

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture February 17th, 2011.
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

The eyes of these herons and allies are mobile within the eye sockets. They often face the eyes forward so that they can look down and gauge distance. They eat minnows and frogs which they spearfish. The eyes pointing downward or directly in front gives them a certain amount of binocular vision.

American Bittern

OCCURRENCE

The only large bittern found in NA. Fairly widespread. Almost completely migratory.

Most of the birds breed in Canada and the northern tier of the US.

In much of CA mostly a migrant and winter visitor, although it breeds in pretty good numbers in the Central Valley. Along the immediate coast it is quite scarce. Formerly nested at Pescadero Marsh, which used to be a really nice freshwater marsh, but the management changed. There have been issues with the water levels since it became a preserve.

Currently there is one at North Lake in GG Park. It is in a reedbed on the west side and can sometimes be seen from the second bench to the south on the east side.

Places to look for them include Shollenberger Park near Petaluma, Sacramento Wildlife Refuge is really good, Pacific Commons Linear Park off Auto Mall Parkway in Fremont, Mountain View Forebay. After a rainstorm the bitterns are often a bit more conspicuous.

FIELD MARKS

Brown, streaky.

About the size of a night-heron. Immature Black-crowned Night-Herons look similar, but have more blurry streaking on the underparts, more white spotting on the upperparts, longer legs.

Posture: bitterns typically skypoint (point their bills straight upwards) which makes them look like dead reeds. They exhibit that behavior even when they are not in a reedbed.

Adult birds have a broad black moustacial stripe on the side of the neck that the immature birds lack.

Long and continuous reddish brown stripes on the front of the neck, very different from the blurry pattern on a night-heron.

Some buffy patches on the back and no white spots. A night-heron will show pretty continuous spangling of white spots on its upper wing coverts.

Greenish legs are similar between the night-heron and the bittern.

Rather small head and thick neck that is held at a really strange angle when they fly: strong hunchback and the neck is low slung.

In flight look for relatively pointed wings with a dark brown or blackish trailing edge. All of the primaries and secondaries are dark and contrast with the paler brown wing coverts. Compare that to a flying night-heron in which the upper surface of the wing is more or less uniform. Night-herons also fly differently. Bitterns fly with the wings in a rowing motion, night-herons flap their wings directly up and down and the wing tips pointed downwards, so that the wings arc up and then down straight, giving a curve to the whole

shape of the flying bird. In a flying night-heron the head does not project out down below like in a bittern

VOCALIZATIONS

"Thunderpumping": a low, harsh, mechanical call that you frequently hear in the evening hours.

Least Bittern

OCCURRENCE

The smallest NA heron. The most difficult NA heron to see. The easiest way to find it is to go to Florida or Texas where the birds can be quite common.

Typically found in freshwater marshes, but they will get into brackish marshes occasionally.

Breeds in southern CA in some of the marshes in Orange County and much more commonly in the Imperial Valley. In northern CA the bird breeds regularly in the Graylodge Wildlife Area, the Los Baños Wildlife Area and the Sacramento Wildlife Refuge. Seeing them is a tricky matter.

You can improve your odds by going in the late summer when young are out of the nest and looking for them at dusk. They seem to be somewhat crepuscular and much more active at dusk.

When they have young that are out of the nest the young tend to fly about and they are not very adept flyers. Particularly they are not adept at landing. They seem to fall out of where they were landing, making a big noise, so they become more conspicuous.

Many of the times you will just glimpse the bird in flight, showing a buffy patch on the upper surface of the wing as it flies across a small area of open water.

As far as the immediate Bay Area is concerned, any sighting of a Least Bittern is worth recording.

Recently there was a Least Bittern at the Martinez Regional Shoreline. Links to Joe's photos on the class website.

Has occurred in SF at Lake Merced in the 1970s.

FIELD MARKS

Females are a little bit larger than males and their crown and the back are brown rather than black as they are on the males.

Buffy patches in the wings, on the leading edge of the wing, the wing coverts.

Some white stripes on the scapulars.

Like many of the herons they get bright colors around the eyes in the breeding season.

The orbital ring turns a bright turquoise color for a brief period.

Dark back.

Large feet. When foraging they frequently hang from their feet waiting for fish, almost like a snake hanging down from a branch.

"CORY'S LEAST BITTERN"

Originally described as a new species based on some very dark chestnut versions of the Least Bittern from eastern Canada. There are very few specimens of this. There are no female specimens, it only happened in males. This is a rare dark color morph.

Sibley's correction to what he says in his field guide (that they are unrecorded since 1928): There is a specimen from Brazil from 1967 and a dozen sight records from Ontario up to 1981. One photographed in Ohio in 1941. Those are the most recent credible records. Change the text in

Sibley to simply "very rare". The illustration is too rusty. The illustration in Nat Geo is correct, a really dark chestnut brown color.

VOCALIZATIONS

A common call by the Least Bittern is very much like the call of the Clapper Rail.

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron

OCCURRENCE

Fairly common in Florida or Texas.

Does occur in CA as a rare vagrant and as a marginal breeding bird with a persistent pair at Imperial Beach.

They like swampy areas with trees, water lilies. Eat a lot of frogs. On the east coast they range as far north as Rhode Island as a breeding bird.

Virtually every accepted record for CA, especially northern CA, is of an adult or near adult.

We know that young birds are more likely to stray out of range than adult birds. That suggests that we may be overlooking immature Yellow-crowned Night-Herons because of their close similarity to Black-crowned.

Recently the situation has become confounded by a pair of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons breeding in San Diego. They have produced young for the last several years. Those young disperse and are occasionally seen around the San Diego area.

For many years a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron was in a Black-crowned Night-Heron colony at the university at La Jolla (Scripps's Institute). It mated with a Black-crowned Night-Heron but never produced any young. However, in a military base in San Diego Bay Yellow-crowned Night-Heron did successfully hybridize with Black-crowned Night-Heron and produced young. They were examined in the hand and an article was published on that hybrid pair and the babies.

Article: <http://elibrary.unm.edu/sora/wb/v39n04/p0233-p0241.pdf>

Featured Photo: <http://elibrary.unm.edu/sora/wb/v39n04/back.pdf>

More recently an immature Yellow-crowned was reported from the Los Angeles area. There were a lot of Black-crowned there and one that was being confidently identified as Yellow-crowned. Eventually the pictures came out, Joe could not decide what it was. Eventually someone closer posted the opinion that it was likely a hybrid.

FIELD MARKS

Different shape from Black-crowned, a little slimmer, bigger eyed.

Crown rarely yellow, both field guides show it as white.

Adult males and females identical.

Lanceolate (linear) white plumes off the back of the head.

Body all gray with black centers to the wing coverts.

Marginally longer legged than Black-crowned.

Shape and color of the bill a key difference.

Bill very swollen, both upper and lower mandible arching to meet equally, giving the bill a dagger shaped appearance.

Bill typically solid black.

Adult

Black on chin and throat.

A very distinctive face, but you can get the stripy pattern on a Great Blue Heron, they have a stripe through the eye, which gets some people confused.

Immature

Dark bill. Some do show a little bit of pale at the base of the mandible.

Spots on the upper wing coverts relatively small.

Streaks on the underparts relatively well defined, not as blurry as on Black-crowned.

Gray-brown color, not nearly as heavily pigmented as most Black-crowned, which have a much more rich brown coloration rather than the pallid color on Yellow-crowned.

A pale stripe under the eye, a ghost of the adult's facial pattern can sometimes be seen.

Not on all, but on many.

Outsized eyeball, eyes are relatively larger than those of Black-crowned.

It takes night-herons mostly years before they get full adult plumage .

Black-crowned Night-Heron**OCCURRENCE**

Quite a bit more widespread than Yellow-crowned.

Abundant around the SF Bay Area.

They tend to be somewhat nocturnal or crepuscular, more so than the Yellow-crowned.

Form winter roosts of quite a few birds frequently in trees, such as at the Palace of Fine Arts and at Fort Mason. There are also pretty good numbers around Lake Merritt in Oakland.

Most of the roosting sites are not used as nesting colonies. The number of nesting colonies is very small. Most of these birds are found nesting either at Lake Merritt or a few other nesting colonies in the south and north bay, often on isolated islands. There is a nesting colony on some of the Marin islands in the bay. Also nest around Bear Island near Redwood Shores. Nesting sites are usually away from human habitation. They will nest both in trees and in shrubs like Coyote bushes. Colonial nesters, the colonies can become pretty dense. In the evening they move from roost sites to feeding sites. At Aquatic Park at the foot of Van Ness Avenue you will see the night-herons come out of the trees at Fort Mason and perch on the seawall on the dock that goes out into the bay.

We tend to greatly underestimate the number of night-herons in a day roost, they are not easily seen in the trees.

They feed on crabs and other crustaceans that come to the surface at night, mostly at low tide, and they can frequently be seen feeding on tidal mudflats at night.

FIELD MARKS

Bill shape different, slimmer, sleeker, not swollen. Upper mandible curved downward.

Lower mandible straight or slightly recurved. Overall impression of a bill which is slightly downcurved. Bill typically mostly yellow. Particularly on the lower mandible there is some greenish yellow color, but adults can have all black bills.

Smaller eye.

Wings cupped when they fly, bowed up and then down.

Legs decidedly shorter than those of Yellow-crowned.

Leg projection in flight beyond the tail: the tail seems to be coming about half way down the foot, in Yellow-crowned the entire foot and a little bit of the leg should show extending beyond the tail. This works only when the bird is flying level and the feet are stuck straight back. If the feet are dangling and you attempt to project the leg length backwards, you will end up with a lot of Black-crowned Night-Herons looking long legged. This is a dangerous field mark.

Adult

Red eye.

Black back.

Black crown.

Gray wing coverts.

Very light underneath.

Immature

Larger, white, teardrop-shaped spots on the wing coverts, lacking the buffy coloration.

More blurry, less distinct streaking on the neck becoming nonexistent on the belly.

Pale color on the bill much more typical of Black-crowned, not of Yellow-crowned.

There is disagreement between different authorities as to how many years it takes them to acquire adult plumage, if they have a third year plumage.