

Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

The Black-crowned Night-Heron spends much of the day resting quietly in marshes or trees, then at dusk flies off to forage, broadcasting a startlingly loud “quock!” In San Diego County it is locally common year round, both along the coast and at lakes and marshes inland. From 1997 to 2001 there were seven substantial colonies in the county, most mixed with other species of herons. Isolated pairs or small colonies also contribute to the population, to an unknown degree.

Breeding distribution: Like the Great Blue, the Black-crowned Night-Heron nests mainly in colonies, often in mixed heronies. Seven sites appear to account for most of San Diego County’s population. At the Wild Animal Park (J12), in the multispecies heronry in the Heart of Africa exhibit, counts of the birds (fledglings included) ranged up to 150 on 15 June 1998 (D. and D. Bylin); our best count of nests was at least 20 on 8 May 1999 (K. L. Weaver). At Sierra Avenue and Plaza Street in Solana Beach (M7), Black-crowned Night-Herons nest in company with Snowy Egrets. There were 10 to 20 nests of the former in a fig tree in 1997, and by 2001 they had spread to some nearby eucalyptus trees (A. Mauro). Pine trees at

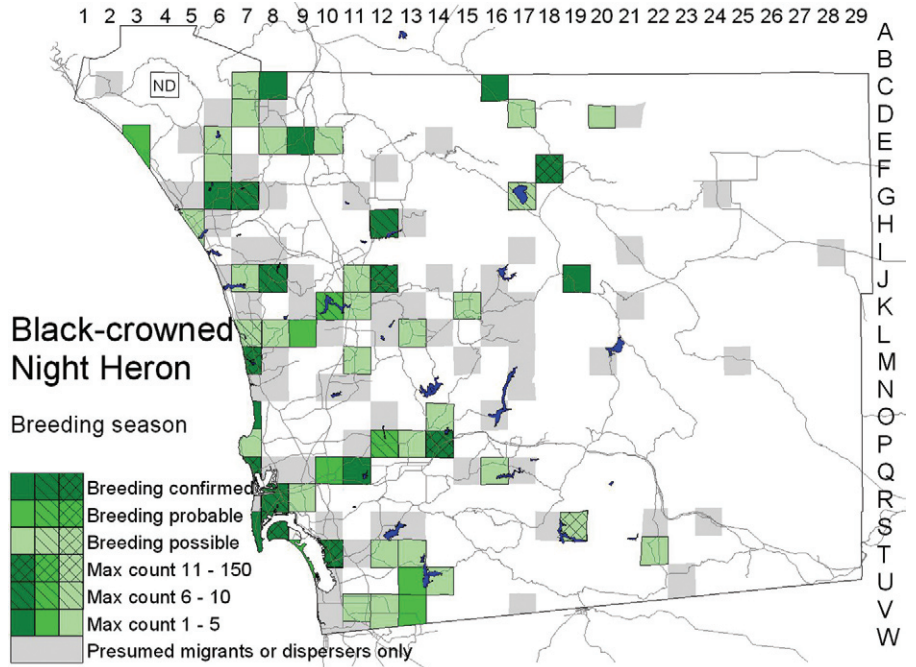
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Scripps Institution of Oceanography (O7) were a colony site for many years, until some heavy construction at the campus in 2002. At least three, possibly seven, nests were active on 4 June 1998 (S. E. Smith). In 1999, Black-crowned Night-Herons founded the mixed heronry at Lindo Lake (P14; M. B. Stowe). By 9 July 2001, there were at least 10 nests of the night-heron, among lesser numbers of the Great Blue Heron, Snowy Egret, and Great Egret. The Point Loma submarine base (S7) hosts the

county's longest-known Black-crowned Night-Heron colony, known since the 1970s and reaching a peak size of about 500 nests in 1980. Fledglings at this site suffered high mortality from steatitis, and the colony declined to 103 nests in 1995, 21 in 1996. From 1999 to 2001 the colony consisted of only 15 nests, all in fig trees (M. F. Platter-Rieger). The largest colony during the atlas period was that at North Island Naval Air Station (S8), shared with Snowy Egrets. In 1999, when McDonald et al. (2000) surveyed the colony regularly, the number of adults peaked at 140 and the number of nests peaked at 115 on 21 May. That year, 164 nests fledged a total of 166 young. A third colony near San Diego Bay is that at the 32nd Street Naval Station (T10); it contained about 30 nests in 1997 (M. F. Platter-Rieger).

Kenneth L. Weaver found an apparently isolated pair nesting in a willow along the Santa Margarita River near Fallbrook (C8) 1 May 1999, another in a cottonwood along Temecula Creek near Oak Grove (C16) 16 June 2001. On several other occasions we recorded single adults carrying prey or single families of fledglings begging from their parents, far from known colonies. These sites are scattered through the coastal lowland, inland to Swan Lake (F18) near Warner Springs (13, including a fledgling, 24 June 2000, C. G. Edwards) and Wynola (J19; fledgling on 19 June and 2 July 1999, S. E. Smith). The literature on the Black-crowned Night-Heron speaks only of colonies, yet these observations suggest that in San Diego County isolated pairs are not rare.

Apparently nonbreeding birds are widespread through the spring and summer all along the coast and at many lakes and ponds inland, as high as Cuyamaca Lake (one on 21 May and 5 June 1998 and 5 June 1999, A. P. and T. E. Keenan). Concentrations during the breeding season away from colonies range up to 20 at the east end of Lake Hodges (K11) 18 May 1997 (E. C. Hall) and 30 at Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7) 1 April 2000 (K. Estey), but these could be of birds commuting 5 miles or less from nests.



Nesting: Black-crowned Night-Herons build a stick platform in trees, similar to those of other herons of similar size. At some colonies the nests are in open-foliaged eucalyptus or palm trees, but more often the birds select sites that offer more concealment, especially dense-foliaged

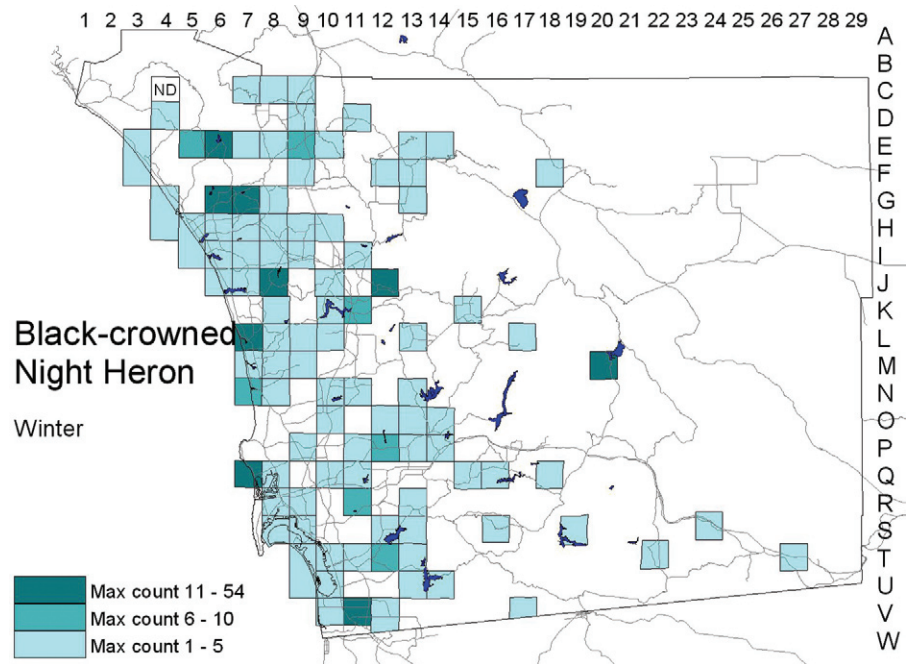
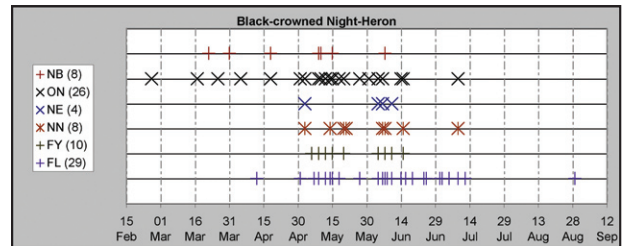


fig trees, used at Solana Beach, Point Loma, North Island, and 32nd Street.

In San Diego County the Black-crowned Night-Heron begins nesting in February. Our earliest date for birds apparently incubating was 26 February; young already out of the nest at Solana Beach 12 April 1997 (L. Ellis) suggest laying in the third week of February. Early March to early May appears to be the main period of nest initiation.

Migration: On the coastal slope of San Diego County numbers of Black-crowned Night-Herons show no consistent pattern of variation through the year. In the Anza-Borrego Desert the Black-crowned Night-Heron is a rare visitor, recorded in ones or twos, mainly in spring and summer. During the atlas period it was noted seven times in this area, from 30 March (1999, one at Desert Ironwoods Motel, I28, L. J. Hargrove) to 20 October (1999, one at Ocotillo Wells, I29, P. D. Jorgensen).

Winter: The Black-crowned Night-Heron's status in San Diego County in winter is similar to that in the breeding season: locally common and widespread in the coastal lowland, scarce and scattered farther inland. The largest winter concentrations have been reported from Whelan Lake (G6; up to 40 on 26 December 1998, D. K. Adams), the Wild Animal Park (up to 54 on 2 January 1999, K. L. Weaver), and the Dairy Mart pond, Tijuana River valley (V11; up to 40 on 18 December 1999, G. McCaskie). Though we found the night-heron wintering at few sites above 2000 elevation, it is regular in winter at Cuyamaca Lake, with up to 13 on 14 December 1999 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan), and there is a winter sighting at Doane Pond, Palomar Mountain (E14; one on 27 January 1995, M. B. Stowe).

The only winter records for the Anza-Borrego Desert

are of one near the Borrego Springs airport (F25) 21 December 1983, two at Santa Catarina Spring (D23) 24 December 1988 (ABDSP database), and one on the Anza-Borrego Christmas bird count 19 December 1993.

Conservation: There is little evidence for changes in the Black-crowned Night-Heron's abundance in San Diego County, though the results of the Rancho Santa Fe Christmas bird count show a downward trend. The decline of the Point Loma colony has been compensated for by the increase of the North Island colony, at least in part. All the major colonies are in planted trees in areas heavily used by people. Although the night-herons are surprisingly indifferent to people, especially while they are foraging at night, the converse is not always true. In 1992, a homeowner in Solana Beach, annoyed with a Black-crowned Night-Heron colony on his property, hired a tree-trimmer to chop down the tree where the birds were nesting—although he had already contacted the California Department of Fish and Game and had been instructed to remove the tree only after the herons were finished nesting. A neighbor filmed the nests, eggs, and chicks crashing to the ground, and the four surviving chicks were rescued from a dumpster the next morning—two were rehabilitated successfully. The film (broadcast on television) and testimony of neighbors supported a lawsuit by the California Department of Fish and Game, and the homeowner and tree-trimmer ultimately paid a fine.

Taxonomy: The North American subspecies of the Black-crowned Night-Heron is *N. n. hoactli* (Gmelin, 1789), with whiter underparts than that of South America and less white over the eye than in that of the Old World.