

# Fishing for a Living

By Deborah Stone



I'd been observing the birds in a heron rookery on a beaver pond near my home for more than two decades, before I finally saw a great blue heron catch a fish—three fishes and a frog, to be precise.

True, I hadn't tried terribly hard to witness the heron's fabled hunting prowess. My patience, I'd assumed, would be no match for its reputed ability to stand motionless for long periods, waiting for the right moment to strike. I was wrong: my heron, at least, was no statue.

The heron that changed my mind was standing in full view in the middle of the pond one day, the water just clearing the tops of its legs. The feathers on its underbelly lightly brushed the lily pads on the surface. I decided to wait and watch. I settled in on the shoreline, my back against a boulder, and positioned my binoculars.

Far from motionless, this heron was positively fidgety. It moved its head backward, forward, and side to side. It stretched its neck high and then abruptly lowered it; at times it rested its neck in a loose S curve. Occasionally the heron swallowed, as if exercising its throat muscles in anticipation. Every so often it opened its beak and shook its head vigorously, as if trying to dislodge a bad-tasting morsel.

While I ruminated on the significance of these gestures, the heron abruptly turned its head to look over its left shoulder. Then, without turning its body, it plunged its long sharp beak into the water so swiftly that the eye could barely follow—and plucked out a frog. It raised its head high, tossed back the frog, and swallowed.

After an interlude of more restless fussing, the heron drew its neck into a tight S, then thrust it forward, shot its beak into the water, and withdrew a shiny black fish. This catch proved a lot trickier to handle than the frog. The heron solved the problem by pitching its head back three or four times and

quickly opening its beak each time, just enough to keep hold of the fish while positioning it more accurately for swallowing. Soon enough, the black fish followed the frog down the bird's gullet.

For its next catch, the heron switched strategies. Suddenly its head and neck shot straight out, cantilevering over the water. A few seconds later the bird juttied its neck out still farther, then plunged its head into the pond. This time the heron barely had its catch by the tail fin. After several vigorous head tosses, though, the bird cleverly manipulated that fish, too, down the hatch.

The last fishing feat I saw that day was the most spectacular. All at once the heron turned its head sharply to the right and, without moving its legs, thrust its beak down past its right shoulder and into the water. It spread its wings a little and then went under, up to its shoulders. The fish it came up with was seven or eight inches long—longer than the heron's bill—and it was putting up a mighty struggle. I counted nearly a dozen head tosses, the heron opening its beak and then clamping down hard each time, the fish flopping furiously. The tussle lasted for more than a minute.

Most of us are used to seeing life in nature through a Darwinian lens. We expect the pressures of natural selection to lead to the kind of simple, rigid behavior we associate with "hardwired" instincts, and that's just what I had expected from the heron. But after watching the bird, I came to think that there's ultimately not much difference between the ways my heron and I go about our lives: we both keep our eyes wide open, we improvise, and occasionally we stick our necks out.

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