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Hérons return to Lyon Oaks County Park

OAKLAND COUNTY – After a long hiatus, Great Blue Herons have returned to nest at Lyon Oaks County Park in Wixom.

Great Blue Herons have nested intermittently on what is now park property since the early 1900s. In the late 1980s, there were more than 200 nests located on the property. When Oakland County Parks and Recreation acquired the land in the early 1990s, the rookery had already been abandoned, which is a natural pattern for heron rookeries. Even so, herons continued to feed at Lyon Oaks while nesting at two other sites within a six-mile radius of the park.

“Hérons prefer very tall trees for nesting. If the trees die, are blown over or destroyed, herons move to a new location,” according to former Lyon Oaks Parks Naturalist, Tim Nowicki. In 2006 DTE Energy provided and installed 11 75-foot cedar utility poles as nesting structures, to encourage Great Blue Herons to once again nest in the park. In 2020 and again in 2021, two nests were active, demonstrating that the structures and location are acceptable to these magnificent birds.

“Utility poles are long-lasting and can be positioned where appropriate. The idea of erecting telephone poles at Lyon Oaks was inspired by successful efforts at rookeries near Chicago and in Canada. It is hoped that this project could serve as a model that other communities could use to attract herons to their areas,” Nowicki said.

“When DTE Energy apprentice crews installed the poles, they included a fake nest and heron decoy positioned on a platform to encourage other herons to nest. Aside from the fact that utility poles don’t rot or die off, the other benefits of artificial nesting sites include the ability to repair platforms if needed and install predator guards to protect the young birds,” Sarah Cook-Maylen, Natural Resources Coordinator for Oakland County Parks and Recreation, said.

“Our goal is to restore as many high-quality natural habitats as possible to support our native species, which includes encouraging herons to continue nesting at Lyon Oaks. We are excited that herons fledged at Lyon Oaks this year and will continue to monitor their population,” Maylen added.