

The Mysterious Night Raven of the Canal


Few Cabin John residents venture onto the towpath at night. But if you did take an evening walk between mid-March and early September, you might spook an intriguing predator, the enigmatic Black-crowned Night Heron. During the day, this easily overlooked neighbor of ours does nothing at all, except stand perfectly still while resting on a half-submerged log or on a tree branch by the canal. Unlike its more active and familiar relative, the pterodactyl-like Great Blue Heron, the Black-crowned waits until dark to make its move.

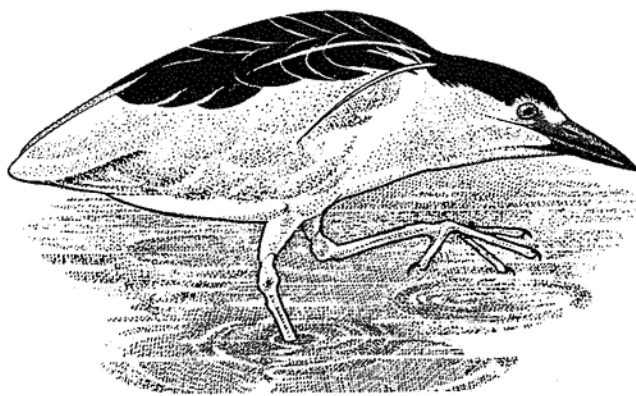
The plumage of the bulky Black-crowned Night Heron reminds me of a bouncer dressed in a tuxedo, accented by a punk accessory of several long white head feathers. Besides the unusual appearance is its nocturnal behavior and name. But unlike the bouncers I've known, or herons that skillfully spear their food—an unsuspecting fish or frog—the Black-crowned grabs its prey between its mandibles. Its scientific name, acknowledging both genus and species, *Nycticorax nycticorax*, translates to “night raven,” in part because its call resembles the squawk of a true raven.

I kept repeating the Latin name whenever I saw it and the repetitive moniker piqued my curiosity. How many bird species, I wondered, have the same name for genus and species, like a biological Humbert Humbert from Nabokov's *Lolita*? The answer is only 86 from the more than 10,000 bird species named by science.

What puts the Black-crowned Night Heron on a truly elite list of only about six birds is its nearly worldwide distribution. Along with the Barn Owl, Peregrine Falcon, Mallard Duck, Osprey, and the Great Egret, this odd grouping of species can be found in almost every country. Biologists have yet to resolve this riddle of near-universal range size for these birds. Perhaps the Black-crowned Night Heron specializes on stalking in habitats—shallow ponds and marshes, freshwater, saltwater, or brackish—that are widespread so it can find a place to hunt almost anywhere.

When I lived on the other side of the globe, in Nepal's lowland jungles, I used to have Black-crowned Night Herons as neighbors, a colony that lived in a dense sward of elephant grass bordering a large oxbow lake. The lake was filled with wallowing rhinoceros during the day, and on the edge, a kind of crocodile called the mugger would bask in the sun. How the Black-crowned Night Herons foraged in the twilight with the muggers nearby always made me wonder for their safety.

No crocodiles along our towpath. But, alas, no Black-Crowned Night Heron now either. Around mid-September, they took off south and won't return until early Spring. Where do they go to winter? Yet another unsolved mystery of local nature. —



Black-crowned Night Heron