

black-crowned night-heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

Kingdom: Animalia

Division/Phylum: Chordata

Class: Aves

Order: Pelecaniformes

Family: Ardeidae

ILLINOIS STATUS endangered, native

FEATURES

The black-crowned night-heron averages 23 to 28 inches in length (tail tip to bill tip in preserved specimen). This stocky-bodied, red-eyed bird has short legs and a thick, pointed bill. The adult has a cap of black feathers and black back feathers. The wing feathers are gray, and gray or white feathers cover the rest of the body. Legs are yellow-green except in the breeding season when they turn pink. Two, long white, plumes (feathers) extend back from the head during the breeding season. The immature bird is brown with white spots and streaks.

BEHAVIORS

The black-crowned night-heron is a common migrant, uncommon summer resident and rare winter resident in Illinois. It lives in marshes, swamps, ponds, lakes and sewage lagoons. Its “quok” call may be heard at night or at twilight, when the bird is active. Migrating at night, the spring arrivals are first seen in Illinois in April. These birds first breed when one to three years old. Eggs are produced in the period from May through June. The black-crowned night-heron nests in colonies in trees or marshes often with other heron species. The nest of sticks or reeds is constructed at a height of from ground level to 160 feet. Both sexes build the nest over a two- to five-day period. The female deposits three to six, green-blue eggs on a flat, platform nest. The male and female alternate incubation duties over the 24- to 26-day incubation period. After nesting, some of these birds move north before migrating further south. Fall migrants begin arriving in Illinois in August. The black-crowned night-heron’s diet is comprised mainly of fishes. The black-crowned night-heron is endangered in Illinois. It was a common, Illinois summer resident bird in the late 1800s and could be seen in wetlands throughout the state. Habitat destruction, human harassment and indiscriminate killing have led to a dramatic decline in the numbers of this species. Protection and preservation of nest and feeding sites are vital to the survival of this species in Illinois.

HABITATS

Aquatic Habitats

bottomland forests; lakes, ponds and reservoirs; marshes; rivers and streams; swamps; wet prairies and fens

Woodland Habitats

bottomland forests; southern Illinois lowlands

Prairie and Edge Habitats

black soil prairie; edge

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