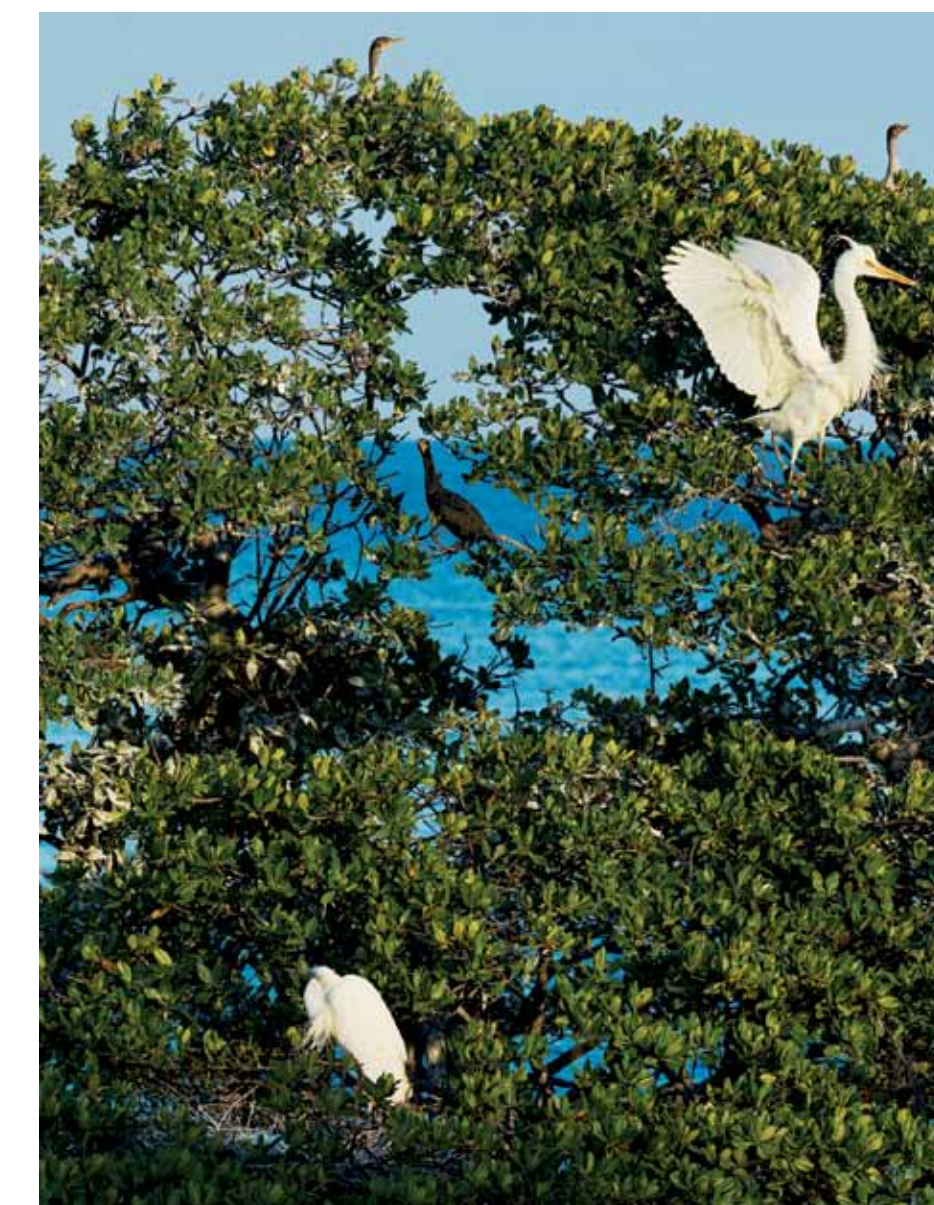


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From more than 50 entries, the winner was Katherine Yalamanchilli, age 10. The name suggested was "Pumpkin", and the three babies: Casey, Lola and Trey. The entry name stood out because it referred to where the heron lives - Pumpkin Cay. Katherine has a room at home decorated with stuffed animals, and she is excited to read "Critters in our Midst".

Despite the vast changes made by man to modify and occupy the coastline, most species can live nicely in proximity to humans as long as their most basic ecological needs are met: food, shelter and nesting sites. Habitat loss accompanying human development poses a great threat to wildlife, and water quality degradation is harmful particularly for wading birds.



Pumpkin Cay Island is ideal habitat for birds. A male returns in the late afternoon with food for his mate and three babies.