

## Black-Crowned Night Heron

*Nycticorax nycticorax*

**Class:** Aves **Order:** Ciconiiformes (storks and relatives) **Suborder:** n/a

**Family:** Ardeidae (herons)

**Other names:** none

**Other subspecies:**

**Other Relatives:**

### Zoo Night Heron 0.1

'Onyx' 0.1 – female

DOH: 04/01/2008 AQ: 07/16/2010

*About Onyx*

Onyx was hatched at the Florida Aquarium, she weighs between 780-900 grams (~1.7-1.9 lbs).

### Status

Least Concern

The Waterbird Conservation Plan indicates this species is of moderate concern, with more than 50,000 individuals in North America but a possibly declining population trend [1].

### Geographic Region

The black-crowned night heron is found across North America from Washington through Quebec, south through coastal Mexico, as well as locally in Central America and the Caribbean.

They spend the winter in southern and coastal portions of their breeding range as well as across Mexico and Central America [1]

### Habitat

Wetlands, including estuaries, saltmarshes, freshwater marshes, streams, lakes, reservoirs, swamps, rivers, lakes, ponds, lagoons, tidal mudflats, canals, and wet agricultural fields [1]

### Characteristics

**Size:** 58-72 cm in length *Wingspan:* 45.3–46.5 in 115–118 cm *Weight:* 800 g

**Longevity:** The oldest Black-crowned Night-Heron on record was 21 years, 1 month old [1].

**Wild** **Captivity**

### Physical Description

- The night heron has a stocky body, with a comparatively short neck and legs.
- The adult has distinctive coloring, with black cap, upper back and scapulars, gray wings, rump and tail, and white to pale gray under parts.
- The bill is stout and black, and the eyes are red.
- For most of the year, the legs of the adult are yellow-green, but by the height of the breeding season, they have turned pink.
- The juvenile has a brown head, neck, chest and belly streaked with buff and white. The wings and back are darker brown, though the tips of the feathers have large white spots [2].

### Dimorphism

**Males:**

**Females:** females averaging slightly smaller than the males in size

### Diet: Carnivore

Prey is shaken vigorously until stunned or killed and then juggled about in the beak and swallowed head first. [3]

**Diet in the Wild:** The black-crowned night heron is an opportunistic feeder. Its diet consists mainly of fish, though it is frequently rounded out by other items such as leeches, earthworms, aquatic and terrestrial insects. It also eats crayfish,



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mussels, squid, amphibians, lizards, snakes, rodents, birds, eggs, carrion, plant materials, squid, crustaceans, aquatic insects, frogs, clams, carrion and garbage. Sometimes specializes on eggs and young birds, and can cause problems in tern colonies.

#### **Diet in the Zoo:**

#### **Behavior**

- *Crepuscular*, active at dawn and dusk
- Some studies suggest that they feed at night because they are dominated by other herons and egrets by day [4]. The fact that this night heron feeds throughout the night means that it avoids competition with day herons which use the same habitat.

#### **Defense Mechanisms**

- Nestlings often disgorge their stomach contents and defecate when approached by intruders [1] [2].

#### **Social Structure & Communication**

- This bird's call is most often given in flight or from a perch.
- These are social birds that tend to roost and nest in groups, although they typically forage on their own [1].
- Black-crowned night herons are social at all times of the year, associating with other species of herons, egrets, and ibises frequently. In the winter, it roosts communally. [1]
- The normal call is a 'Qua,' 'Quak,' or 'Quark.' [2]

#### **Reproduction**

- Black-crowned night herons are presumed to be monogamous.
- The male starts building the nest, a platform of sticks, twigs, and other woody vegetation which he collects from the ground (or breaks right off of the trees). [1]
- Displays include stretching neck up and forward with feathers ruffed up and slowly bowing while raising feet alternately, giving hissing buzz at lowest point in bow. [4] Once he has found a mate, the male continues collecting material but passes it to the female, who works it into the nest. Nests measure 12-18" across and are 8-12" deep. [1]
- The male chooses a nest site in a tree or in cattails—usually in a habitat safe from predators such as on an island, in a swamp, or over water—and then advertises for a female. Black-crowned Night-Herons nest colonially, often with a dozen nests in a single tree. Colonies sometimes last for 50 years or more. [1]
- Pair formations are signaled by males becoming aggressive and performing *Snap Displays*, in which they walk around in a crouched position, head lowered, snapping their mandibles together or grasping a twig.
- Eggs are laid at two day intervals, beginning four to five days after pair formation.
- Incubation, which lasts 24-26 days, is carried out by both adults. The **clutch** size is three to five eggs. The eggs are greenest on the first day and fade to pale blue or green after that. One **brood** per season. [1]
- Both parents feed young, by regurgitation. Young begin to leave the nest at about 1 month of age, and can fly by 6 weeks. Breeding maturity is reached by age 2 [4] [1].
- A breeding black-crowned night-heron will brood any chick that is placed in its nest. The herons apparently don't distinguish between their own offspring and nestlings from other parents. [1]

#### **Conservation**

- **Use & Trade:** Colonies of Black-crowned Night-Herons can provide good indications of overall environmental quality, because night-herons forage at the top of food chain, nest in colonies (where they are fairly easy to study), and have a wide distribution. They tolerate disturbances such as traffic, so they are especially useful in revealing environmental deterioration in urban environments. [1]
  - Black-crowned night herons have been hunted for food, though they are hunted for this purpose much less frequently now. [2]
- **Threats:** Breeding Bird Survey data suggest their populations are stable—although their clumped distributions make it hard to estimate trends precisely. [1]
  - Threats include draining and development of their wetland habitat, and reduced water quality due to contaminated runoff. They are highly susceptible to accumulating pollutants such as persistent organochlorine pesticides, PCBs, DDE (a breakdown product of DDT) and heavy metals [1] [5].
  - Also susceptible to drought in wintering areas [5]
  - Adults were often killed or trapped near fish-culture establishments, due to their fishy diet, but other methods of discouraging them from eating the fish are now available. It is estimated that 1,300 birds were killed per year at fish hatcheries in nine states. Herons that nested too close to human settlements were considered pests and were also often killed, but other methods that do not involve killing have been developed. [2]
- **Predators:** Adult herons have few predators, but predation may occur by larger birds, include eagles and other large birds of prey.

### Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- They have strong digestive acids that can dissolve even bones. Their feces are white and limey because of the dissolved calcium. [3]

**Glossary:** List of definitions of the most important recurrent technical terms used in the text.

**Brood** - a family of young animals, especially of a bird, produced at one hatching or birth

**Clutch** - A clutch of eggs refers to all the eggs produced by birds, amphibians, or reptiles, often at a single time, particularly those laid in a nest. In birds, destruction of a clutch by predators results in double-clutching.

### References

[1] Cornell Lab of Ornithology, "Black-Crowned Night Heron," All About Birds, 2015. [Online]. Available: [http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/black-crowned\\_night-heron/id](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/black-crowned_night-heron/id). [Accessed February 2015].

[2] A. Ivory, "Nycticorax nycticorax," Animal Diversity Web, 2002. [Online]. Available: [http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Nycticorax\\_nycticorax/](http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Nycticorax_nycticorax/). [Accessed February 2015].

[3] Animal List, "Black-crowned night heron," Animal List, 2015. [Online]. Available: <http://animallist.weebly.com/black-crowned-night-heron.html>. [Accessed February 2015].

[4] Audubon, "Black-crowned night heron," Audubon, 2015. [Online]. Available: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/black-crowned-night-heron>. [Accessed February 2015].

[5] IUCN Red List, "Nycticorax nycticorax," The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, 2012. [Online]. Available: <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/22697211/0>. [Accessed February 2015].