

# Species Fact Sheets

**Order:** Pelecaniformes  
**Scientific Name:** *Nycticorax nycticorax*

**Family:** Ardeidae  
**Common Name:** Black-Crowned Night Heron

**AZA Management:**  Green  Yellow  Red  None



**NATURAL HISTORY:**

**Geographic Range:** Europe  Asia  North America  Neotropical   
 Africa  Australia  Other [Click here to enter text.](#)

**Habitat:** Forest  Desert  Grassland  Coastal   
 Riverine  Montane  Other Wetlands

**Circadian Cycle:** Diurnal  Crepuscular  Nocturnal  Other [Click here to enter text.](#)

**Cold Tolerance:** To 70° F  To 60° F  To 50° F  To 40° F   
 To 30° F  To 20° F  Other  Tolerant of wide range of temperatures, can be kept outside as long as basic shelter, heat lamps are provided

**Heat Tolerance:** To 30° F  To 50° F  To 70° F  To 90° F   
 To 110° F  Other  Tolerant of wide range of temperatures, can be kept outside as long as water and shade are provided

**Diet:** Frugivore  Carnivore  Piscivore  Insectivore   
 Nectivore  Omnivore  Folivore  Other (Add Below)

**Captive Dietary Needs:**

Commercial Bird-of-Prey diet, chopped fish, chopped hard-boiled egg

**Life Expectancy in the Wild:** Males: 20 Years Females: 20 Years

**Life Expectancy in Captivity:** Males: 20 Years Females: 20 Years

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## BREEDING INFORMATION:

**Age at Sexual Maturity:** Males: 2 Years Females: 2 Years

**Courtship Displays:** Thought to be monogamous. The male selects a nest site and calls for a female. The displays include calling, head-shaking, beak-snapping, and raising and lowering the long head plume. The legs turn pink at the time of pair formation. Copulation generally takes place on the nest.

**Nest Site Description:** Colonial nesters, may nest in association with other species. Stick platform nests (30-45 centimeters across, 20-30 centimeters high) built in trees or on islands or reedbeds on the ground. Nests may appear fragile and flimsy, but may be reused for several years.

**Clutch Size, Egg Description:** 3-8 pale blue or green eggs measuring 5-5.6 by 3.6-3.9 centimeters. One brood produced per season.

**Incubation Period:** 24-26 Days

**Fledgling Period:** 4-6 Weeks

**Parental Care:** The nest site is selected by the male and is built by the female, using sticks provided by the male. Both parents defend the nest site and take turns incubating the eggs and brooding the chicks. Chicks are fed by both parents through regurgitation

**Chick Development:** Chicks hatch with eyes open and covered with gray-white down. They leave the nest at about one month of age, a few weeks before they are able to fly. At this point, they disperse widely. Adult plumage is acquired during the third year.

## CAPTIVE HABITAT INFORMATION:

**Social Structure in the Wild:** Large Colonies (especially when nesting)

**Social Structure in Captivity:** Large Colonies

**Minimum Group Size:** Pair

**Maximum Group Size:** Large Colonies

**Compatible in Mixed Species Exhibits:** Yes **Comments:** Can be mixed with a wide variety of species, including beavers, alligators, turtles, waterfowl

**Optimal Habitat Size:** 200 Square Feet per Pair

**Management Challenges:** Black-crowned night herons are bold and assertive, and will not hesitate to rob the feed bowls of other species sharing their enclosure. Multiple feeding stations around the exhibit may reduce food-theft. The herons can be housed with other birds peacefully, but may pose a threat to the eggs or chicks of exhibit-mates; it may be necessary to remove the herons or the potential-prey until the chicks are large enough to be safely integrated into the enclosure.

## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

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The black-crowned night heron is the mostly widely-ranging heron in the world. Its distribution covers much of the globe, including most of the Americas, much of Africa, and the southern reaches of Eurasia. In Australia it is replaced by the closely related rufous night heron (*Nycticorax caledonicus*). There are four recognized subspecies – the nominate, found in the Old World, *N. n. hoactii* (North, Central, and northern South America), *N. n. obscura* (southern South America), and *N. n. falklandicus* (Falkland Islands). Birds in the northernmost populations migrate south with the winter; in the warmer parts of the range, the species is resident year round.

Black-crowned night herons are approximately 58-66 centimeters long with a wingspan of 115-118 centimeters, and weigh 720-1020 grams. Males tend to be slightly larger than females, but otherwise the sexes look alike. The plumage is white with gray wings, black bills, yellow legs, and reddish eyes. The crown of the head and the back are black. The top of the head has long white plumes (up to 25 centimeters long during the breeding season), used in breeding displays. Juveniles are dull-brown with pale spots, their white undersides are streaked with brown, and their bills are yellow-black. Compared to other herons, black-crowns are relatively stocky, which is especially emphasized by their slouching posture when at rest.

The genus name *Nycticorax* means “Night Raven”, reflecting both the nocturnal lifestyle of the herons and their harsh calls. The herons usually forage at night, alone, although recently fledged juveniles tend to band together until they learn to fly. Prey includes fish, crustaceans, reptiles, amphibians, insects, and small mammals, as well as some plant matter. Prey is found by sight and then seized with the bill, though bill-vibrating (opening and closing the beak rapidly in the water) may also attract prey. During the breeding season, herons adjust to the greater demand for food by hunting during the day as well.

Black-crowned night herons are common over much of their range and are listed as “Least Concern” by the IUCN. The species may be declining in some areas due to habitat loss and pollution, including bioaccumulation of toxins in the environment. Historically, there was some persecution of colonies near fisheries, as the herons were deemed competitors and pests. They are fairly tolerant of human disturbances, however, and can be found even in disturbed habitat. An example of this can be seen in Washington, DC, where large numbers of black-crowned night herons come every year to raise their chicks on the grounds of the Smithsonian National Zoological Park.

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