



Grey herons have on average four or five chicks.

WHAT TO DO IN ONE... *weekend*

Primal screamers

As spring reaches its peak, seize the opportunity to visit a **HERONRY** and experience the sights, sounds and smells of the nesting birds.

▶ **AT A GLANCE** |||||

- **What?** Breeding herons, from building nests to fledging chicks.
- **Where?** Powderham Castle, an English country home and deer park in south Devon.

■ **When?** The first chicks hatch in early April, but the cycle lasts from February until June.

■ **Also look for** Spring migrants, breeding waders such as redshanks (*left*) and wildfowl at reserves on the Exe Estuary.



Braced by the salty breeze of the Exe Estuary, I stroll through the grounds of Powderham Castle in south Devon. Here among the soft, manicured lawns and deer park nestles a small copse of oak trees, which at this time of year is filled with two of the most unearthly sounds I have ever heard: the primal scream and pterodactyl croak of the heron.

Peering between the tangled, ivy-covered oaks, I can just see the precarious dwelling from which these strange noises emanate. An adult grey heron, its plumes raised like

a Native American headdress, is standing gingerly on a vast mass of twigs that is barely supported by the tiny apex of the trees' branches, sheltering three or four curious-looking (some might say ugly) chicks.

Here, with all their finery on display, herons are transformed – from ditch-side loafers to the aesthetic equals of cranes. Considering herons weigh on average 1.5kg, I am amazed that such a flimsy platform can hold both parents and their brood.

As I watch, I realise that the tree is home to several heron families, with space fiercely

contested between neighbours. Each nest represents a moment in the heron's life-cycle. In one, a mother protects her clutch of eggs; in another, I can see the punky hairstyles of nature's spikiest chicks. The parents warmed their eggs through wind and rain, but it paid off.

The acrid smell of guano drifts from the wood, when suddenly – with a coarse slap – a fish lands on the grass near my feet. An inexperienced hunter has dropped his prey.

High above, a male is coming in to land, croaking hoarsely, and as he flops onto the nest his family greet him in a frenzy. Crown feathers are raised and wings neatly packed away. The father's gullet bulges with regurgitated fish, and the chicks open their throats wide, like bin-liners, to receive his offering.



Breeding little egrets can also be seen at the Powderham Castle heronry.



Enjoy a springtime stroll in the daffodil-carpeted grounds of Powderham Castle.

Heronry: Chris Gomersall/NPL; egret: John Baker; daffodils: Michael Dutton/Alamy; redshank: David Kraer/NPL; Cetti's warbler: Frederic Desmette/BIOS/SpécialistStock

In turn, the heron lowers his skewer of a bill into each of the chicks' mouths. Until the chicks fledge, in a month or so, this ritual will be repeated about four times each day.

Suddenly, I notice another bird sitting beneath the canopy, a ghost against the pale sky. The little egret is a small, white heron that has only started breeding in the UK over the past two decades, perhaps attracted by our slowly warming climate.

Egrets often nest in the low, dense branches below herons. In doing so, they benefit not only from the cover, but also from the herons' aggressive attitude to predators. Egrets have

the same ornate plumes on the backs of their necks, the same killer bills and build the same delicate platforms. At this time of year, nearly 1,000 pairs are breeding in the UK, especially the south-west of England.

Heronries are among Britain's oldest wildlife spectacles. One, in Chilham in Kent, was host to

a breeding colony that dated back to at least the 13th century before it blew down in the 1980s. So I am continuing a great tradition as I watch the birds today. But, no matter how long these species have nested besides the banks of the Exe, seeing them will never lose its thrilling novelty.

I see the punky hairstyles of nature's spikiest chicks.

NOW YOU DO IT

HERONRIES IN SPRING

SEEING THE SPECTACLE

POWDERHAM CASTLE SOUTH DEVON

01626 890243; www.powderham.co.uk
► Powderham Castle dates back to 1391, and consists of a deer park, lake and heronry.

► Visit in early April to observe many stages of the heron's life-cycle before the trees come fully into leaf.
► Admission costs £9.80 and includes both a castle tour and a return visit in the same season.

GETTING THERE

► From the M5, take the A379 from Junction 30. Follow this road south through Exminster then take the left turn signposted to Powderham.

► Park at Powderham Church (OS grid reference SX972844) or Starcross Yacht Club (OS grid SX974840) and view the herons from the layby on the coast road.

WHERE TO STAY

BUDGET Mill Farm B&B, near Kenton, is 3.5km away and offers singles from £39 and twins from £60. 01392 832471; <http://millfarmstay.co.uk>

MID-RANGE Lyme Bay House, in Dawlish (right), 8.5km away, overlooks the sea and offers singles from £66 and doubles from £84. 01626 864211; www.lymebaydawlish.co.uk

LUXURY Southernhay House in the centre of Exeter is a



Grade II Georgian townhouse. Rooms range from £150 to £240 a night. 01392 439000; www.southernhayhouse.com

ALSO IN THE AREA

EXMINSTER MARSHES

This estuarine habitat will be alive with migrants such as sand martins in April and the distinctive sound of Cetti's warblers (right). Later in the spring, hobbies can be seen hawking for dragonflies.

DAWLISH WARREN In April, this National Nature Reserve has good numbers of passage

waders and the first terns arrive to breed.

BYSTOCK POOLS

On the other side of the Exe Estuary from Powderham Castle, Bystock is good for dragonflies, damselflies and other invertebrates in late spring and summer.



WHERE TO GO

1 POWDERHAM CASTLE, SOUTH DEVON

2 REGENT'S PARK, LONDON This famous park holds more than 40 pairs of easy-to-watch herons. www.royalparks.gov.uk/The-Regents-Park.aspx

3 YNYS-HIR, CEREDIGION, WALES

An RSPB reserve with a heronry hide. 01654 700222; www.rspb.org.uk

4 TEALHAM MOOR, SOMERSET

A roadside heronry amid the wet pastures of the Avalon Marshes. The colony is at OS reference ST433442.

