

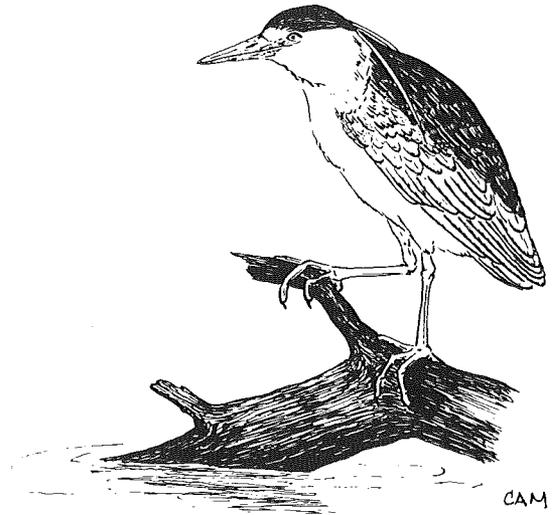
Black-crowned Night-Heron

Nycticorax nycticorax

Although the Black-crowned Night-Heron breeds throughout most of the continental U.S., its distribution in Vermont is very restricted. Seldom observed outside the Champlain Valley, it is known to breed in only two locations within that area. It was widely observed in the Champlain Lowlands, and a few additional nesting colonies may have gone undiscovered.

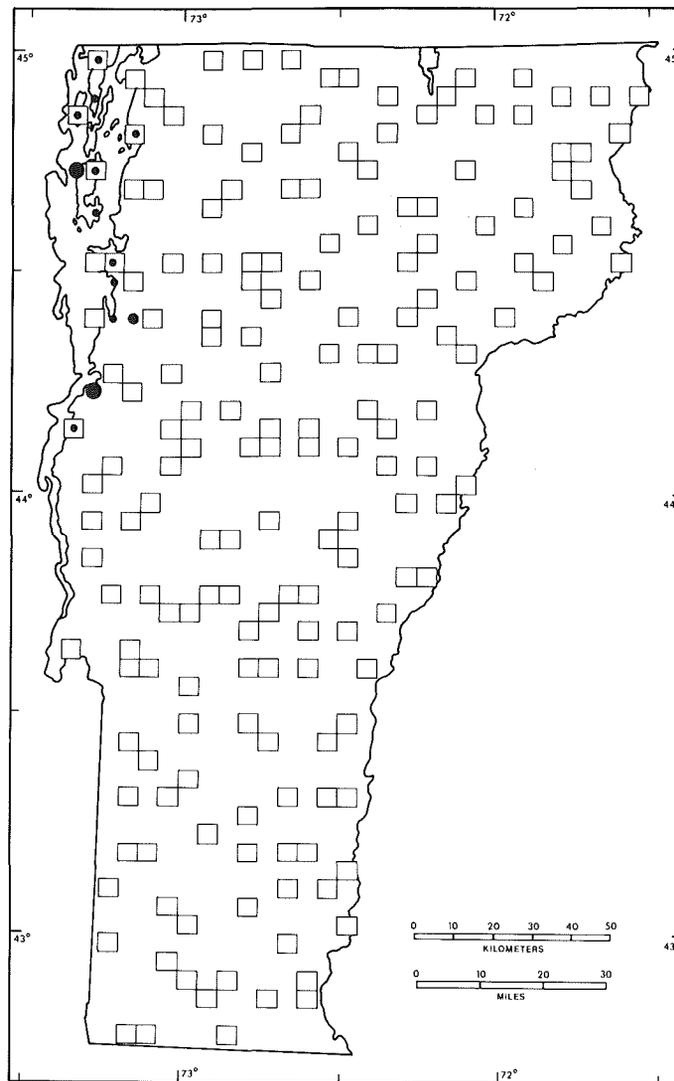
Black-crowned Night-Herons begin returning to Vermont breeding areas from their Caribbean wintering grounds during the second week of April. Both sexes arrive at nearly the same time. Most active on its feeding grounds at dusk and after dark, the night-heron is also a nocturnal migrant (Cramp and Simmons 1977). Pair formation, courtship, and copulation occur on or near the nesting grounds (Palmer 1962). Courting birds may remain active around the clock except for a midday lull. Egg laying may be initiated only 4 to 5 days after pairing (Allen and Mangles 1940).

A colony nester, the species accepts a range of nest sites. It appears to prefer islands and wooded swamps for colony sites in the Northeast, but nest placement is highly variable. Sites include dry ground, cattail marshes, low pines, snags, and tall deciduous trees. Vermont's primary nesting colony, on Young Island, nested in tall cottonwoods until 1983, when the newly established Double-crested Cormorant colony began using those trees; the night-herons moved to lower sites, nesting in quaking aspens at an elevation of about 5 m (15 ft) (S. B. Laughlin, pers. observ.). The female constructs the nest from materials the male brings. New construction may take a week or more, but old nests may also be reused. Champlain Island egg dates range from April 24 to June 1. Although from 3 to 5 or more pale bluish green eggs are laid, more than 2 or 3 young rarely fledge in a successful nest (Tremblay and Ellison 1980). Disturbances during the laying cycle are particularly disruptive to this species (Trem-



blay and Ellison 1979). Both sexes share responsibilities during the 24- to 26-day incubation period that commences with the laying of the first egg. Young are fed by regurgitation, mostly at dawn and dusk. Their slow development is typical of most herons. The young may venture onto branches surrounding the nest at 12 to 18 days, but do not try to fly until 4 weeks of age; sustained flight is attempted some days later (Tremblay and Ellison 1979). Free-flying young accompany the parents to feeding areas, where they continue to beg. In streaked brown plumage, the young are easily mistaken for American Bitterns unless the stocky bill and gray flight feathers are noted. Drab-plumaged 1-year-old birds may breed, but most nesters are older.

Although the Black-crowned Night-Heron is gregarious throughout the year (Palmer 1962), most sightings in Vermont are of solitary birds at or on their way to or from the feeding areas. Active mostly after sundown, their location call, a loud *qwok*, is frequently heard overhead along Lake Champlain. The birds may forage miles from their nesting or roosting areas. More than half the diet is fish, taken by still fishing or stalking, but a myriad of other prey are taken, including amphibians, reptiles, mollusks, crustaceans, insects, vegetative matter, small mammals, and even other marshbirds.



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 6 (3%)

Possible breeding: 6 (100% of total)

Probable breeding: 0 (0% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 0 (0% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	6	19	100
Green Mountains	0	0	0
North Central	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

The Black-crowned Night-Heron has apparently always been considered uncommon and local in Vermont. Although generally a common species in New England, it has been more abundant near the seacoast, seeming to prefer foraging in extensive marshlands rather than in streams and rivers like the more ubiquitous Great Blue and Green-backed herons. Few areas in Vermont provide the habitat features desired by Black-crowned Night-Herons. The extensive wetlands bordering Lake Champlain are excellent foraging grounds, but lakeshore homes and agricultural development may preclude nesting in many areas, as an undisturbed nest site is essential. The majority of

the birds known to nest at Lake Champlain are on islands.

Birds nesting on New York's Four Brothers Islands undoubtedly forage regularly in Vermont and may have contributed to the sightings in that vicinity. Surprisingly, no Black-crowned Night-Heron nests were reported at the heronry in the Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge. Additional fieldwork on both ends of Lake Champlain may reveal at least occasional breeding in those areas.

DOUGLAS P. KIBBE