

Black-crowned Night-heron

By Troy E. Corman

Neotropical Migratory Birds Coordinator

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Nycticorax nycticorax*. Both genus and specific epithet are from the Greek *nyktikorax*, meaning night raven, possibly referring to its nocturnal activities and a call reminiscent of a raven's *croak*.

DESCRIPTION: About 23 to 28 inches long; 45-inch wingspread. Heavy bodied with thick neck, short legs, and heavy bill. Sexes similar; males usually larger. Adult's head white with black cap, 2 to 3 narrow white plumes at back of head, eyes scarlet, back black, underparts white, wings and tail gray, legs and feet usually yellow but red at beginning of nesting season. Upperparts of immatures brown with white spotting, underparts white with heavy brown streaking. Full adult plumage acquired in third year. In flight, utters characteristic *quock* or *woc*.

HABITAT: Occurs at most any body of water (e.g., ponds, swamps, lakes, lagoons, mangroves), but most common in extensive fresh or salt marshes. Wanders widely after breeding season, and may be found on almost any small lake or pond.

DISTRIBUTION: Nearly cosmopolitan. In Western Hemisphere breeds from southern Canada to South America. In North America, most migrate to southern United States or farther south to winter. In Arizona, resident in lower Colorado River Valley and along Gila River, below Salt River confluence but may breed regularly in other areas too. Uncommon statewide as a transient, and in southcentral Arizona as a winter visitor.

BIOLOGY: As its name implies, this night-heron feeds mainly at night. Its familiar croaking notes are commonly heard as it flies overhead during the evening, to or from its feeding grounds. An expert at "still fishing" (standing motionless in shallow water), sometimes

for long periods. With a quick thrust, its bill catches hapless prey. Primarily a fish eater, but also eats some plants and amphibians, snakes, crustaceans, and larger insects. Extremely adaptable; it eats whatever is most plentiful at the time and place, including young colonially



JOHN H. HOFFMAN

nesting birds (e.g., egrets, herons, terns, gulls, blackbirds). May feed exclusively on meadow mice when they are available. When not searching for food, it perches in a characteristic short-necked, round-shouldered pose.

The black-crown nests in small to large colonies, often with other heron species. Its nests have been observed up to 160 feet high in trees and practically on the ground in matted reeds or grass. The nests are built close together, from twigs, reeds, or branches, with finer twigs, roots, vines, and grasses woven into the top and lining. Many nests are crude, loosely-built platforms so insecurely placed that the eggs or young are shaken out of them by heavy winds. Larger, well-built nests are often used year after

year. The male selects the nest site and gathers materials, but the female builds the nest. Most courtship displays and copulation take place at or near the nest. The male may present the female with a twig just before copulation, which is often followed by head shaking, bill rattling, and mutual feather nibbling.

An average of three to five eggs are laid. They are incubated by both sexes for 24 to 26 days. The young remain in the nest until they are two or three weeks old. They first fly about 42 days after hatching, when they pursue adults to beg for food. Night-herons may live more than 20 years, but they average less than 10 years at death.

Although often seen singly, these night-herons commonly migrate in flocks. Winter roosts of more than 300 individuals have been observed along the Gila River, in willow and tamarisk thickets.

STATUS: This species is not on the Department's 1988 list of *Threatened Native Wildlife in Arizona*, nor is it listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as threatened or endangered. Even so, its numbers have been reduced in many localities by land-clearing for river channelization, urban development and agriculture, and indiscriminate shooting and disturbance at nest colonies and roosts. Damming of desert rivers and streams has led to further losses of riparian habitats on which this species depends.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Natural history information for Arizona is lacking. Riparian habitat along lakes and rivers must be protected, or restored. We need surveys to determine status, and information on which to base habitat management decisions. Nesting colonies should be monitored to determine the health and stability of Arizona's breeding populations. 🦶