

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

GREAT BLUE HERON

Here in Victoria Park, and throughout much of Florida, we're accustomed to seeing our resident Sandhill Cranes walking around our neighborhoods, probing the ground for grubs and acorns along our sidewalks, yards, and golf course. These tall, red-capped, stately birds are unmistakable. But there's another large, long-necked, long-legged bird that frequents our ponds. The Great Blue Heron stands about as tall as the Sandhill Crane (4 feet) but has a shorter wingspan — about 70 inches compared to the crane's 80 inches. In flight, it's easy to tell these 2 big grayish birds apart: the crane flies with its long neck extended straight out

while the heron's neck is folded in.

Unlike the Sandhill Crane, the Great Blue Heron is always found around water. It's often seen standing around the shores of our ponds in Victoria Park, with its neck and head bent down toward the water waiting for a fish or frog to come within range of its powerful, sharp beak. With a lightning-fast lunge, the heron spears its prey and then brings it away from the water. Dropping the fish or frog onto the ground, or shaking it loose from its beak, the heron then grabs its prey and swallows it whole. I recently watched one dispatch an armored catfish in this fashion on the Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive (see photo).

Great Blue Herons are found from Alaska and Nova Scotia all the way down to the Caribbean Islands. In winter, most of the ones from the north migrate south, joining our resident herons for a few months before flying back up to breed.