

## Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*



**Folk Name:** Squawk, Qua-Bird

**Status:** Migrant, Winter Visitor

**Abundance:** Rare

**Habitat:** Creeks, ponds, wetlands, and marshes

Adult Black-crowned Night-Herons are distinctive. No other species of heron has their glossy black crown and black back. Immature birds look quite different and are so similar in appearance to immature Yellow-crowned Night-Herons that great care must be taken to distinguish between the two. The immature Black-crowned has bold, white spotting on its brown body versus paler, smaller spotting on the body of the Yellow-crowned, but observers are advised to consult a field guide to contrast these birds' finer details. This heron gets its folk-name "Qua-Bird" from the loud *quawk* sound it makes when it's disturbed. The Black-crowned Night-Heron is the second most widespread heron in North America. It has become so common in some parts of our country that it is considered a threat to the aquaculture industry, and both non-lethal and lethal permits are issued for their control. In other parts of the United States, this species is in serious decline and is designated a species of special concern. In the Carolinas, it remains a fairly common bird in wetlands scattered along the coast, and it breeds in both states.

In late March 1903, *The Charlotte News* shared a special report about what they described as:

[A new] exhaustive study of the *Nycticorax nycticorax*, if you know what that means. ...The night heron is a wanderer. It goes all over the world. There is little exact knowledge of its habits and life. Last year Mr. Bartsch [Smithsonian] discovered three big breeding places of the heron in the District of Columbia, on the banks of the Potomac. He prepared and numbered 800 aluminum bands. Last week with several assistants he went to the breeding places in the night and put bands around the legs of 800 young heron hatched this month. What the ornithologists want to find out about the heron is how long it lives, how far it wanders and where it lives in the winter time.

Research studies like this showed that Black-crowned Night-Herons periodically wander inland during migration and that some migrants found in the Carolinas are birds that nest in the Northeast. Scientists learned this heron is a nocturnal migrant, only moving at night and resting in dense vegetation during the day. Consequently, it can easily be overlooked.



The Black-crowned Night-Heron is a rare visitor to the Central Carolinas. Most are reported in the spring or fall. The first one found here was collected by Leverett Loomis on August 28, 1881. It was an immature female that had landed by a small creek outside of the town of Chester. Becky Norwood reported one in Mecklenburg County on April 25, 1956. The following year, she and her husband Joe reported a winter sighting of an immature bird on City Lake in Salisbury on January 20, 1957. Understanding the rarity of this bird, they carefully took notes and later wrote and published a full-page description of this bird, noting many specific details down to the brown color of this bird's iris. That spring, Mrs. J.U. Whitlock and Dwight Morgan reported a Black-crowned Night-Heron in Stanly County which they had found twice during the week of the Stanly Spring Bird Count held on April 19, 1957.

Additional twentieth-century reports from the region include one Black-crowned Night-Heron found by H. Lee Jones in Charlotte on April 16, 1963, and one found by Doug McNair at the Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge in Anson County on July 2, 1979. A decade later, David Wright found a Black-crowned Night-Heron in a small



*Juvenile Black-crowned Night-Heron in Mecklenburg.*  
(Rob Van Epps)

marsh off Highway 51 near the Town of Pineville while conducting the Charlotte Spring Bird Count on May 6, 1989. This was the first record of this species on that count and the third for Mecklenburg County. This bird was photographed and seen by many observers over a two-day period. Lastly, the McGuire Nuclear Station on Lake Norman hosted a bird roosting in some pines on the edge of their “thermal ponds” on August 29, 1992. This bird was first reported by Taylor Piephoff.

On June 7, 1989, biologists documented the first inland breeding of Black-crowned Night-Herons in the Carolinas in Kershaw County, SC, just 25 miles south of Lancaster County. The nest was located in a heron rookery on Boykin Mill Pond. The adult birds were found preying on nestling Cattle Egrets to supplement their diet of turtles, frogs, and fish. Though quantitative data is lacking, anecdotal evidence suggests that inland nesting of this species has slowly grown in South Carolina since this initial discovery.

There have been at least 14 separate reports of Black-crowned Night-Herons in this region since the turn of the twenty-first century. Numbers range from one to four birds. Spring dates range from 3 March through 2 May. Post-breeding reports range from 12 July through 13 August. A local wildlife rehabilitation specialist received an injured Black-crowned Night-Heron that had been found off the McAlpine Creek Greenway in Charlotte on July 12, 2008.

We have no reports from September through November. We received two winter reports. At sunrise on December 16, 2012, Rob Van Epps photographed a Black-crowned Night-Heron on the edge of a small pond in the Town of Huntersville. His sighting represents the first record of this species for the Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count. This bird may have lingered into January. An observer reported a Black-crowned Night-Heron at Pee Dee NWR on February 1, 2012, but provided no identification details.