

Profile

Black-crowned Night-heron

Nycticorax nycticorax



The Black-crowned Night-heron is the most widespread heron in the world, found on every continent except Australia and Antarctica. They are one of the most common herons in the United States and breed everywhere except in the Rocky Mountains and southwestern states.

They prefer various wetland habitats including salt, brackish, and freshwater marshes, swamps, streams, lakes, and agricultural fields.

True to their name, the Black-crowned Night-heron is most active at dusk, at night, and in the early morning hours, feeding in the same areas that other heron species frequent during the day. When food is in high demand, such as during the breeding season, it will feed at any time of the day.

It forages by standing or wading slowly through shallow water feeding primarily on fish. It is an opportunistic feeder and will eat aquatic invertebrates, amphibians, lizards, snakes, rodents, eggs, the young of other birds, and small mammals.

It is generally disliked by other herons and egrets because it will raid unattended nests to steal eggs and chicks. Several years ago at Corkscrew's south lake, one Black-crowned Night-heron

ate a Wood Duck chick that swam too close to the heron's perch.

The primary technique for capturing prey is to stab at the prey, grasp it in the serrated bill, juggle it and swallow it head first. Another technique used to attract smaller fish is bill vibrating, which is opening and closing the bill rapidly in the water to create a disturbance.

Larger prey is shaken vigorously until it is stunned or killed. The strong digestive acids can dissolve even bones.

Courtship begins with the male bowing, stretching, rocking from foot to foot, hissing, and bill clapping in its displays for the females. After the formation of the pair bond, the birds do mutual preening and rubbing their bills over their heads, necks, and backs.

Black-crowned Night-herons nest colonially and there can be more than a dozen nests in a single tree. The nest is somewhat flimsy platform composed of sticks, twigs, and reeds and lined with roots and grass. It is built near the trunk of a tree or in the fork of branches, either in the open or deep in foliage. The nests tend to be below the tree canopy to provide some protection from predators.

The male initiates nest building by beginning to build a new nest or refurbishing an old one. During and after the pair formation, the male collects sticks and presents them to the female, who works them into the structure the male has started.

The female lays three to five eggs; both parents incubate for 24 to 26 days. About three weeks after hatching, the chicks begin to climb around in the nest, fledging at six to seven weeks of age.

The immature birds have a dull gray-brown plumage on their heads, wings, and backs with numerous pale spots. The underparts are paler and streaked with brown. When they are two years old, the crown and back are brownish-black. They get their adult coloring when they are about three years old and are ready to breed.

The Black-crowned Night-heron does not fit the typical body form of other herons. It is relatively stocky and about two feet tall with a wingspan of almost four feet. It has a shorter bill, legs, and neck than "day" herons. The resting posture is normally hunched, and when napping, the bill is tucked into the breast feathers.

During breeding season, the adult has two or three long white plumes extending from the back of its head, which it erects in greeting and courtship displays.

Sexes are similar in appearance although the males are slightly larger.

Immature Black-crowned Night-herons are often confused with immature Yellow-crowned Night-herons. The easiest way to differentiate between the two is to look at the bills, especially the lower bill. Then think "opposites": the lower bill of the Black-crowned is yellow while the lower bill of the Yellow-crowned is black.

Cool Fact

Adult Black-crowned Night-Herons apparently do not distinguish between their own young and those from other nests, and will brood chicks not their own.



Immature Black-crowned Night-heron, left, with yellowish lower bill; immature Yellow-crowned Night-heron, right, with black lower bill.