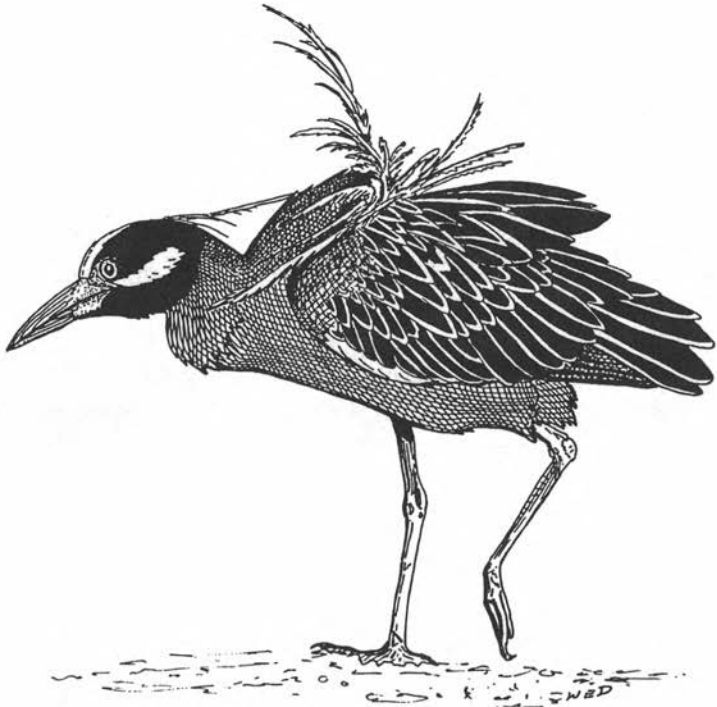


ABOUT THE COVER: YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON

The Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax violaceus*) is more secretive, less gregarious, and much less common in Massachusetts than the Black-crowned Night-Heron. Adult Yellowcrows are very distinctive gray birds with contrasting black heads with white crowns (sometimes with yellow or rusty foreheads) and white cheeks. Their eyes are orange or red, and their legs are yellow. Sexes are similar in plumage, but males are slightly larger. They have a more upright posture, longer, thinner necks, and shorter but deeper bills than Black-crowned Night-Herons. Most individuals seen in Massachusetts, however, are immature birds, which are much more difficult to distinguish from immature Blackcrows. Immature Yellow-crowned Night-Herons have the same posture and shape as adult birds, and appear less spotted and are more bluish-gray than immature Blackcrows. Perhaps the best distinguishing character is the fact that the feet and legs protrude well beyond the tail in flying Yellowcrows.

The Yellow-crowned Night-Heron is placed in its own genus (*Nyctanassa*) by some taxonomists, and recent DNA-DNA hybridization work suggests that the Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and Black-crowned Night-Heron, although



Yellow-crowned Night-Heron

Illustration by W. E. Davis, Jr.

similar in appearance, are as genetically divergent from each other as each is from most day-heron species. There are six subspecies generally recognized, only one of which, *N. v. violaceus*, occurs within the United States. They breed from Massachusetts (rare but regular) south along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, and inland along the Mississippi River system as far north as Wisconsin, and west to Oklahoma and Texas. Breeding Yellowcrowns are found along both coasts of Mexico, Central America, and as far into South America as southern Ecuador, Galapagos Islands, and Brazil.

They are uncommon spring migrants in Massachusetts, and scattered pairs probably begin nesting in April. The first Massachusetts nest was found in Ipswich in 1928, and breeding occurred in Marshfield for several decades beginning in the late 1930s. Recent breeding has taken place at Plum Island, Westport, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket. Like many heron species, they have a pronounced postbreeding dispersal, which probably accounts for many of the late summer and fall sightings, including those inland as far as Berkshire County. They winter from North Carolina south along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts and possibly as far south as Panama.

Yellow-crowned Night-Herons in much of their range breed in small to large colonies, but tend to be solitary nesters at the limits of their range. They are presumably seasonally monogamous and single brooded. Most nest near coastal marshes, or in trees or shrubs near water. They generally roost in tall trees.

They give the familiar *quock* or *quack* when flushed from a marsh, slightly higher in pitch than the call of the Black-crowned Night-Heron. They utter a wide variety of calls during courtship and nesting, including *woks* associated with nest relief ceremonies, and *whoops* with the spectacular stretch displays where birds stand with tail and partially open wings pointing up, neck curved back and bill pointing up, while scapular plumes are fanned into a forward directed ruff. Circle fights, pursuit flights, and supplanting attacks accompany pair formation. *Yacks*, *scaups*, *quorks*, and *guchs* are also associated with nesting behavior, and *ahh-ahhs* and *squawks* with aggression. Bill clapping and feather nibbling are common between members of a nesting pair. Also, at the height of courtship, bills turn glossy black, lores change from yellowish to dark green, irises to scarlet, and legs to scarlet or bright orange.

The nests are placed from near to the ground to 40 feet or so up willows, pines, or cypress, in some areas mangroves, or even in prickly-pear cactus on dry Caribbean islands. They may reuse old nests or dismember them for nesting material. Nests are characteristically thick structures several feet across of large sticks, lined with rootlets or leaves. The usual clutch is four to five smooth bluish green eggs. The incubation period is three to four weeks, and by the sixth week the young can fly short distances—by eight weeks to the foraging grounds.

Both parents feed the young, usually by regurgitation on to the nest floor.

They feed in coastal marshes, tidal mudflats, stagnant backwaters, bayous, swamps, and mangroves. They are more diurnal in their feeding than Black-crowned Night-Herons, but their large eyes are probably adaptations for crepuscular and nocturnal foraging. The tide cycle may affect their feeding schedule. Their prey are mostly crustaceans, with crabs and crayfish preferred items. They also eat mollusks, snails, frogs, snakes, and young birds. They will feed opportunistically on an abundant resource (e.g., grasshoppers). They rarely eat fish. They usually forage by standing or walking slowly, and are often seen head swaying and neck swaying as they stalk their prey. Their status has remained largely unchanged in Massachusetts during the past half-century. During the nineteenth century in North America their range was reduced to largely coastal areas, but they have expanded their range in the twentieth century up to and beyond their former range. They were not hunted for plumes, but are reported to be, or have been, a favored food item in parts of the south. They have adapted well to human habitation, and are often seen in campgrounds or parklands in much of their range.

W.E. Davis, Jr.

ABOUT OUR COVER ARTIST

Paul Donahue's artwork last appeared on *Bird Observer's* cover in June 1993. Paul can be reached at P.O. Box 554, Machias, Maine 04654.

The Yellow-crowned Night-Heron drawing first appeared in a catalog of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT). Victor Emanuel has kindly given *Bird Observer* permission to use this drawing. VENT conducts birding tours around the world. Their address is P.O. Box 33008, Austin, Texas 78764.

AT A GLANCE *June 1994* _____ *Wayne R. Petersen*

Perched hawks! What a tough and often humiliating experience they can create for even the most avid and experienced hawk watchers. Unlike the dot in the sky that is usually going away and mercifully seldom allows a second look, a perched hawk leaves little room for retreat when a controversial identification is involved.

June's mystery hawk is entirely typical of the problem—a lone individual with only tree branches for comparison; an immature, as suggested by the streaked underparts (a condition found in only a few adult North American hawks); and no obvious flight behavioral characteristics to lend a clue. Given these realities, it is necessary to carefully analyze the bird—its shape, structure,