

[Home](#)[Great Blue Heron
Parasitism](#)[Symposium 2011 In
Review](#)[Spider Bite in
Squirrel](#)

WRNC



Sharing information and knowledge for the benefit of native wildlife

A Quarterly Newsletter

Issue 43, March 2011

Great Blue Heron Parasitism

By Amelia Mason

I am a state licensed rehabber living in Wilmington NC (awaiting my federal permit). I moved here about a year ago from Charlotte, where I volunteered and learned waterfowl rehabilitation from Jennifer Gordon, with whom I am now great friends. For the past year now, I have volunteered for Toni O'Neil at Possumwood Acres (working under her federal permit) and Mary Ellen Rogers, at Sea Biscuit Wildlife Shelter on Oak Island; I liaison back and forth between them volunteering, helping with rehab, and transporting birds for them. In Wilmington there is really not enough help for the injured birds, so Mary Ellen and Toni both refer calls to me to pick up birds they cannot get to and help out.

A while ago, Mary Ellen referred a call to me about a Great Blue Heron that was sitting in front of someone's townhouse right down the street from where I live. It was a young bird, very weak – hardly put up a fight, and very emaciated (they are already very skinny birds as you know, but this one was just skin and bones – even for a heron). Other than that it had absolutely no physical injuries. It was already late at night so I hydrated, stabilized, and set him up comfortably to rest for the night. Next morning things looked like they might be ok, because he was sitting up. Then suddenly, within a matter of seconds..., he just got weaker..., went limp.... and faded away. He was just too far gone with starvation.

It bothered me as to why a young Great Blue Heron with no injuries would starve to death for no obvious reason? I know we've been having a few cold spells but nothing crazy, and it looked as if he had been starving for a while. So before I went to wrap up his body, I felt him over again really well. I noticed in the abdomen, above the cloaca, it felt like a big, hard lump was inside of him, almost like a very large egg. I made a small incision in the abdomen to look inside and was shocked at what I found. His entire stomach was densely encased with a concentration of nematodes, large and small. They looked like a bunch of tightly balled up skinny reddish/blue spaghetti. Quite gross!



I looked it up in my "Field Manual of Wildlife Diseases in the S.E" and it was a perfect match with "Verminous Peritonitis" also called *Eustrongylidosis* . The nematodes were constricting the stomach very tightly and even burrowed through to the inside of the stomach wall. There were several yellow lesions and cysts that had penetrated to the inside of the stomach, most likely contributing to his emaciation and starvation. The book indicated that the larval nematodes penetrate the walls of the upper gastro-intestinal tract and then migrate through other organs. The heron had all the matching clinical signs including emaciation and abdominal swelling. Apparently they get the parasite from eating infected fish. It's an indication of what is going on with the fish in our wetlands, and is something to look out for if rehabbers get in emaciated herons & egrets with no injuries.

References:

Davidson, William R. *Field Manual of Wildlife Diseases of the Southeastern United States*, Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study, (The University of Georgia, Athens, GA, 2006). Pg. 336.

[Edit this entry.](#)