

## Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea*



**Folk Name:** Calico Bird, Little Blue Crane (adult), Little White Crane (young)

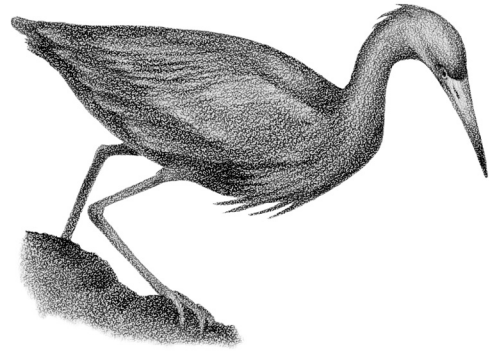
**Status:** Migrant

**Abundance:** Rare to Uncommon

**Habitat:** Lakes, rivers, ponds, wetlands, marshes

The Little Blue Heron is an all-dark, slate gray to purplish-blue heron when it has reached its full adult plumage. Immature “Little Blues” look entirely different. They are all-white birds that look very much like a Snowy Egret, and most sightings of Little Blue Herons here in the Central Carolinas are of all-white immature birds. These young herons gradually become “calico-colored” as they molt into their adult plumage during their first spring. At 24 inches, the Little Blue Heron is the same size as a Snowy Egret. Therefore, great care must be taken to carefully identify all medium-sized white herons to properly differentiate between the two. The key distinguishing features to watch for are the dull, yellow-green legs of the Little Blue versus the black legs of the Snowy; and the thick gray, black-tipped bill of the Little Blue, versus the thinner, all-black bill of the Snowy.

The Little Blue Heron has been much more common in this region than the Snowy Egret. Leverett Loomis recorded post-breeding birds as “common” during the summer in Chester County in the late 1800s. Members of the YMCA nature club in Salisbury reported several west of town on August 11, 1920. On August 7, 1929, William McIlwaine was birding along the Catawba River near Charlotte when he encountered his “find of the day”: three species of herons, which included a total of seven white (immature) Little Blue Herons. He noted: “They were finding where the weeds and grasses were growing in the shallow waters among the rocks” and remarked he had “quite an experience” as six of them flew and landed very close to him. McIlwaine recorded a Little Blue Heron



arriving in Charlotte on 16 April in 1931, and a second bird was present on 3 June of that year. In 1939, Charlie Sellers observed post-breeding dispersal of Little Blue Herons in the region and noted “young occur through July and August.” He listed specific dates of three seen in 1939 on 4 July, one on 13 July, and one on 17 August. Two years later, Sellers observed a Little Blue Heron on 10 May and an adult-plumaged bird present on 17 May. He provided this comment: “The appearance of the adult of this species is regarded as unusual in this locality. One was also seen on June 7.”

Little Blue Herons have been reported on almost 20 Spring Bird Counts conducted in this region since the 1950s. When they are found they are always cited as a highlight of the count because, as one count compiler noted, this heron is “rarely seen this time of year” in the Carolina Piedmont. John Scavetto found an adult bird in a marsh near the Pineville mall on April 10, 2015, providing our earliest spring record. This bird appeared to linger as late as 1 June. Most spring birds have moved through our region by 16 May. Post-breeding birds have been found arriving in the region as early as 22 June, most are found in July and August, and some linger as late as 17



Little Blue Heron in Pineville. (Lee Weber)



Immature Little Blue Heron over the Catawba River. (Jeff Lemons)

September. Three lingered at the Cheraw Fish Hatchery in Chesterfield County until 5 October in 2007.

This species is extremely rare inland in winter. We have four reports of Little Blue Herons in the region between November and March. One was reported on the Chester CBC held on December 29, 1977, and one was reported on the Gaston CBC held on December 21, 1985. No details were provided for either sighting but both were

accepted by the National Audubon Society. The third report is of a bird found in Iredell County from February 18–23, 2003. Lastly, one was reported on the Cottonwood Trail in Spartanburg County on March 29, 2012. No details of these birds were provided.

Little Blue Herons have been confirmed nesting in a growing colony of egrets and herons near the town of Dyers Hill, SC, about 20 miles south of Anson County.