

## Fishing Bird

A friend of mine sent me a video of a Green Heron actually fishing for his next meal using bait to get the fish in range for the successful strike. The heron was using a piece of white bread to attract sunfish and minnows to come close enough for him to select his next meal. I could not see the fish other than the stirring water near the bread. The heron would float the bread out into the water and wait for fish to come near the bait.

Numerous times the heron would recover the bread without making a strike on his prey. I watched the video several times to see if I could figure out his plan. My analysis is that the bird sized up each small sunfish that approached the bread. If the fish was either too small or too large, he would recover the bait before it was devoured by the fish. The size of his bait was diminished each time he recovered the bait. When the fish he thought was just right for his next meal came into range, his beak struck in the blink of an eye, and the bird retreated – fish in his beak

My estimate of the size of the sunfish he caught was three to four inches long and two and one-half inches in the perpendicular direction. A Green Heron is one the smaller of our heron family members - only eighteen inches long, so stretching his mouth to swallow his catch took some effort. I have witnessed many herons and egrets swallowing fish that looked to my imagination as being way beyond possible to swallow. For a bird whose head is not much wider than an inch, it is indeed a stretch to get the mouth open to two and one-half inches.

The video ended with the heron waddling off to find a secluded spot for dinner. Two significant questions came to mind when the video ended. First, how did this bird learn how to use a bait, or lure, to attract the fish into his striking range, and second, how did he figure out what bait to use? A follow-up question might be, where did he get the piece of bread?

I am not a behavioral scientist, but I doubt that this knowledge came from instinct. The bird probably had watched people feeding bread to ducks and geese at the edge of a city lake. The heron likely noticed the fish feeding on the bread. Or, he somehow figured out the scheme from watching real fishermen. To put all of the pieces of this process together took some amount of reasoning; few animals have that capability. My guess is that this heron witnessed enough people feeding the ducks, geese, and fish. Might he have noticed the relationship of the fish and bread?

If the answer to my first question is in the ball park, then the selection of bread as the bait of choice follows logically to his solving the problem. Now if I see a heron dig up an earthworm to drop into the water, I will need to visit a psychiatrist about my possible delusions.

Next, the question might be where did the bird get the bread? Likely he found a small piece left by people feeding the waterfowl. If that is not the correct answer, then where did he steal his bait – a picnic table, a garbage can or leftover of a loaf of bread a raccoon stole from someone? Maybe someone will observe such a bird obtaining bread and using it for fishing bait. In the meantime, it is amazing just to contemplate what the answer might be.

I have read scientists' discussions of the intelligence of wild animals, but do not recall seeing a Green Heron in the mix. This phenomenon would become even more complicated if this behavior were to be witnessed several times in different places to rule out that this was just an isolated case

where one individual bird stepped well beyond his perceived intelligence. Events like this make learning about nature and animals so fascinating.

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