

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron *Nyctanassa violacea*



Folk Name: Quok

Status: Migrant, local Breeder

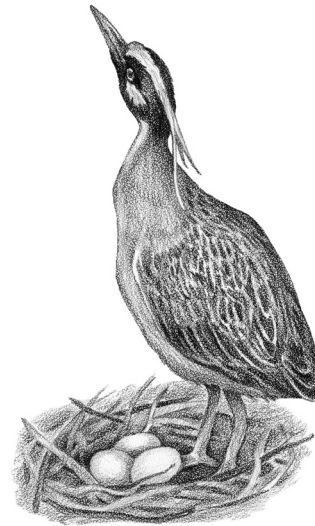
Abundance: Rare

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

The Yellow-crowned Night-Heron is always a special find anywhere in the Carolina Piedmont. The adult bird is unique with a slightly plump, grayish-violet body, a pale lemon-white crown, and a bold white cheek patch on its black face. In breeding plumage, long yellow plumes protrude from atop its head and its eyes are orange to scarlet red. At 24 inches, this bird is about the same size as both the Little Blue Heron and Black-crowned Night-Heron. Immature birds look very similar to the immature Black-crowned. In addition to the degree of spotting previously mentioned, pay special attention to the bill and eye color of these birds. The bill of the immature Yellow-crowned is noticeably thicker and is grayish black. The bill of the Black-crowned is thinner, more pointed, and has yellow on the lower mandible. The iris of the immature Yellow-crowned is orange, while the iris of the Black-crowned appears brown or orange brown.

Yellow-crowned Night-Herons are “sedentary foragers.” When feeding, they are the least active of all of our species of herons. Studies have shown that while foraging, they stand still almost 80% of the time and use a “stand and wait—walk slowly—stand and wait” strategy. In this region, Yellow-crowned Night-Herons rely on crayfish as their primary food source. Examinations of pellets ejected at local nesting sites reveal lots of undigested crayfish exoskeletons. Earthworms, insects, frogs, and even small mammals, are secondary food sources.

Birds of North America reports that: “Although occasionally breeding on coastal islands, this species most often inhabits forested wetlands, swamps, and



bayous of the deep south where poor lighting seems to be the most reliable characteristic of its breeding sites.” Contrary to this preferred habitat, sporadic local nesting has been confirmed in cities in the Carolina Piedmont since the early 1940s. Birds have been documented at Greenville, Union, and Rock Hill, South Carolina, as well as Charlotte, Winston-Salem, Durham, Greensboro, Old Salem, Chapel Hill, and Cramerton, North Carolina. No one really understands why these colonies persist in these mostly urban sites. A detailed research study is needed.

Haywood Bobbit and Ben Haas provided the earliest dated report of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons building a nest in this region. They found an active pair near Charlotte on April 23, 1943. A few years later, Mecklenburg Audubon Club members shared these details and a photograph of another nest site:



Yellow-crowned Night-Heron nest in Charlotte. (Jeff Lemons)

A nest was found on May 18, 1946, in a pine tree approximately 40 feet above the ground, and eight to ten feet from the trunk. The tree was some fifty feet from a ploughed field in dense woods bordering Big Sugar Creek, three miles north of Pineville. When found, the last egg of a set of four was just hatching. The young were covered with patches of grayish down. They were observed at close range until they were ready to leave the nest by Moon and Layton, who climbed the tree repeatedly. Usually one of the adults returned to a nearby tree and occasionally to the same tree while the nest was being observed. All four of the eggs were accounted for by large sections of shell found directly under the nest, showing that they were simply pushed over the edge rather than

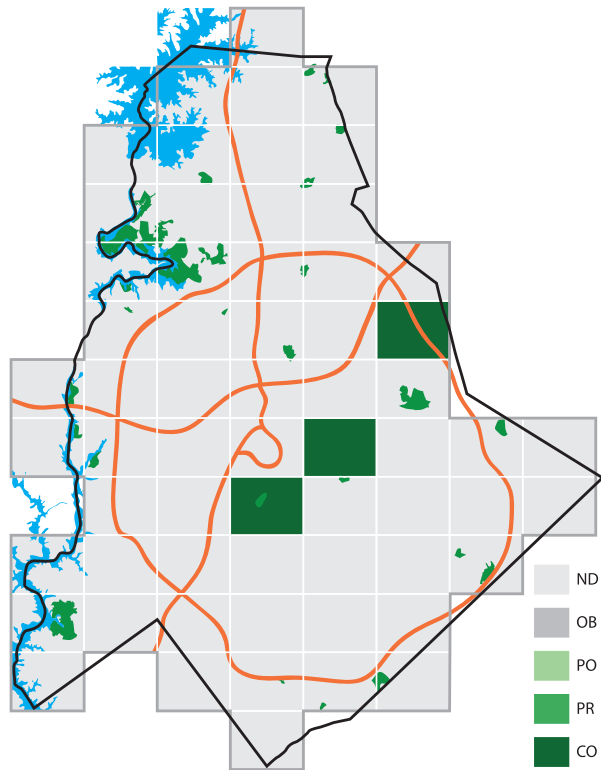
being carried away. Numerous visits were made to this nest. City records for the occurrence of this heron were obtained when an individual bird was repeatedly seen to fly along the banks of Briar Creek each evening (7:30–8:00 o'clock), and each morning (6:00 o'clock) during the second week of June. The morning flight was down creek towards the Catawba River. The evening flight was up creek.

In 1953, there were “several nesting records from the Piedmont region, at least as far west as Mecklenburg County,” and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons were discovered nesting “just outside Charlotte city” on May 6, 1959, during the spring count. Birders found them on every subsequent Charlotte spring count for the next seven years.

Since the 1970s, there have been sightings of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons at more than 30 discrete locations in and around the region, with most found primarily along the Catawba and Yadkin-Pee Dee river corridors. Birds were found in the following counties: Union, SC, Chester, Chesterfield, Spartanburg, York, Alexander, Anson, Catawba, Cleveland, Gaston, Iredell, Mecklenburg, Richmond, and Stanly. All birds, except the three described below, were seen between 10 March and 13 September.

This species is seldom found in the winter anywhere in the Carolinas. There are a few reports of birds found in the Piedmont in the fall and winter season. Each sighting was reviewed and published after it was reported. A Yellow-crowned Night-Heron was reported on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count on December 30, 1961. It and a Green Heron were deemed “particularly noteworthy” finds that year. H. Lee Jones spotted an immature bird in Charlotte just over a month later on February 15, 1962. Jones saw one again in the same location on April 5, 1962, and thought it likely that these sightings were of the same bird. On December 29, 1965, J.H. Lovell found an immature Yellow-crowned Night-Heron along a creek in his backyard in Charlotte. This bird lingered long enough to be counted on that year’s CBC. Dennis Forsythe found an adult bird on Allison Creek in York County on November 18, 1988. Ramona Snavely reported an adult in Forsyth County in January 1998.

There have been several reported nest sites in the Central Carolina region over the past 40 years, and, surprisingly, the only persistent sites have been in the rapidly growing city of Charlotte. Nesting was confirmed near Union, SC, in 1980. Nesting was suspected, but remained unconfirmed, at Winthrop College in 1983 and 1984. Nesting has been confirmed at more than five separate sites in the city of Charlotte since 1980, and at least two of these remain active today. The highest number of birds counted at one of these nesting colonies was 26 birds found in Charlotte’s Cotswold neighborhood in the spring of 2002.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Very Local (PR/0, CO/3)

In 2016, Steve Tracy confirmed a new nest site in Gaston County, just off the South Fork River in the town of Cramerton. A woman had reported finding “strange heron-like” birds in her backyard and asked him to check them out. Tracy provided this account:

This evening about 6 PM I went over to see them for myself. She pointed out a flimsy nest of what appeared to be small sticks about 60 feet up over a utility right of way. At first we could not see anything in the nest. However, with my binocular I thought I could make out a beak poking out one side of the nest. We moved several yards to get a better angle and, as the wind moved the nest, we could make out yellow on the crown of the bird with a spotting scope. After a few minutes its mate flew in and the first bird stood up.

Later, Tracy made sure to take a photograph to formally document this as the first Yellow-crowned Night-Heron nest ever discovered in Gaston County.

The status of the North Carolina breeding population of the Yellow-crowned Night-Heron is currently designated as “Significantly Rare.” This means it now exists in small numbers and needs monitoring.