

# *Faith, Hope and Fiction*

## **Patience and Reward**

**By Patricia Crisafulli**

For three straight days I have seen them—sought them out to be truthful. As I approach, I say to myself, today is the day they will not be here; I will be disappointed. And each time, like a pleasantly reoccurring dream, I have been delighted by what greets me: herons.

Hérons are not rare. I've seen long-legged blue herons stalking marshlands not far from here, and white egrets used to wade among the cattails on a neighbor's farm across the lots from where I grew up. But this is a pond in a park in a busy Chicago suburb; where kids play soccer and baseball and occasionally learn to fish. People ride bicycles and walk their dogs at the park. Although there is a wild prairie garden filled with birds, butterflies, and rabbits, it is not a nature preserve in the strictest sense.

Squadrons of ducks cruise the pond and march up to passersby who just might be carrying bread. The geese that stretch out in the shade like so many grazing sheep don't even move unless you get too close. Our wildlife, it seems, is rather tame.

Hérons, though, are another matter. These odd-looking birds, with their tiny heads and long necks, are fishers and patient stalkers of prey. Herons do not rely upon humans to feed them; indeed, they would prefer if we stayed clear of their habitat, which makes the last three

days so special. In both morning and evening, I have seen four herons: an adult great blue and a smaller one that appears to be this year's hatchling, and a pair of squat green herons. Their presence and my fascination seemed to hint at a deeper meaning than mere observation, a lesson to be learned.

The first time I saw one was quite by accident. The sun was climbing high on Saturday when my friend, Susan, spied an enormous bird at the pond as we walked in the park. Three or four feet tall and the same grayish color as the dead wood half-submerged in the water, the bird could have passed itself off as an old branch crooked at an odd angle. No doubt that is the intention of nature's camouflage.

We stood for several minutes to see what the heron would do, perhaps walk noiselessly on those backward-bending legs to hunt aquatic life. Instead, it trained its beady eye on us, moving its head when we shifted our positions. The watchers were being watched. We stopped a woman as she jogged along the path around the pond and pointed out the heron. "Oh, I never see him this late," she exclaimed happily.

From her house near the park she sees the herons only early in the morning, before the park gets too crowded. Perhaps the holiday weekend had kept foot traffic down to a minimum, allowing the bird to venture out from the island in the center of the pond where it has a nest.

The next day I went back twice, scanning the dead wood for the heron, but to no avail. When I returned in the early evening with my husband, we saw a strange-looking creature flying into the trees on the island: as big as a hawk, but with a long bill like a water bird. Around the bend the same type of bird rested on a log, its eyes trained on the water. We had no idea what it was.

This morning, when I went back to the park a man approached me on the path. Perhaps he saw me scanning the edge of the island, looking for something. “One of the green herons is out,” he told me, “on a log just up a ways.”

There was the bird Joe and I had seen the night before: squat and short-legged, with a bill like a needle; commandeering that log and waiting for opportunity. It hit me then, the lesson I have been trying to find in all this. Unlike the hawks that sail the air currents overhead, constantly in motion in search of their prey, the herons stake their claim and work it. With patience, they sit and wait for what comes within striking distance. They do not worry if this log is better than that one; if Tuesday will be a better day for catching fish than last Sunday. They take their place and wait for what the current will bring them. They profit because they are always ready.

How I could benefit from that kind of patience, coupled with an alert eye! I would not worry about being in the right place or time; I would merely be where I was and see what opportunity came within my reach. Then, like the heron, I would reap the reward of patience and alertness.

On the way back from my morning run, I stopped back in the park a second time, wondering if I would be so lucky to see the herons yet again. Approaching the pond from a different direction, I spied a green heron on a log near the shore. I wondered how close I could get and stepped through the thicket, only to disturb the bird into flight. This is why the herons don't venture out when the park is crowded, I chastised myself as the heron sought the refuge of the wooded island. They need peace and quiet to practice their patient alertness. I still had much to learn.

Thankfully, I was given a second chance. As I circled the pond, I came upon another green heron. I kept a respectful distance, watching this motionless bird, a study in concentration. This was not passive waiting, but intention focused on a few square feet of potential opportunity. “Bloom where you are planted,” I told myself, echoing that well-known phrase. Or perhaps it would be better expressed by “Fish in the water at your feet.”

Enormously satisfied by another encounter with the herons, I headed home. Just where the path angles away from the pond, I caught a glimpse of a strange looking branch on a log. Then I noticed the branch had a long neck and wings. As my eyes adjusted, I recognized the same head and body shape as the blue heron Susan and I had seen on Saturday, only this one was much smaller—a hatchling, perhaps. It stood on a log, its eyes fixed on me.

I watched for a while and then moved on, not wanting to disturb such a young one from the lessons it, too, must learn, of waiting with intensity and focus, for whatever time, patience, and the current will bring.