



## Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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## Green Heron *Butorides virescens*

State Status: None  
Federal Status: None



Photo by Bill Byrne, MassWildlife

**Description:** The Green Heron is a relatively small wading bird with a moderately long straight bill. It has a wingspan of 26” and can reach a height of 18”, but often retracts its neck making it appear shorter. Adults have a dark green to black crown that can appear slightly crested. The neck is dark rufous in color, blending into a gray belly. The back and wings are dark green-black and glossy, while the legs are bright orange. Adult females are generally slightly duller in color than males. Juveniles have a streaked neck of rusty brown and cream, with a dark gray/black crown and yellowish legs. In flight, the wings of juveniles show brown with lines of buff spots. The most common call of the Green Heron is often given as it takes flight when alarmed and is described as an explosive, sharp SKEEW, SKOW, or SKEOW. This call is also given during flight.

**Similar Species in Massachusetts:** The juvenile Green Heron may superficially resemble the juvenile Black-crowned Night-Heron and American Bittern, both of which have streaked necks and similar overall shape. However, both are considerably taller (Night-Heron 25”, Bittern 28”). In addition, the coloration of the back and head of the bittern is a warmer brown that is not as dark as that of the Green Heron and the backs of juvenile night-herons are gray and the head is streaked.

Green Herons may also be confused with the Least Bittern, an endangered species in Massachusetts. It is particularly difficult to distinguish between these two species in flight or in low light conditions. In flight, the Least

Bittern’s upper wings show a distinct pattern of light buff coverts and black remiges (gray in juvenile plumage), while the adult Green Heron’s wings are darker overall. Juvenile Green Heron wings also appear darker, but have a line of white speckles between the dark remiges and the rusty coverts. Other differences are best noted under good light conditions: 1) Bill color -the upper bill of the Green Heron is dark gray to black, while the Least Bittern’s bill is yellow to light brown. 2) Neck and throat plumage -In all plumages, the Green Heron’s neck and throat shows darker rufous or rust compared to the lighter tan streaking of the Least Bittern. Also, the Least Bittern’s legs are never orange, and the Least Bittern is also about five inches shorter than the Green Heron.

**Range:** Green Herons breed throughout eastern North America, east of the Central

Plains and as far north as Southeast Canada and south along the Gulf Coast into northern South America. Breeding Green Herons are also found along the Pacific coast, south from southwest Canada. Most individuals from eastern North America migrate south to Florida and the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean islands, Mexico, and throughout Central America into northern South America. Green Herons have been observed breeding in all counties within Massachusetts.

**Habitat in Massachusetts:** Green Herons generally occupy thickets and other dense vegetation associated with wetlands, streams, rivers, lakes and ponds. More specifically, they are known to feed in swamps, riparian forests, shoreline habitat, and salt marshes. They typically nest in swamps and forests associated with wetlands, and may even nest in orchards if they are close to water.

**Lifecycle/Behavior:** In New England and New York, breeding occurs from late April to late June. Nests are built in a variety of habitats, including both wetlands and uplands that offer thick cover (e.g. branches) that serve to protect the nest. Nests are often built over water, and nest height ranges from near ground level to up to 20 meters in trees. Typically one clutch of 3-5 eggs is laid. Eggs are pale green to blue when freshly laid, and become duller and chalkier over time. Incubation usually begins when the second egg is laid, and lasts for 19 to 21 days after last egg. Hatchlings are semialtricial, emerging from the egg with open eyes and are capable of some movement. Green Herons primarily consume small fish, but also feed on aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates. There is also some evidence of tool use in this species, in the form of placing objects or insects as bait on the water's surface.

However, Green Heron populations appear to be stable in Massachusetts. The Breeding Bird Atlas, which collects data state-wide, mapped 417 blocks

with breeding evidence in Massachusetts in its first survey, and the current second survey shows 420 blocks with breeding evidence. In contrast, the Breeding Bird Survey data, collected along established transects, indicate a significant decline in observations of this species in Massachusetts from 1966 to 2007. A review of the literature revealed very few recent studies of Green Heron.

**Management Recommendations:** Because this species is not considered rare anywhere in its range, no management or conservation efforts have focused on Green Herons. However, the conservation and management of wetlands and riparian zones, in general, would clearly benefit this species. Systematic surveys for this species could provide important information on population trends in this species here in Massachusetts.

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