

## Yellow-crowned Night-herons

By Susan Heath

Have you seen a heron flying around your neighborhood recently? If so, chances are good that it's a Yellow-crowned Night-heron. They nest high in trees and can be found in many neighborhoods this time of year. They often make a distinctive squawk when taking off or flying which is easily recognizable. They also frequent ditches along roadsides where they hunt for crawfish, one of their favored delicacies.

Yellow-crowned Night-herons are stocky with a short, thick neck and somewhat short legs. They have blocky heads with thick, short bills compared to other herons and in flight the wings are broad and rounded. They are larger than a Cattle Egret and smaller than a Great Egret or Great Blue Heron. Adults are gray with a bold face pattern including a black head with a large white cheek patch and a creamy yellow crown with head plumes during the breeding season. Immature birds are brown with fine spots on their back and streaky bellies.

They like to nest near or over water in trees such as pine and oak, sometimes as high as 60 feet off the ground. They can nest alone or in colonies with other shrub and tree nesting species. Their nest is a platform of sticks with a slight hollow in the center. The male and the female build the nest together. They prefer to strip sticks from dead trees rather than gathering them off the ground. The nest building process takes about 10 days but they may refurbish a previously used nest too.

The female lays two to six eggs and the parents take turns incubating them for about 25 days. When the chicks hatch, the adults will brood them for up to two weeks to protect them. Both adults will bring food when they exchange brooding duties. Once the chicks are two weeks old, the adults stop brooding them but will still protect them from rain and sun with their wings. It can take up 43 days before the young birds can fly, at which point they disperse to preferred feeding areas. They only lay one nest a year, so once their young are fledged the adults leave the nesting area and also move to feeding areas.

Although northern breeding Yellow-crowned Night-herons are migratory, the birds that nest along the Texas coast are likely resident and we have them year-round though not in neighborhoods like we see them in the spring and summer. They flock up into large roosts in the winter, sometimes with their cousin species, the Black-crowned Night-heron, and can be found in saltwater roosts at low tide or other areas near water with thick vegetation.

If you have a pair nesting in your yard, enjoy them while they are there. Yes, they will make a little mess, but it won't be long until the young birds fledge and you can clean your yard or driveway. In the meantime you'll have a great time watching the young birds grow!

Photo: Adult Yellow-crowned Night-Heron

Photo by Mike Williams