

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON

Nycticorax nycticorax

Family: ARDEIDAE
B059

Order: PELECANIFORMES

Class: AVES

Written by: S. Granholm

Reviewed by: D. Raveling, L. Mewaldt

Edited by: R. Duke

DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

The black-crowned night-heron is a fairly common, yearlong resident in lowlands and foothills throughout most of California, including the Salton Sea and Colorado River areas, and very common locally in large nesting colonies. Feeds along the margins of lacustrine, large riverine, and fresh and saline emergent habitats and, rarely, on kelp beds in marine subtidal habitats. Nests and roosts in dense-foliaged trees and dense emergent wetlands. Common nesting species on northeastern plateau from April to August. Uncommon in northwestern, and rare in northeastern, California in midwinter. Uncommon transient and rare in winter in southern deserts, and rare on Channel Islands. Seldom seen in mountains, but formerly nested at Big Bear Lake in San Bernardino Mts. (Cogswell 1977, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Feeds mostly nocturnally and crepuscularly. Highly variable diet consists of fishes, crustaceans, aquatic insects and other invertebrates, amphibians, reptiles, small mammals, and rarely young birds (Palmer 1962, Wolford and Boag 1971b). Collins (1970) and Hunter and Morris (1976) reported feeding on young terns. Usually hunts in shallow water, waiting motionlessly or, less commonly, stalking prey slowly (Kushlan 1976a). Sometimes vibrates bill to lure or flush prey, and may alight briefly on deep water to make a strike.

Cover: Roosts among dense foliage of trees, not always near water, and in dense, fresh or brackish emergent wetlands (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Often rests on piers and pilings.

Reproduction: Nests in dense-foliaged trees, dense, fresh or brackish emergent wetlands, or dense shrubbery or vine tangles, usually near aquatic or emergent feeding areas. Nests are built of twigs and/or marsh plants.

Water: No additional data found.

Pattern: Nest-sites usually near aquatic or emergent feeding areas, but nonbreeding-season roosts may be farther away.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, crepuscular and nocturnal activity. Sometimes also feeds diurnally (Terres 1980).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Local migrator, dispersing widely from breeding colonies after nesting (Gill and Mewaldt 1979). Much of the breeding population from northwestern and northeastern California probably moves southward and is absent from those areas in

midwinter.

Home Range: In North Carolina, foraged up to 8 km (5 mi) from nesting area (Custer and Osborn 1978).

Territory: Breeding territory, used for courtship, copulation, and nesting, is large initially, but shrinks after pair-formation to a "few feet around nest" (Palmer 1962). Sometimes defends roosting and feeding territories (Palmer 1962).

Reproduction: Breeds mainly February to July, but April to August in northeastern California (Cogswell 1977). Monogamous, colonial nester. Clutch size is 3-4, sometimes 5. Mean clutch size for 684 nests in a South San Francisco Bay colony (Bair Island) in May 1971, was 2.9 eggs (Gill 1977). Incubation reportedly 24-26 days. Semi-altricial, downy young are tended by both parents. They fly first at 6 wk, but are not independent until some time later. A few breed at 1 yr, but most not until 2-3 yr (Palmer 1962, Harrison 1978).

Niche: Human disturbance of nesting colonies in Quebec (simulating a typical scientific nesting study) resulted in nest abandonment, predation of eggs, and reduced late-season nesting (Tremblay and Ellison 1979). Corvidae and other predators eat eggs. Numbers have been reduced from drainage of marshes and swamps, and cutting of trees, but this species is more adaptable and persistent than most other ardeids.

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