

Black-crowned Night Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*)

A Bird's Eye View

BY RAM NAMBIAR

This stocky and distinctive black-crowned night heron returns to our shallow water marshes, swamps, ponds, rivers and lakeside in early spring and leaves for the South in Fall. Unlike other water birds, with the exception of its cousin - the yellow-crowned heron of Florida Everglades, black-crowned is an oddity in that it is largely, if not entirely, a nocturnal bird.

A prolific species, black-crowned herons are found in Asia, Europe, Africa, South and Central Americas, Caribbean, the U.S. and Canada. The mature black-crowned heron is more or less a white and pearl gray bird. It has white silky plumage under. On the upper, a jet-black crown and the back is black and gray, which gives a greenish glossy look in the sun light. Easily noticed are 2 to 3 white thread-like plumes that dangle from the hind-head.

Heron's stout beak is black and eyes blood red. This night heron has a unique charm and beauty. As legend goes, the 10th century Emperor of Japan, Daigo, was so captivated by the grace and tameness of the black-crowned night heron in his Kyoto capital gardens that it was rewarded with the title of Earl, Agoi, in the Japanese nobility. Even today, this bird is addressed in Japan by its noble name, Agoi heron.

Black-crowned's scientific name, *Nycticorax* means 'raven of the night'. This short-necked wading bird almost exclusively feeds by night. Flying and interacting with its own kind, such as courting, are also carried out in the dark. This heron's fiery eyes can penetrate the darkness and see the fish or other aquatic creatures in water. Black-crowns spend days roosting in the leafy cover of trees mostly in groups. The roosting heron can often be seen sitting hunched. When leaving its perch for its feeding ground in the twilight hours of evening, the heron utters a throaty 'squawk'.

During the breeding season, some Black-crowns will also forage in broad day light to satisfy the ravenous appetite of their young. One can see the heron standing motionless either on the water-side, on a rock projecting from the water, on a tree branch that is nearly touching the water or simply in knee-deep waters of shallows, poised to strike its prey. The black-crowned has a habit of opening and closing its bill in water and making ripples to entice aquatic life to come to the surface and then attacks its prey.

Karl Karalus, in his great artwork published on wading birds, has shown 17 animals which the black-crowned relishes, including frogs, salamanders, snakes, fish and small squirrels to name a few. At times, the black-crowned may try to bite more than it can chew as you can see in the photo. Did the fish choke the heron? I did not have time to find out.

Male and female black-crowned herons are alike in appearance, the male being slightly larger. Although a gregarious species, the male is aggressive towards rival males during pair formation. Allen Eckert, author of *Wading Birds*, is of the opinion that the vocalization of the male is far more carrying than

its counterpart, another clue to their sex differentiation.

The female heron must be courted before she can accept a male partner. Pair formation and courtship rituals of the black-crowned heron was studied by Noble, Allen and Mangels in the fifties. Adults seem to return to their previous year's stick nest colony in early Spring, each male selecting its own territory.

The rituals include 'twig ceremony', 'a dance', and caressing and preening. In the twig ceremony, the male breaks the twigs off the branch, carries them around. Snapping mandibles, he moves his head up and down. He takes three or four steps forward and then stops. Lowering his bill, he nearly touches his own pink feet uttering a hissing sound. The female may join him in his dance. They then, perch side by side and engage in mutual caressing and preening with their beaks, culminating in copulation.

Black-crowned herons nest in colonies. Tommy Thomson Park trees on Leslie Spit in Toronto boasts at having 800 to 1000 of their nests. Another location where one can find their nests is within Hamilton Harbour. About 130 black-crowned herons' nests are reported at this location.

Black-crowned herons have only one

brood a year. The stick nest, made or refurbished by both the male and female, is a platform on the trunk of a tree. The clutch may contain three to five eggs and is incubated by both parents. The eggs hatch in 26 days. The young are fed by regurgitation of half digested food. In six weeks the young are ready to fly out and do their own hunting.

The immature night heron is streaky brown with white spots, vastly different from its white, black and gray parents. It is in the third year that the young acquires its adult plumage and maturity.

The life span of black-crowned heron is about 20 years. One in captivity though, could live for another ten years.

The black-crowned night herons' down-south migration takes place mostly in October. Odd ones may stick around for a little longer depending on the weather and food supply. By and large, most of them, young and old, take off early and the flight is at night. They head south to the West Indies, Central and South America and sometimes fly as far south as Argentina where they will spend the (northern hemisphere) winter.



An Amazing Adventure

PHOTO BY PETER MCCUSKER
Albert and Tomke Roelofs in a dress rehearsal for their haunted Halloween maze being held on October 28, 29 and 30 at the Wellington Corn Maze, 5151 Jones Baseline, Guelph, just west of Rockwood.