

A SAD DAY FOR THE 'QUAWKS': DESTRUCTION OF A BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON COLONY IN THE LOWER MOHAWK VALLEY

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An early account claims the Black-crowned Night-Heron was an "uncommon summer resident" of Albany County with only isolated nests (Judd 1907). In contrast, three years later Eaton (1910) noted the species as a "common" summer resident in the Hudson-Champlain Valley as far north as Washington County, with one of the three more notable colonies in New York State located near Dunsbach Ferry, Saratoga (=Albany) County. A third early record for this region mentions a colony of about 500 pairs on the Hudson River due east of Saratoga Lake (Bull 1974).

In 1933 Guy Bartlett reported the colony cited by Eaton near Dunsbach Ferry, also known as the Normandin or Crescent Colony, to be composed of a "few hundred nests" and to be of long standing (Stoner 1942). The colony was estimated at 300 to 400 nests on 17 May 1935; at 175 to 200 nests on 5 May 1939; at 125 nests on 11 May 1940; at 80 to 90 nests on 25 June 1941; at 60 to 70 nests on 9 May 1942; and, finally, on 24 June 1942, "Inspection of the rookery, well populated six weeks before, now revealed a complete absence of night herons." (Stoner 1942). Reportedly, the 'authorities' had issued a permit for removing the nests and the owner of the land had cut many of the nests down after the nesting season (Andrews 1943).

Concurrent with the demise of the Normandin colony, a new one of 100 to 150 nests was forming in the area now known as the Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve (Andrews 1942). However, this colony seemed short-lived and, probably, was replaced by one located on an island just west of the Route 9 crossing of the Mohawk River. As the colony at Vischer's Ferry apparently disappeared about the time this new colony appeared, the change seems reasonably explained as a translocation. Vincent Schaefer, an astute observer in the region, also remembers the presence but not the dates for the colony at this location. Although unnamed on published maps, local residents call the latter site 'Long Island.'

A spritely account of an unpleasant 1948 visit to the 'Long Island' colony suggests a population of about 450 herons (Drahos and Fosburgh

1949) and a somewhat mixed view of the species: "... it is extremely doubtful if there exists in the State of New York a more truculent, noisy, balmy yet beautiful bird." The negative aspects of their evaluation echo a much earlier commentary by T. H. Jasper (1881): "There are few things in nature more repelling than one of these heronries. The treacherous, waterlogged surface of the swamp will be white with the excrements of the birds, the air hot, close, and insufferable with its penetrating odor, and fine particles of these excrements floating in the air will cause the perspiring body of the intruder to smart wherever they touch. Decaying fish are everywhere, slowly rotting, and intensifying the intolerable stench; while at the approach of the intruder, the air is filled with a clamor like the breaking out of pandemonium."

Nothing more is known about the 'Long Island' colony until the early 1950s when, according to Gerald Metzger (pers. comm.), a marksman from the Selkirk area, apparently hired by local residents, visited 'Long Island' and emptied 6 boxes of .22 caliber shells to kill the Black-crowned Night-Herons present. This action apparently ended the last of the night-heron rookeries of the Mohawk Valley.

Currently, there are no known nesting sites for the Black-crowned Night-Heron in the Tri-Cities Region (Andrle and Carroll 1988) and it has again assumed the status of an "uncommon summer resident." In May 1989 I asked Walton Sabin, one of the more experienced ornithologists of our region, what his memories are regarding the Black-crowned Night-Heron. He claimed to have seen fewer than five in the last twenty years, knew of none nesting in our region, and never saw the rookeries of the lower Mohawk Valley. Other experienced members of the Hudson Mohawk Bird Club provided similar remarks on the species regionally. During my twenty years of Mohawk Valley watching, I estimate seeing no more than six different Black-crowned Night-Heron. Of these sightings, the presence of a pair of adults at Collins Lake from 24 through 29 June, 1989, was the most exciting; I thought I had observed nest building but they were gone on the morning of 30 June.

My contribution to this unhappy history is the account of interviews with Ernest Normandin on 3 Oct 1988 and with Gerald Metzger on 8 Oct 1988. At the time, Normandin was 93 years old. He remembered well the times when, after his purchase of part of Dunsbach's farm in 1930, he shared the premises with the Black-crowned Night-Heron while managing a small restaurant and a series of campsites at the farm.

He remembered the noise, night and day; the odor emanating from the five acre heronry and the whitewashing of nearby houses, laundry and cars, as well as his efforts to displace the birds. He spoke of his requests for help and of the visit of a uniformed Washington official who became 'plastered' when Normandin clapped his hands causing an uproar in the colony, but he did not remember the granting of a permit or his purported destruction of the nests in 1942. Instead, he attributed the demise of the colony to the hurricanes of 1938 and 1952, which blew down the trees and nests. Indeed, the region did experience destructive hurricanes in these years. He also remembered the attacks of owls and hawks on the herons, and the eventual movement of the remaining herons to Laving's Flat east of Vischer's Ferry.

Normandin's other recollections were fascinating as well: the days by the Erie Canal when he drove mules through groves of chestnut trees with the edible nuts; wading across the Mohawk River; the three large brickyards; three large ice houses loading their blocks for transport to New York City; the Whitehead Sand Co., a source of foundry sand for the local iron casters; white egrets coming at night to roost among the other herons; busloads of Union College students coming to see the colony; the arrival and chemical demise of the Water-Chestnut (*Trapa natans*) from the river and nearby Wager's Bay, and its return; and the glowing legs of the night-herons which lured fish to their demise.

My interview with Metzger was another instance of an encounter with a keen observer. I had met him on a late summer day a year or so earlier when my wife Gail and I were struggling to paddle our canoe through the Water-Chestnut choked channel to the south of 'Long Island' near the Route 9 bridge. Metzger was tending his garden and we invited him to come and tell us about his life with the Water-Chestnut. He turned the volume of his hearing aid up, joined us on his now useless dock and spoke for thirty minutes with vivid detail on the chemical destruction of the Water-Chestnut beds, the outlawing of the herbicides by the EPA and the eventual return of the smothering mats spread out before us. I had little interest in the Black-crowned Night-Heron at the time and didn't inquire. On learning about the onetime night-heron colony of the island adjacent his home, I returned on 8 Oct 1988 for a possible account, which he provided in sterling detail.

Metzger bought his riverside home at 21 Crescent Terrace in the Town of Colonie, in the 1940s and remembered the Black-crowned Night-

Heron (which he called 'quawks' or 'black-crested' night herons.) as unpleasant neighbors: the usual whitewashing of houses, clothing and cars; the noise and rank odors. His house along with those of his neighbors were prone to receive the worst the herons had to offer because the birds fed below the Federal Dam at Cohoes and Waterford and took the direct route over them. Metzger remembered counting three hundred herons on one occasion and had other recollections as well: the shabby nests of the herons and the eggs being blown out by strong winds; the herons bringing snakes, lizards, crabs, frogs, brown bullheads (in spite of their spines) and other morsels for their young and nest mates and the regurgitation of this provender for these associates and those humans walking beneath their lofty nests; and the coming of the 'hired gun' from Selkirk, a member of the Selkirk Pistol Team. Metzger described the day in the late spring of 1953 when the man arrived and showed him the six boxes of .22 cartridges (each with 50 shells) he planned to use and then, after three hours of slaughter, the six empty boxes with the claim that he "didn't miss often - only about forty times." On the basis of the number of shots fired and the number of misses reported Metzger had arrived at the estimate of 260 herons killed. From this day in 1953 the herons were no longer a problem in the area. Metzger informed me that the marksman has passed on as well; there is no need nor opportunity for recrimination.

Metzger had other interesting memories as well: a Mr. Doyle (a lock-tender at Waterford) with his mentally ill wife and their six year old son living on the island for its quiet!; the construction (*ca.* 1928) on the island of the foundations of a huge ice house to serve the New York City barge trade but never finished because of the hard times and the new "monitor top" refrigerators being invented by General Electric (the foundations with their 36 inch thick walls still stand); the use of the island as a way station for liquor during prohibition; the presence at one time of a causeway connecting the island to the southern shore; the presence of white egrets roosting among the night-herons; the louse laden night-herons whose feathers often were chewed to tatters by these parasites; and the destructive whitewashing of the vegetation over the two acres of the heronry.

One of my students, Leela Mulukutla, and I tried to revisit Metzger about a year later to explore the story further but he had died in the interim. Normandin, I believe, lives on. The demise of the Black-

crowned Night-Heron in the Capitol district has been blamed on crows (Stoner 1942), DDT (Henny *et al.* 1984; Custer *et al.* 1983; Fleming 1984), owls and hawks, hurricanes, and human settlement. We may add gunning to the list.

Several ideas emerge in this account. The first is that a colony of Black-crowned Night-Heron may translocate relatively easily as appears to be the case at hand. The next is that once a colony has been decimated so ruthlessly, there is little likelihood of its redevelopment by the few survivors. Today, the range of the Black-crowned Night-Heron in New York (Andrle and Carroll 1988) is notable for the hiatus of nesting colonies within a radius of some one hundred miles of the former Mohawk colony of Long Island. Finally, there is the tragedy of our own species expanding so relentlessly into the domains of others; would that we could live more comfortably with those whose habits are not as we prefer.

The author would greatly appreciate receiving additional information on nesting of the Black-crowned Night-Heron in the upper Hudson-Mohawk region. Confirmation of the events described is needed.

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