Abandoned Windmill Used as a Nesting Site by Great Blue Herons

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An active Great Blue Heron (Ardea herodias) nest was discovered on the platform of an abandoned windmill at Batture aux Loups-Marins, Quebec. Among the hundred or so heronries known in Quebec, this was the only one where a man-made structure was used.

Un nid actif de Grand Héron (Ardea herodias) installé sur la plateforme d'une éolienne désaffectée a été découvert à la Batture aux Loups-Marins, Québec. Parmi la centaine de hérónnières connues au Québec jusqu'à ce jour, c'est la première fois que l'on observe l'utilisation d'une structure artificielle par cette espèce.

Key Words: Ardea herodias, nesting platform.

On 25 April 1978, while conducting an aerial survey of aquatic bird colonies in the St. Lawrence estuary for the Canadian Wildlife Service, Pierre Dupuis and I discovered an active Great Blue Heron (Ardea herodias) nest on the platform of an abandoned windmill at Batture aux Loups-Marins (47°14'N, 70°25'W) (Figure 1). We located four other nests being built in a grove of tall willows (Salix sp.) in the vicinity of the windmill. There were no Great Blue Herons at this site prior to 1978 (Reed 1973; personal observation 1977).

On 1 June, the heronry contained eight active nests, four of which contained only eggs ($\bar{x} \pm SD = 3.0 \pm 1.6$) whereas the others, including the nest on the windmill, held both eggs and young. On 3 July, six nests remained, all with young herons ($\bar{x} \pm SD = 2.0 \pm 1.2$). The nest located on the windmill held four young herons whereas the others held fewer than three each.

Although Great Blue Herons have been recorded nesting on duck-hunting blinds (Stotts 1959) and navigational buoys (Henny 1978), it is nonetheless unusual for them to nest on artificial platforms. Among the hundred or so heronries known in Quebec, this was the only one in which a man-made structure was used (DesGranges, unpublished data). Nevertheless, other species of herons have been known to nest on artificial structures (McIlhenny 1934; Finkenstaedt and Heckenroth 1974; Wiese 1976). This suggests that the erection of elevated platforms where Great Blue Heron natural nest sites have been destroyed could prove to be an effective remedial technique, providing other features of the habitat remain suitable. At Batture aux Loups-Marins, the artificial platform was occupied from the time the heronry was first established and the nest found on it produced more young than any of the nests located in trees, the usual nesting site for this species.

I thank Transport Canada for making a helicopter available for our use in the St. Lawrence estuary survey.

FIGURE 1. Great Blue Heron nest built on platform of abandoned windmill.
Unusually Late Pregnancy of a Muskrat in Southeastern New Brunswick

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A Muskrat (Ondatra zibethicus zibethicus) containing nine embryos was trapped on 6 November 1978 on the Tantramar marshes in southeastern New Brunswick. The projected birth date for the embryos was the last week of November. This is the latest reported pregnancy for a muskrat in eastern Canada.

Key Words: Muskrat, late pregnancy, New Brunswick, Ondatra zibethicus zibethicus.

As part of a study of Muskrats (Ondatra zibethicus zibethicus) on the Tintamarre National Wildlife Area, Westmorland County, New Brunswick, carcasses of Muskrats caught during the 1978 fall trapping season (4 November – 31 December) were examined for sex, age, productivity, and other morphological measurements. Productivity was measured by placental scar counts from macroscopically examined female uteri.

The uterus of one female caught on 6 November contained nine embryos; these averaged 5-7 mm in length and were believed to be approximately 10-14 d old. The normal gestation period for Muskrats in northeastern North America is 25-30 d (Errington 1963). This Muskrat would have given birth during the last week of November.

This Muskrat had been live-trapped and ear-tagged 2 August; it weighed 1000 g. When caught in November it weighed 1490 g. Its exact age is uncertain. When tagged in August, it was subjectively classified as an adult, based upon size and appearance. When examined in November the molar fluting was at bone line, which left the age of the animal in question. The uterus showed no other scars of earlier pregnancies.

It seems most reasonable that this Muskrat was born late in the autumn of 1977, and that possibly it too came from a fall litter. This would account for its adult appearance in August, the questionable age from molar fluting, the absence of previous breeding, and its substantial weight gain in late summer and fall.

The Tantramar marshes of the New Brunswick-Nova Scotia border region contain some of the best habitat for Muskrats in the Maritimes. Under favorable conditions, it seems reasonable that autumn or fall breeding may occasionally occur, and that some kits survive the winter to enter the next year’s breeding population. Such late-born females, however, probably do not breed until late the following summer.

Muskrats may give birth during all months of the year in California (Dixon 1922), Louisiana (Svihla and Svihla 1931), and Texas (Lay 1945). Further north, in Maryland, breeding normally ceases by late October (Forbes 1942). Late litters have been reported in September from Wisconsin (Beer 1950), east Tennessee (Schacher and Pelton 1975), Connecticut (Smith and Jordan 1976), and Manitoba (McLeod and Bondar 1952), and in October from Idaho (Errington 1963). In New Brunswick (Dilworth 1967) and Prince Edward Island (Dibbilee 1970) the latest observed litters were born in September. Errington suggested that it is quite possible litters might rarely be sired during winter in Iowa. This specimen from the Tantramar marshes of New Brunswick, however, is the first documented evidence of a November pregnancy of a Muskrat in eastern Canada.

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