

## Black-crowned Night-Herons on Mill Creek

Black-crowned night-herons *Nycticorax nycticorax* (BCNH) have long been associated with the Mill Creek Valley in Cincinnati, Ohio. Many nestling BCNH were banded in the 1940s and 1950s at a large (approximately 200 pairs) historic colony on the West Fork of Mill Creek (Kemsies and Randle 1953, G. R. Austing, pers. comm.). This colony had disappeared by 1963, while another small colony of BCNH was present at Gilmore Ponds in Butler County in 1989 (Peterjohn and Rice 1991). The current Mill Creek colony is located 100 meters north of the Gest Street Bridge over Mill Creek, only 4 km from downtown Cincinnati. This is one of only three known colonies in the state of Ohio. The other two are located on Lake Erie on West Sister Island NWR and on a small island in Sandusky Bay. The closest established colony to that in Mill Creek is in Louisville, Kentucky.

Although lower Mill Creek flows through primarily industrial properties, there is a 2-km stretch of the creek bordered on the north by the Western Hills viaduct and on the south by 8<sup>th</sup> Street that contains some natural vegetation. In this section, 15 m along either side of the creek is wooded with small trees, predominantly cottonwood and silver maple. Beyond 15 m, the land is commercially developed. All the nests described below were located within a 50-m subsection at the southern end of this wooded area. Most nests were located 10-15 m high in cottonwood trees, either close to or hanging over the creek. This land is owned by the City of Cincinnati, and is near the Metropolitan Sewer District wastewater treatment plant.

BCNH usually return from their wintering grounds in early April to nest. Chicks normally hatch between late May and early June. By mid- to late July most chicks have fledged and there is little activity around the rookery. For this report, we defined an active nest as one with an incubating bird or young present.

1996—On 25 June, 21 active nests were seen.

1997—From 19 June to 16 July, a total of nine active nests were counted. In seven nests in which we were able to count young, there were an average of 2.3 bandable young per nest.

1998—On 22 April, six new or improved nests were counted. On 7 May, there were at least nine BCNH incubating at the site; however, by the end of May all the nests had been abandoned. On 23 June, fourteen adult BCNH and four active nests were discovered at Gilmore Ponds in Butler County, Ohio, 27 km north of the Mill Creek site; it seemed likely the Mill Creek colony had relocated there. During the spring and summer of 1998 the water levels at Gilmore Ponds were relatively high. Here in addition to the BCNH were 8-10 great egrets, three cattle egrets, and numerous great blue herons and green herons. On 26 June, a closer look at Gilmore Ponds revealed 18 active nests and 30 adult BCNH. Within the area of the BCNH colony were also two great egret nests that later failed. On 15 July, there were 10 BCNH nest with small chicks, and four other nests with incubating adults. Unfortunately, by 29 July the entire colony had failed due to predation on the chicks and a major windstorm that destroyed several nests and trees.

1999—No nests were detected at either Mill Creek or Gilmore Ponds, although there were several sightings of adult BCNH near the former location.

2000—On 10 April there were 13 birds and four new nests on the Mill Creek site. A re-check on 21 April after a spring windstorm found only one adult standing on the single remaining nest. On 25 May there were five active nests, and by 13 June all five had at least one chick.

The colony has existed at the Mill Creek site since at least 1986 (per Metropolitan Sewer District employees), and probably earlier than that. Although the period under consideration is relatively brief, it appears there may have been a decrease in the number of nesting pairs in recent years. Although it is possible that BCNH could be nesting somewhere else on Mill Creek, or at other sites such as Oxbow Lake in Indiana, no other colonies have been reported. Due to the urban nature of the area, this is certainly a very isolated and unique colony of night-herons. Because of the apparent decrease in nesting pairs, the next few years may be critical in determining the future of BCNH at this location.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## REFERENCES

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Black-crowned night-herons are known to nest in only three colonies in Ohio. This nest with young was photographed at the Mill Creek, Hamilton Co., colony during this year's breeding season. Photo by Tom Uhlman.