

# Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, *Nyctanassa violacea*

**Status:**

**State:** Threatened

**Federal:** Not listed

## Identification

The yellow-crowned night-heron is a medium sized, short-legged wading bird. Adults are blue-gray with a black-and-white patterned head. The head of the adult is black with a yellow-white crown and a white cheek patch. In breeding plumage long, white streamers extend from the crown. Eye color is red in adults. The legs are yellow and turn pinkish-red on breeding adults. The bill is short, stout, and black on both adults and juveniles. The yellow-crowned night-heron flies with slow wing beats, trailing the legs behind the body. The call is a guttural, whoc, often emitted when the bird is disturbed.

Juvenile yellow-crowned night-herons differ in plumage from adults. The juvenile is grayish-brown overall with thin, buffy spotting on the back and upperwings. The throat and body are buff-white with heavy amounts of fine, grayish-brown streaking. The legs of juveniles are greenish-yellow and eye color is yellow or orange. Yellow-crowned night-herons acquire adult plumage by two years of age.

Yellow-crowned night-herons are similar in appearance to black-crowned night-herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) and American bitterns (*Botaurus lentiginosus*). The adult black-crowned night-heron lacks streaking on the head, and instead has a black cap and white cheeks. The adult black-crowned also has a black back, while that of the yellow-crowned is solid gray. In comparison to the immature black-crowned night-heron, the yellow-crowned is darker brown above with smaller and rounder buffy markings. Although the underparts can vary, those of the yellow-crowned tend to be darker with a greater amount of brown streaking. The bill of the yellow-crowned is shorter and heavier without a light colored base. In addition to plumage, body shape can be used to differentiate the two night-herons. The yellow-crowned is slimmer-bodied with an elongated neck and posture, contrasting with the stocky-bodied and shorter-necked black-crowned, which often appears hunched over. In flight, the legs and feet extend beyond the tail of the yellow-crowned, while only the toes of the black-crowned extend beyond the tail. In contrast to the American bittern, which has a two-toned upperwing, the immature yellow-crowned night-heron shows a solid upperwing in flight. The bittern lacks buffy spotting on the upperparts and has a much longer, thinner, and lighter colored bill than the night-heron.



Photo by Eugene Hester, courtesy US FWS

## Habitat

Yellow-crowned night-herons nest on barrier islands, dredge spoil islands, and bay islands that contain forested wetlands or scrub/shrub thickets. Colonies may be located in dense shrubby thickets, forests with an open understory or suburban parks and yards that offer suitable habitat. Yellow-crowned night-herons use similar habitat types for both nesting and roosting, avoiding areas with insufficient cover. When nesting in mixed species colonies in habitats with low vegetation height, yellow-crowneds tend to nest closer to the ground and group with other yellow-crowned night-herons. At one New Jersey colony, nests were located 2.5 m (8 ft.) above the ground in cherry trees (Prunus spp.) that reached a maximum height of 8 m (26 ft.) (Burger 1978).

Yellow-crowned night-herons hunt along the shores of tidal creeks and tide pools within salt and brackish marshes dominated by salt marsh cordgrass (Spartina alterniflora). They also wade in shallow water and mudflats in search of prey and seek food along the wrack line during low tides. Similar foraging and roosting habitats are used throughout the year.

In recent years the ENSP has received reports and documented yellow-crowned night-herons nesting in residential neighborhoods, parks, campgrounds, and other areas in close association with humans. This is similar to trends observed in the Virginia Tidewater area where more than 80% of the known population nests in residential areas (Watts 1991). In these areas the prefer areas with an open understory and park-like appearance (Watts 1989).

## Status and Conservation

Killed for the plumes that adorned breeding birds, the yellow-crowned night-heron was pursued by gunners who sold the birds' feathers and meat in city markets during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The year 1910 marked the end of the millinery trade and the start of the birds' population recovery.

In the northeastern United States, the yellow-crowned night-heron was rare prior to the 1900s. Although the species may have nested in small numbers in New Jersey during this time, breeding was not officially documented in the state until 1927. Over the next several decades, populations in New Jersey began to build, leveling during the mid-1950s and 1960s.

The surge in coastal development in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century destroyed much of the suitable habitat for nesting yellow-crowned night-herons in New Jersey. The number of breeding birds in the state dropped from the late 1970s throughout the 1980s. In 1984, the yellow-crowned night-heron was listed as a threatened species in New Jersey due to population declines and habitat loss. Because it is located near the northern extent of the species' range, the effects of habitat loss and other threats to the New Jersey population are intensified by low recruitment from neighboring populations. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program considers the yellow-crowned night-heron to be "demonstrably secure globally," yet "imperiled in New Jersey because of rarity" (Office of Natural Lands Management 1992). Declines of this species have occurred in other states, resulting in its listing as endangered (Indiana), threatened (Pennsylvania, Illinois, Kentucky), or of special concern (Connecticut, Virginia). Recent changes in nesting habitat selection may help yellow-crowned night-hero populations begin to recover.