

## Black-crowned night heron

### *Nycticorax nycticorax*

The sun is just beginning to set in the west near a small waterfall on the Chicago River, and splashing in the water are some sturdy-looking long-legged birds. The distinctive jet black cap of feathers on their heads extends down their backs like the hat and cape of a well-dressed gentleman. This is the scene of a summer evening at River Park, where black-crowned night herons are frequently spotted. They can be found all along the North Branch. The presence of these birds should be especially dear to the hearts of Chicagoland nature lovers because they are a state endangered species.

Black-crowned night herons are the shorter, stockier cousins of great blue herons. They can reach a length of 24 to 26 inches and have a wingspan of 2 feet. The adult birds are visually striking; with bright red eyes, bright yellow legs, a jet-black head and back, white face, white torso, bluish-gray wings and a black beak. A particularly charming physical feature is the long, thin white plumes that cascade from the back of their heads. Juvenile herons look very different from the adults as they are brown, mottled with white and tan and have yellow eyes. They complete their metamorphoses into adult coloring by the time that they are three years old.

Black-crowned night herons dine on invertebrates, reptiles, amphibians and even small mammals. They spend their time in or near water and prefer to hunt in the evenings, often lounging about during the day. The birds migrate to the Southeastern United States in the winter and then come back up north to breed, though some colonies choose to stay south year round. Nests are made from twigs and sticks, constructed in ground vegetation or trees, with 3-5 light green eggs per clutch.

Black-crowned night herons have become rarer around the country due to the effects of pollution on their reproduction rates and also because of habitat loss. In addition, the birds were frequently shot and killed as game birds in the past century, being a favorite meat among farmers in the South.

Next time you feel like taking a summer stroll, wander around River Park or elsewhere on the North Branch. You just might catch a glimpse of the state endangered black-crowned night heron.

