

NESTING BEHAVIOR BY YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERONS IN MIDDLETOWN, ORANGE COUNTY, NEW YORK

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On 15 April, 2019 I invited my eight-year-old grandson, Benjamin Depew, to come birding with me since he was on spring vacation from school. We have been doing this kind of activity a couple of times a year since he was four years old. Ben has shown rapid growth in his skills observing wildlife.

It was a typical spring day in rural Orange County near Middletown, NY, which is an agricultural and residential region that includes many acres of fields, woodland, and swamp. We started out on Prosperous Valley Rd. near Moonbeams Wildlife Sanctuary to eventually connect to Vanburenville Rd. The temperature was around 65° F, and partly sunny. April's erratic temperatures had been swinging between 30° to warm temps of 79°. Precipitation this year had been well above average with the land and waterways saturated. Since all trees were devoid of foliage it made roadside birding quite easy.

Ben was observing through his window as we traveled on Vanburenville Rd. Suddenly excited, he proclaimed that he had just seen a bird that he believed to be a Green Heron. I pulled off the road and backed up to the driveway of a home which had a small pond in the yard. Instead of seeing a Green Heron at the pond, I discovered it was a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*)! I explained to Ben that this was a "record" and rare bird for Orange County. We were both thrilled! I took photographs and reported it on the "WhatsApp" alert for other Edgar A. Mearns Bird Club members to be notified in hopes that some others would get to see this bird while it was still present. As a result, other birders arrived later on and were able to see it. At that time there was only one Yellow-crowned Night-Heron seen. This was the third occurrence of the species recorded in Orange County by Edgar A. Mearns Bird Club members, according to Kenneth McDermott.

Exactly one week later on 22 April, bird club members Scott Baldinger and Bill Fiero reported that there were two Yellow-crowned Night-Herons at the same location on Vanburenville Rd. Scott put out the notice to our Edgar Mearns Bird Club on the "WhatsApp" alert. Club member Ken McDermott also joined Scott and Bill in their observations of courtship displays, these displays indicating the presence of both a male and a female. As a side note, the sex of these herons is difficult to determine if mating behavior is not observed. (Unfortunately, I wasn't able to see these mating displays but observed the two herons roosting later in the afternoon).

I continued observing the Yellow-crowned Night-Herons a few times per week from the road until, by chance, at the end of April, I met the owner of the property. She was formerly an active birder, named Eleanor Hajas. She granted me permission to enter her property in order to safely observe the herons from a location closer to them. By this time, the herons were spending more time in the adjacent swamp than in the pond. The swamp is bordered on one side by a stone wall on Eleanor's property, ending on Vanburenville Rd. and located about 30 feet from the pond where the first heron was originally discovered. The tree leaves and swamp grasses were maturing rapidly and now the herons were able to hide more effectively than in mid-April. During foraging they would hunt prey either from tree limbs that leaned close to water, or by walking along edges of the swamp. Sometimes they would hunt prey in the pond towards the early evening.

On 18 May, two teams of birders from the Edgar A. Mearns Bird Club were able to document the sighting of the Yellow-crowned Night-Herons during our Break 100 Competition. We added this to our rare bird records in our club's Orange County data. During this month these herons seemed to establish a routine of actively foraging in early morning around 7:30 a.m. and early evening around 5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., whereas, in April, they could be seen at various times of the day.

Behavioral observations indicated that one Yellow-crowned Night-Heron was more wary than the other. On a few occasions one would be seen heading toward the pond confidently and the other lagging behind, acting more cautious. On one particular evening the cautious heron got frightened when it saw me and quickly exited to the swamp. The first heron casually followed behind but didn't appear as upset as the other. This behavior was also noticed by Eleanor Hajas, as she was watching the two herons together from her window. We both speculated on which sex was likely to be more wary!

On 18 June I witnessed the pair of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons engaged in nest-building. The tree they selected was a white oak that was leaning over the swamp about fifty yards in from Vanburenville Rd. I happened to be in the swamp a few yards from the oak tree and the herons were unaware of me this time. The limb they chose was approximately 25 to 30 feet above the water. Both herons were stripping twigs from the tree and one was placing them on the limb which would hold the nest. They made croaking-type vocalizations to each other during this activity. I was able to photograph the nest building which shows one heron with a twig in its bill. A few days later I returned to find a completed nest in the oak tree and photographed it. This nest had an irregular shape. I've estimated its size at about 15 to 18 inches long. It didn't appear to be lined with any other material and was not very deep. The photos associated with this article may be found in the color centerfold on page 364.

On 21 June, at 6:15 p.m., I observed one Yellow-crowned Night Heron coming out of the swamp to the pond in Eleanor's yard. I felt compelled to hide

behind a tree because the heron was acting suspicious when I pulled into the driveway. When it realized that I was not a threat, it continued to walk slowly around the pond. I noticed that it preferred to hunt in the shadowed water of the pond while the sun was setting. A while later, it poised itself, intently peering into the water and snapped up a very large crayfish!

After the nest was built, I did not observe any change in the birds' feeding habits or other behaviors. I checked the nest location several times and there was no evidence that it was being used. Research indicates that "Yellow-crowned Night-Herons breed once a year, from early spring to early summer." (www.biokids.umich.edu>Critter Catalog, Subject: Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*), section subtitle: "How do they reproduce?" category "Mating Systems"). According to this piece of information, mating season was likely to be over and too late for them to produce offspring.

By mid-July our weather was hot and very humid with temperatures ranging from 78° to a high of 98°. I curtailed some of my observations due to the heat and returned there 23 July. The water levels in both the pond and the swamp had receded about 12 to 14 inches in depth since the pattern of frequent rainy days had ceased. I began to think that perhaps there wasn't enough food for the herons in this location. However, in spite of receding water levels, there was still a significant amount of water for aquatic animals to survive in both the pond and swamp. I observed turtles, small fishes, frogs, and a resident muskrat in the swamp going about its daily routine. Lack of food could not have been the issue. Throughout this time period the herons did not appear in either the swamp or pond and I didn't hear their vocalizations as I had in the past months. I continued my visits every week in August and have concluded that sometime after 8 July these herons must have relocated from the Vanburenville Rd. location and perhaps had begun to migrate since breeding season was over.

During my five months of observation of the Yellow-crowned Night-Herons on Vanburenville Rd., I successfully photographed one or both of the birds fourteen times between 15 April and 8 July, 2019. I have submitted photographs on my reports to eBird. The location is listed as Swamp Location or Vanburenville Rd., Orange County, NY.

Many thanks to my grandson Benjamin Depew for his keen observance which resulted in the discovery of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons in Orange County, and to Eleanor Hajas for her support of my study, her observations, and access to her property. Finally, much appreciation goes to Scott Baldinger, William Fiero, and Kenneth McDermott for their contributions of experienced observations and record keeping included in this report.



Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, Middletown, *Orange*, 18 Jun 2019 (top) and 21 May 2019 (bottom), © Joyce Depew. See article, pp. 314-316.