At sites like the Lake Renwick Heron Rookery Nature Preserve in
are helping to shore up the fragile status of heron breeding colo

A Heron Home Com

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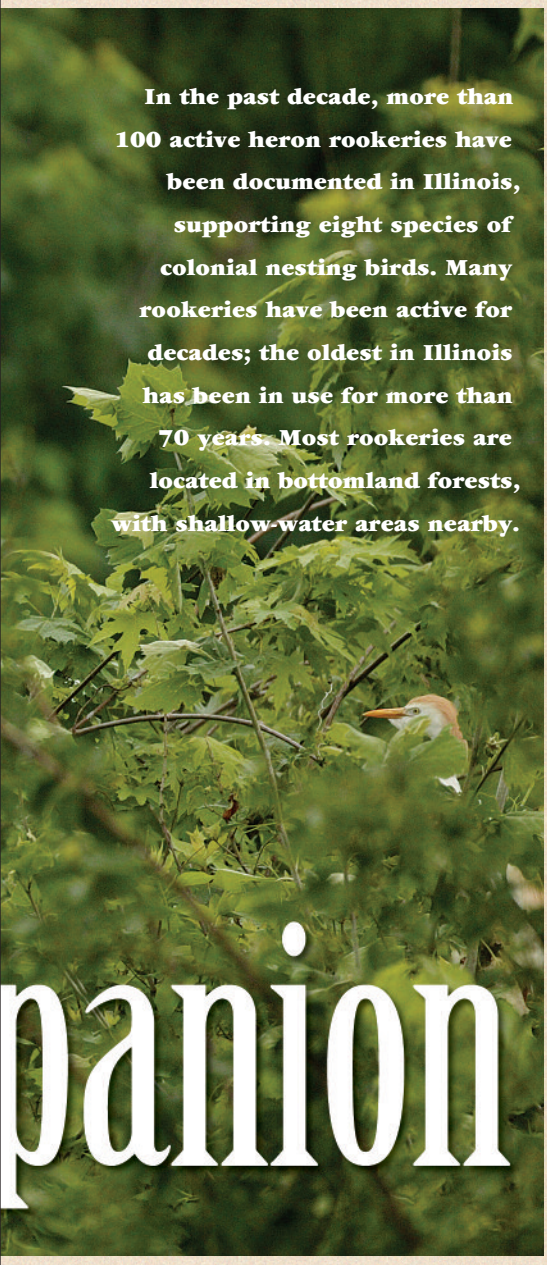
As the summer sun rises over a heron rookery, the silver maple and cottonwood trees are alive with noisy activity.

Adult herons and egrets fly in and out of the rookery as they go to foraging areas and return with food for their young. Immature birds sit in the nests, or out on tree limbs, squawking and clucking as they wait for their meal. Both young and adult birds would appear to be wildly messy housekeepers, with splattered evidence of the feeding above littered understory plants. In a rookery which may have thousands of young herons, it is quite a display of sounds, sights and smells.

A rookery might range from a handful of nesting great blue herons along a small creek to more than a thousand nests, including several different species of birds, along a large river or lake. In the last 10 years, more than 100 active heron rookeries have been found in Illinois. Wading birds nesting in these colonies include great blue herons, great egrets, snowy egrets, black- and yellow-crowned night herons, little blue herons and cattle egrets. Double-crested cormorants are not wading birds but they also nest colonially, frequently with herons and egrets.

Herons build platform nests made of sticks which are usually in trees and shrubs, although some species also will nest in marsh vegetation. Nests often are used year after year, with maintenance done each year when the pair arrives on the rookery.

Will County, volunteers
nies in Illinois.



In the past decade, more than 100 active heron rookeries have been documented in Illinois, supporting eight species of colonial nesting birds. Many rookeries have been active for decades; the oldest in Illinois has been in use for more than 70 years. Most rookeries are located in bottomland forests, with shallow-water areas nearby.

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Active from dusk to dawn, the state-endangered black-crowned night heron constructs a fragile platform nest of interwoven twigs.

Both parents participate in nest building, egg incubation and care of young. Although the dates vary by species, eggs are typically laid in April and May and incubation takes an average of three to four weeks. Many birds remain in the rookery until July or later. In the late fall, most herons migrate south, although some great blue herons and black-crowned night herons remain through the winter.

An average Illinois heron rookery is in bottomland forest close to shallow-water areas for foraging. Most herons and egrets primarily eat fish, although snowy egrets and yellow-crowned night herons prefer crayfish and cattle egrets consume mainly insects. All of these species will eat other small prey if available.

Through the generations, herons and egrets tend to have a strong fidelity to some of the larger rookery sites. While the size of a rookery and species using it may vary over time, some heron colonies in the state have been documented in the same location for several decades, and one for more than 70 years. Sometimes the appeal of the site is not apparent to humans. The most diverse heron rookery in the state, which includes six species with more than a thousand nests, is found in an exotic species thicket in an urban area.

In some cases, the attachment to a rookery site has overcome severe disturbance factors.

Several years ago a rookery in eastern Illinois was hit by a tornado and many of the trees were destroyed. Recovery began slowly, with only about half the breeding pairs returning to the area, but numbers have returned to nearly pre-tornado levels. Another rookery on the Illinois River was disturbed by logging, but after a 12-year absence from the site, the herons returned and it is now one of the larger heron colonies on the Illinois River.

Typically, herons nest in secluded locations away from people. Despite the fidelity of herons to a particular site, too much disturbance can cause abandonment of a rookery. Some colonies have been permanently abandoned from dis-

The state-endangered little blue heron primarily nests in the southernmost part of the state. Illinois is at the northernmost edge of its range.

Plume hunters caused numbers of great egrets to plummet in the late 1800s. The species has slowly recovered and now is a common to fairly common migrant and summer resident in Illinois.

turbances such as persistent human activity, development and logging.

To protect heron colonies, people should never enter a heron rookery during the spring and summer when the birds are nesting. Herons are particularly sensitive to disturbance early in the breeding season before eggs have hatched. Natural factors, such as frequent, prolonged floods during the breeding season and high mortality of nest trees, also can cause desertion of a rookery site. On more than one occasion, herons have abandoned a rookery after a bald eagle started nesting nearby.

Since Europeans settled in Illinois, heron populations have faced many obstacles that threatened their survival.

In the late 1800s, millions of herons were killed, especially great and snowy egrets, for their breeding plumes—the beautiful feathers grown during the breeding season to attract mates and once highly desired for their use in decorating hats. Although the plume trade ceased in the early 1900s, factors such as illegal shooting, pollution, breeding season disturbance, and destruction of nesting and foraging habitat have continued to adversely affect heron populations. Black- and yellow-crowned night herons, little blue herons and snowy egrets are Illinois-endangered species.

Restoration efforts to increase wetland habitat acreage and quality are beneficial to many species, including wading birds. One example is in the Cache River Watershed, where a new rookery has been established in an area where extensive wetland restoration and protection recently occurred. These restoration efforts also have enhanced foraging opportunities for birds nesting in existing rookeries.

Lake Renwick Heron Rookery Nature Preserve, in Will County, is an example of a different kind of restoration that has benefitted one of the largest rookeries in the state.

Herons have been documented nesting on islands at this site since the 1940s. Twenty years ago it became clear that the islands were becoming degraded by nest tree mortality and erosion. In 2001, the Will County Forest Preserve District and Audubon Society volunteers undertook a restoration project that stabilized the islands and provided 561 artificial nesting sites. The project has been a huge success and every structure is being used by nesting herons. There are more than 1,000 nests on the site, including five different species. Non-intrusive viewing opportunities are provided Saturdays and Wednesdays during the breeding season. Information is available online at www.fpdwc.org/renwick.cfm.

Heron populations continue to be stressed by human and natural impacts, therefore successful restorations like these are needed. Increased restoration and protection of nesting and foraging habitat are an important step in encouraging recovery of these graceful birds in Illinois wetlands.

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Rookeries often support multiple species, such as the black-crowned night heron (upper left), little blue heron (lower left) and cattle egret (right).