



**Natural Heritage
& Endangered Species
Program**

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

**Black-crowned Night-Heron
*Nycticorax nycticorax***

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: A stocky, thick-billed, short-legged heron, Black-crowned Night-Herons ranged from 23 to 28 inches in length. When seen during the day, these herons are usually inactive, with a hunched posture. At dusk, Black-crowned Night-Herons fly to their feeding areas. Breeding birds have a blackish back and black cap, contrasting with light underparts, and two white head plumes. The voice is a flat *quok!*, most often heard at dusk.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: Black-crowned Night-Herons are widely distributed along the Massachusetts coast; 1,420 pairs were reported from 19 nesting colonies in 1994-95. Post-breeding assemblages of roosting or feeding birds sometimes occur in summer or early fall at locations widely separated from the nesting colonies. This species formerly nested in the Connecticut River Valley into the 1930s, but is now uncommon at locations more than 20 miles from the coast. Black-crowned Night-Herons have declined substantially as a breeding species in Massachusetts since the late 19th century.

HABITAT DESCRIPTION: Habitats of Black-crowned Night-Herons in Massachusetts include salt marshes and tidal flats, fresh and brackish marshes, ponds, and creeks. Night-Herons are primarily nocturnal and crepuscular foragers on small fish, amphibians, crabs and other crustaceans, and insects. Occasionally, they feed on the eggs and young of gulls and terns. These herons nest colonially in trees or shrubs, often in mixed-species assemblages with other herons. Often the vegetation used for nesting is eventually killed by years of accumulating excrement, forcing the herons to seek another colony site.

THREATS: Threats to this species include human disturbance at nesting colonies; destruction of woody vegetation used for nesting; and coastal development that degrades or destroys nesting, roosting or feeding habitat. Pesticides such as DDT are believed to have impaired reproductive success in the past.

REFERENCES:

- Davis, W. E., Jr. 1993. Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 74 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, PA, and The American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D. C.
- Petersen, W.R., and W.R. Meservey. 2003. *Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas*. Massachusetts Audubon Society and University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Massachusetts.
- Veit, R., and W.R. Petersen. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*. Massachusetts Audubon Society, Lincoln, Massachusetts.

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A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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