

Yellow-crowned Night-heron

Nyctanassa violacea

The Yellow-crowned Night Heron is a bird of the Americas, ranging from South America to Canada. The northern populations migrate south in cold weather while in warmer climates there are sedentary populations.

It breeds from southern New England to Florida and west to Texas, mainly near coasts but in the interior north to Minnesota and along the Mississippi River and its larger tributaries.

Winters are spent along the Gulf Coast and along the Atlantic coast north to South Carolina. Preferred habitats include wooded swamps and coastal thickets.

The Yellow-crowned Night Heron is a short, stocky wading bird about two feet in length with a wingspan of a little under four feet.

It lives in wooded swamps, fresh and saltwater marshes and thickets near wetlands: on the coast along islands, mangroves, and barrier beaches; farther inland in wooded swamps, forested uplands, and lakes and rivers.

They forage along tidal marshes, in tide pools, and the shores of water bodies where crustaceans are abundant.

Unlike many night herons, the Yellow-crowned Night Heron forages both in the day and at night.

Most of the heron's diet is made up of crustaceans like crabs and crayfish, its two preferred foods. It sometimes eats fish, eels, mussels, frogs, tadpoles, aquatic insects, snails, and small snakes. It either stands and waits for its prey to swim by or wades in the shallow water and slowly stalks its prey.

Courting pairs make a neck-stretching display, slowly raising and then quickly pushing

the head back between its shoulders, while fanning the long shoulder plumes. Males do this first and females sometimes follow.

Both sexes help build the nest, which is away from the trunk on a horizontal limb, often hanging over water.

The female stands on the nest site as the male carries sticks to her to begin the nest. As the nest building progresses, the female also begins to gather sticks.

They typically strip sticks from the limbs of dead trees rather than gathering them from the ground. Sticks can be up to about two feet long and an inch thick.

The twig nest is sometimes lined with leaves, vines, or Spanish moss. It takes about a week and a half to build, but night herons may use the same nest for

several years, adding to an old nest each year. Often used nests can be up to four feet across with just a shallow depression inside for the eggs.

The female lays three to five eggs on a nest of sticks placed in a tree or sometimes on the ground. The eggs hatch in about three weeks. Both parents care for the chicks and feed them regurgitated food. The chicks fledge when they are about 25 days old.

Foraging birds stand still or slowly stalking prey, usually on their own while keeping other individuals at a distance of 15 feet or more. Once in striking range, they lunge and seize the prey in their bill.

They swallow small prey whole, but they must often shake apart, crush, or spear larger prey.

YELLOW-CROWNED FACTS

- Occasionally the Yellow-crowned Night Heron will prey on small turtles; its stomach secretes an acid capable of dissolving the shells.
- January and February are the two months when they are most often seen from the boardwalk.
- The average life-span in the wild is about six years.

