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## Profile

# Green Heron

*Butorides virescens*

The Green Heron is part of a complex of small herons that sometimes are considered one species. When lumped, they are called Green-backed Heron.

When split, they are the Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*) in North America, the Striated Heron (*Butorides striata*) in the Old World tropics and South America, and the Galapagos Heron (*Butorides sundevalli*).

Green Herons are most conspicuous during dusk and dawn, being as much nocturnal as diurnal. They tend to retreat to sheltered areas in daytime. However, they will feed actively dur-



Main feeding technique: Scan, Strike, Score!



ing the day if they're hungry or if they have young to feed.

They mainly eat small fish, frogs and aquatic arthropods like crayfish, but may take any prey they can catch, including such animals such as leeches and mice.

Green Herons are intolerant of other birds when feeding. They typically stand in a crouched position, horizontal to the water surface with head and neck retracted. Standing is often interspersed with slow walking in a crouched posture. When a fish approaches, the heron lunges and darts its head, grasping or sometimes spearing the fish with its heavy bill.

Sometimes they drop bread crusts, insects, and other small objects on the surface of the water as bait to lure fish, making them one of the few known tool-using birds.

Occasionally Green Herons hunt in deeper water by plunging on prey from above. They can swim back to shore with help from the webs between their middle and outer toes.

Common foraging areas are shallows of swamps, creeks, marshes, ditches, and mangroves, typically among thick vegetation in water that is less than four inches deep. They tend to avoid the deeper and more open areas frequented by longer-legged herons.

Green Herons are wary, erecting their short crests, straightening their necks, and nervously flicking their

short tails when alarmed. They are often first noticed when flushed unexpectedly from the edge of the water and fly off uttering a sharp call. They are the smallest herons after the tiny Least Bittern.

Green Herons are common breeders in coastal and inland wetlands. They nest along swamps, marshes, lakes, ponds, and other wet habitats with trees and shrubs along the edges to provide secluded nest sites.

The male selects a secluded site within his territory, usually in a large fork of a tree or bush, with overhanging branches to conceal the nest. The nest is usually on or over the water and may be anywhere from ground level to 30 or higher feet off the ground.

The male begins building the nest before pairing up to breed, but afterward passes off most of the construction to his mate. As the male gathers long, thin sticks, the female shapes them into a nest 8–12 inches across, with a shallow depression averaging less than 2 inches deep. The nest varies from solid to flimsy, and has no lining.

Green Herons sometimes renovate old nests, or build in old Black-crowned Night Heron or Snowy Egret nests. Occasionally they take sticks from nearby old nests and refashion them into new nests. They keep adding sticks throughout the breeding season.

The clutch is usually from two to four eggs, laid in two-day intervals. After the last egg has been laid, both parents incubate for about 19–21 days until hatching. Both feed the young birds. The frequency of feedings decreases as the offspring near fledging.

Chicks fledge in about three weeks, but they hop around the nest and snap at insects at two weeks. The young may start to leave the nest after 16 days, but they are not fully fledged and able to fend for themselves until they are about a month old.