

Lincoln Park Zoo pond gets the bird

Black-crowned night herons force delay of project

By William Mullen

Tribune reporter

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When the Lincoln Park Zoo decided to convert a concrete- and steel-lined pond into the heart of a showcase preserve, it had to craft a construction plan around something unusual: the mating schedule of an endangered bird that came not from the zoo's aviary but out of the wild.

A small, unnamed island in a pond in the middle of a park in a very large city is a surprising place to see a breeding colony of black-crowned night herons. But early last spring, 63 mating pairs found Lincoln Park's South Pond and chose it as their nesting ground.

As biologists watched with a mix of wonder and concern, more than a hundred chicks hatched and grew on the island in the pond, just outside the zoo's boundaries.

Also watching and waiting were the zoo's construction workers, who had to wait until late July, when the chicks had grown their flying feathers and departed, before starting the \$12 million pond renovation.

Last week, right on schedule, a state Department of Natural Resources biologist gave crews the nod to start work.

"It is a little atypical to find these birds nesting in the middle of the city," said Doug Stotts, a bird curator from the Field Museum, "but what they have in Lincoln Park is pretty typical of what they look for in a nesting area.

"Being on the island is good protection from predators, and it has plenty of trees and shrubs to build nests in. They are near the water, and they have the whole lakefront to fly along to find places they like" to forage for food.

This week, the final phase of the construction plan will get under way to transform South Pond -- a shallow, dirty, 140-year-old ditch -- into the marshland nature preserve.

Called "Nature Boardwalk at Lincoln Park Zoo," it is scheduled to open next spring. Workers have begun to rip out the concrete and steel shoreline and will replace it with a gentle slope into the water planted with native marsh reeds and cattails.

Owned by the Chicago Park District but now managed by the zoo, the pond will be part of a wild marsh habitat that zoo officials hope will fill up with native animals like the herons.

Stocky and short-necked with short yellow legs, the herons don't match the stereotypical image of the graceful heron species. With glowing red eyes, they stand motionless in shallow water for long periods, waiting for small fish or frogs they swallow whole.

Found on every continent except for Antarctica and Australia, the species is plentiful in some parts of the world. But in Illinois and surrounding states, 200 years of human destruction and loss of wetland habitats have decimated night heron populations, and they are listed as one of the state's endangered species.

Stotts estimates there are fewer than 500 breeding pairs in Illinois. Experienced birders, however, often spot them in and around Chicago, perhaps because the state's largest breeding colony is in marshes on the east side of Lake Calumet and Torrence Avenue on the city's Far South Side.

The herons suddenly appeared in Lincoln Park three years ago and began establishing a breeding colony on the island.

The island, choked by trees and underbrush, apparently looked like a nice little fixer upper as several pairs in 2007 built nests, laid eggs and raised their hatchlings until they could fly away that summer. Even more of the herons nested there in 2008.

But the zoo knew that if the herons returned to the island this spring, it would have to wait through most of the summer before major renovation could be done because noise and activity would likely distress the birds. Preliminary work began in November when the zoo fenced off the area and, amid some controversy, killed off fish and removed non-native trees and plants on the island.

"Our construction crews were in agreement that we could not disturb the nesting birds," said Steve Thompson, the zoo's senior vice president for conservation. "The construction company says we are still on schedule to complete the project as planned, before the herons come back starting next March."

The zoo also is building an interpretive/education center along the pond. Zoo staff and volunteers will conduct tours and staff overlooks. They will also enlist Chicago students to help record wild species seen.

"It is fortuitous," Thompson said, "that an endangered species turned up right in the middle of the pond. Going forward, this will be one of the most studied colonies of these birds in the world."

wmullen@tribune.com

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