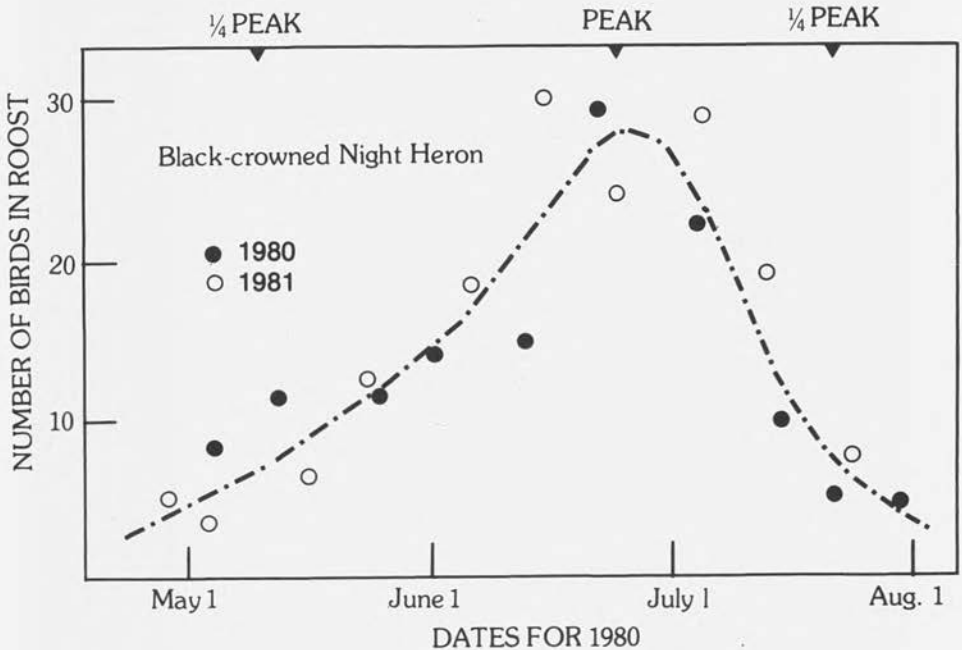


BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERONS:
THE RISE AND FALL OF A DAYTIME ROOST

by Leif J. Robinson, Wellesley

In Cambridge, Little Pond and Little Brook are loaded with carp. It's not surprising, therefore, that herons, particularly Black-crowned, love the place. For the past couple of years, I've surveyed this area near noon whenever time and weather permitted.

The Black-crowned Night Heron arrive in mid-April, peak in mid-June, and are virtually gone by mid-August (a straggler, however, can appear whenever there is open water). The growth and decay of this daytime roost is shown in the accompanying graph, which is based on 62 censuses conducted in 1980 and 1981 between late April and late July.



Each point is a 10-day average of my estimates of the number of birds present: dots for 1980 and open circles for 1981. Both years yielded about the same maximum population, some 28 individuals. In 1980 the observed peak occurred on June 24th, in 1981 it arrived about six days earlier.

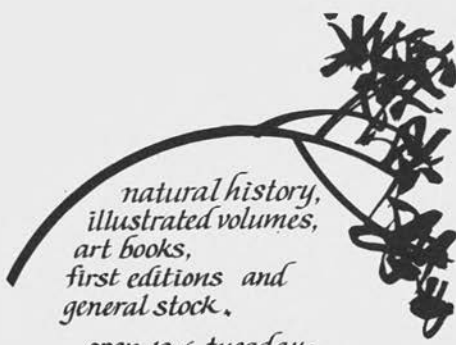
However, to fit best the 1981 data to those of 1980, all of the former points had to be shifted 12 days later in time; that is, the overall arrival and departure of the herons in 1981 occurred nearly two weeks earlier than in 1980.

Even more interesting, perhaps, is the shape of the curve through the composite data. After the roost has attained seven birds (quarter peak strength), 44 days are required to reach maximum; thereafter, only 28 days are needed for the roost to fall back to the seven-bird level. Why the asymmetry?

The actions of two other species may shed some light on this question. Up to mid-June both Great Black-backed Gulls and Double-crested Cormorants occur regularly on Little Pond. Then they vanish, concomitant with the beginning of the Black-crowned colony's wane.

Are the carp involved in some way? Does the same spring and summer cycle prevail at other daytime roosts?

LEIF J. ROBINSON is editor of Sky and Telescope, an international popular magazine of astronomy and space science. He has been a bird student for 15 years with a principal interest in resident populations and the statistical means for assessing them. Mr. Robinson is also active in studying the migration of birds of prey.



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