

Swimming in the Black-crowned Night-Heron

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On 1 September 2004 at approximately 2000 hours, an adult black-crowned night-heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* was observed hunting from a low perch at Lower Shaker Lake in Shaker Heights, Cuyahoga County, Ohio. The heron was bent in typical hunting posture (Kushlan 1978, Sibley 2000) for several minutes, after which it crouched and then entered the water. The heron swam to ~3 m from shore with its head and neck positioned in a sigmoid, grebe-like fashion and then circled back, reassumed its position on the perch, and apparently continued to hunt. Observations continued for seven minutes, during which the bird did not move. Its entire time in the water lasted less than one minute. At no point did the bird appear distressed or disoriented, but appeared to make a deliberate decision to enter the water, swim for a short period, and return to its perch.

Black-crowned night-herons are known to swim (Davis 1993), but the accounts of this behavior are relatively few, and most accounts describe a bird alighting on the water from flight. In one of the first accounts of swimming, Wetmore (1920) reported a black-crowned night-heron alighting on water (six feet deep) to eat a floating, dead salamander (*Ambystoma* sp.). After seizing the carcass, the bird rested a moment and flew away. While this was Wetmore's only descriptive account of the behavior, he noted that black-crowned night-herons kept floating dead salamanders to a minimum. Hoffman (1941) reported a black-crowned night-heron flying from a sandy shore, alighting on the water, and swimming back to shore three times. The bird reassumed a relaxed posture on the shore, and appeared to have no particular motivation for the behavior. White (1947) documented three separate instances in which black-crowned night-herons floated on the surface of the water. One appeared to be resting, one had been displaced from a perch and was swimming to a new perch, and one appeared to be wetting its plumage for moisture in nest incubation. Of these behaviors, resting on the water is closest to what I observed at Lower Shaker Lake, although none of White's observations offer an exact description of what I observed. Allsopp & Allsopp (1965) also reported two instances of black-crowned night-herons alighting on calm water. One of the birds appeared to secure food.

In previous reports of black-crowned night-herons swimming, Kushlan (1978), Hancock & Kushlan (1984), and Martinez-Vilalta & Motis (1992) described "swimming feeding" as a foraging behavior in this species, but did not provide details about the behavior. Kushlan (1973) defined swimming feeding as striking at nearby prey while on the surface of the water. I did not observe the heron at Lower Shaker Lake capturing prey before swimming or consuming anything during

its time in the water. Swimming has been documented in other ardeid species. In a condensed summary of heron feeding behavior, Kushlan (1976) reported that the great egret *Ardea alba*, great blue heron *A. herodias*, tricolored heron *Egretta tricolor*, green heron *Butorides virescens*, and black-crowned night-heron will all swim to capture prey. Several modes of entering the water were described, including plunging, diving, feet-first diving, jumping, and wading. Kushlan (1976) noted that some herons may swim without feeding, but did not indicate which species. This most closely reflects my observations at Lower Shaker Lake. Kushlan (1976) also reported that some herons use their feet to agitate the substrate to dislodge prey, as documented in the snowy egret *Egretta thula*, reddish egret *E. rufescens*, tricolored heron, green heron, and little blue heron *E. caerulea*. In Meyerriecks' extensive observations on herons' use of feet to dislodge prey (1959, 1966, 1971), he never documented such behavior in black-crowned night-herons. However, Meyerriecks also never made mention of the yellow-crowned night-heron *Nyctanassa violacea*, indicating that he probably did not observe heron behavior after dark.

In conjunction with Kushlan's articles, Kelly et al. (2003) provide an updated summary of wading bird foraging behavior, describing plunging into the water after prey by the great egret, snowy egret, great blue heron, tricolored heron, green heron, and little blue heron, and diving in all but the great blue and little blue herons. Kelly et al. also add that great egrets use their feet to agitate the substrate. A. C. Bent (1926) documented both juvenal and adult green herons swimming by paddling their feet like anseriforms. A. R. Buckelew, Jr. (1993) documented a green heron swimming and diving in avoidance of an aerial predator (Cooper's hawk *Accipiter cooperi*). While swimming, the heron continuously watched the hawk until the hawk's departure.

During my observations at Lower Shaker Lake, no aerial predators were observed, and the heron did not seem distressed or watchful, so swimming was probably not a result of predator avoidance. It is possible that the heron described herein was agitating the substrate with its feet while swimming, although the actions of the feet were not observed. This possibility is reinforced by the heron's return to its perch and hunting posture. However, "foot stirring" by a swimming heron has not previously been documented.

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A Parting Shot . . .



One of the regal Cleveland peregrines endures an earful from a highly perturbed mockingbird. It was unclear which candidate each was supporting. Chad and Chris Saladin snapped a picture of the exchange on 3 August 2004.