

A Yellow-crowned Night-Heron at Painted Rock Dam

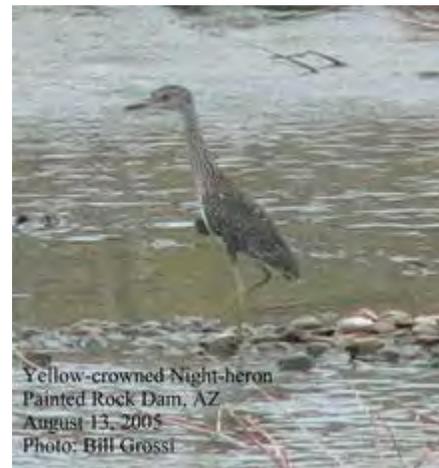
BY WILLIAM GROSSI

Tolleson

When the alarm went off at 3:30 A.M. on 13 August 2005 one part of me was tempted to remain in bed, but another part reminded me it was going to be hot later in the day. Plus, it had been about 10 years since there was any open water at Painted Rock Dam. Open water, fall migration, and the closeness of the Sea of Cortez makes this site in western Maricopa County a good bet for finding unusual birds. The prospect of finding a rare bird was enough to get me going.

Arriving at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers parking lot at Painted Rock Dam around 5:30 A.M., there was a bit of cloud cover, making it feel a bit cooler and easier to view the water without all the glare and shimmer. The Corps had steadily released water through the dam since the winter's abundant rains, and it looked as though the reservoir would be empty within a week. The usual throngs of Brown and American White Pelicans, egrets, herons, and cormorants were flying back and forth from behind the dam to the flooded borrow pit below the dam.

I decided to check out the birds foraging in the river channel at the end of the road that leads from the parking area. It was approximately 7:15 A.M. As I approached, several Black-crowned Night-Herons and Snowy and Great Egrets, feeding in the shallows below the concrete spillway, flushed. One bird remained about 40 yards away in the top of a salt cedar tree across the channel and below the spillway from me. It appeared to be a subadult Black-crowned Night-Heron, but I took a look at it through my binoculars and immediately noted the longer, more slender neck and longer legs. My first thought was



Yellow-crowned Night-Heron
Photo by Bill Grossi

it could be a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron!

Knowing the differences between subadult Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons are subtle, I trained my spotting scope on the bird and took a closer look. Besides the long slender neck and long legs, the bird seemed to have a thicker, darker bill as viewed from the side. It hopped down from the salt cedar and began walking along the gravel shoreline of the flowing water, at times approaching as close as 30 yards to me. Its dark flight feathers were apparent, and the eye looked larger than those of the Black-crowned Night-Herons. Fine white streaking on the brown face that continued down the neck led me to believe the bird was probably a juvenile. The presence of so many subadult Black-crowned Night-Herons made it easier to compare the differences.

I began to take pictures, lots of pictures! I had not heard of a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron report in Arizona since I moved here in 1987. Yellow-crowned Night-Herons mostly inhabit coastal habitats, such as mangroves, beaches, and freshwater marshes. A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America by Steve Howell and Sophie Webb lists the species as a resident breeder on the west coast of Mexico about as far north as the southern half of Sonora.

As it turns out there are only three accepted reports since record keeping began, the most recent over 20 years ago. In their Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Arizona, Gale Monson and Allen Philips list the first two state records: an adult in Tucson on 26 May 1968 and a subadult at Imperial Dam on the Colorado River on 17 April 1973. The third record, an adult bird along the San Pedro River at Dudleyville from 8 May to 16 June 1984, was reviewed by the Arizona Bird Committee and published in the 1996 report. There are also a handful of reports over the years that have not been reviewed by the Arizona Bird Committee. Assuming the ABC accepts my report, there will now be four accepted records for the state.

Updated Sunday, April 16, 2006