

A Wild Kingdom

By Susan Griffin Ward, KWA Director of Community Engagement



It was a peaceful Sunday afternoon, until it wasn't. Without warning, the creek valley was filled with terrible screams. When the bedlam began, we were sitting in our canoe, in a stream, straining our necks to spy on the heron rookery swaying 200 feet above us in ancient sycamore trees. Spring is nesting season and herons were sitting on eggs and feeding chicks. The peaceful scene abruptly ended when an eagle attacked. The herons' crazy shrieking and violent flapping of their powerful wings did not thwart the eagle's hunt for dinner. It was chaos.

Just as suddenly as it started, it was deathly quiet. No longer hungry, the raiding raptor ruled the rookery with a conqueror's ease; a heron nest served as her new throne. While the eagle surveyed her kingdom, the remaining herons were stock-still, effectively now prisoners of war. Under threat and unwilling to leave their babies, their instinct was an attempt at invisibility. That's what most mothers would do, me included. The reign of terror lasted a surprisingly long time. When the eagle finally flew off, a hawk chased her--perhaps to steer her away from and prevent a raid of its own nest.

Great Blue Herons are my favorite bird, my personal blue bird of happiness. It is true when I tease my children that I have taken more photographs of herons than them. I never tire of watching the resident river poets dressed in their blue-gray robes; they are lyrical in flight, and when fishing on a shoreline a study in stillness and silence that a monk would envy. But I am also amazed every time I see an eagle soaring over the Ohio River.

I considered that the eagle might also be nesting and have her own chicks to feed. All creatures are focused on survival. The eagle needs the heron, the heron needs the fish, the fish needs the mussel, the mussel filters the water to keep it clean, and all living things depend upon clean water to live. This includes humans, but often we forget what's important to the smallest of creatures is also in our own best interest.

Now it's almost commonplace to see eagles on the river, proving that wildlife and the environment can be restored when humans make the right choices. Witnessing this life and death scene unfold was a dramatic reminder that wildlife is indeed wild, not always easy, and protecting the ecosystem is critical to survival for all of us. A good start would be to stop pouring poison into our water.



Eagle in heron rookery