



Non-breeding



Breeding

Photos and Text by Heidi Meier
meierdvm@hotmail.com
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Spring Bird Notes

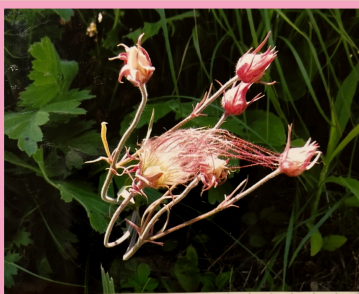
Nycticorax nycticorax (Black-crowned Night Heron)

ORDER: Pelecaniformes (6 Families)

FAMILY: Ardeidae (64 Species)

Hérons and sparrows and swallows, Oh My!

What an absolutely gorgeous sunny day to be out exploring the lakefront after several gray, cold, windy days! There were Wood (*Aix sponsa*) and Ruddy (*Oxyura jamaicensis*) ducks, Tree (*Tachycineta bicolor*) and Barn (*Hirundo rustica*) swallows, Savannah (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) and Swamp (*Melospiza georgiana*) sparrows, and Black-crowned Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*). I even got to watch three Caspian Terns (*Hydroprogne caspia*) chase one another back and forth from the lake to the Juneau Park Lagoon all while raucously calling KE-OUW. It was like watching a fight scene from Top Gun. I usually see terns focused on foraging during their brief stop here before migrating to the extreme north, so it was nice to see them “playing”. Gulls or rookeries or groups of Double Crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) were flying by the dozens high overhead. Many of these dark, long, symmetrical-shaped diving birds are migrating and starting to form colonies to stay here during the summer.

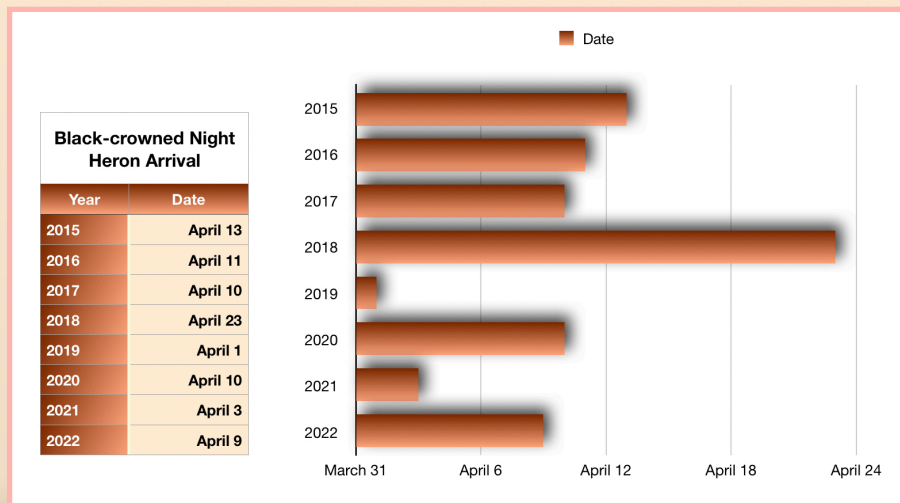


Prairie Smoke

The grass is really starting to look lush and green. The prairie grasses at Lakeshore State Park are still very wet from all the recent precipitation. So, no wolf spiders (*Pardosa*) were seen today. However, I did see nodding, native Prairie-Smoke (*Geum triflorum*), also known as Old-Man's-Whiskers starting to bloom. The pale pink, long, thread-like seedheads of this prairie flower are beautiful to see in early spring.



The real excitement was seeing Black-crowned Night Herons perched motionless in the tall trees along the eastern bank of the Juneau Park Lagoon. I have been recording the dates when I first see them arrive in April at this same location for several years. Additionally, I keep track of how



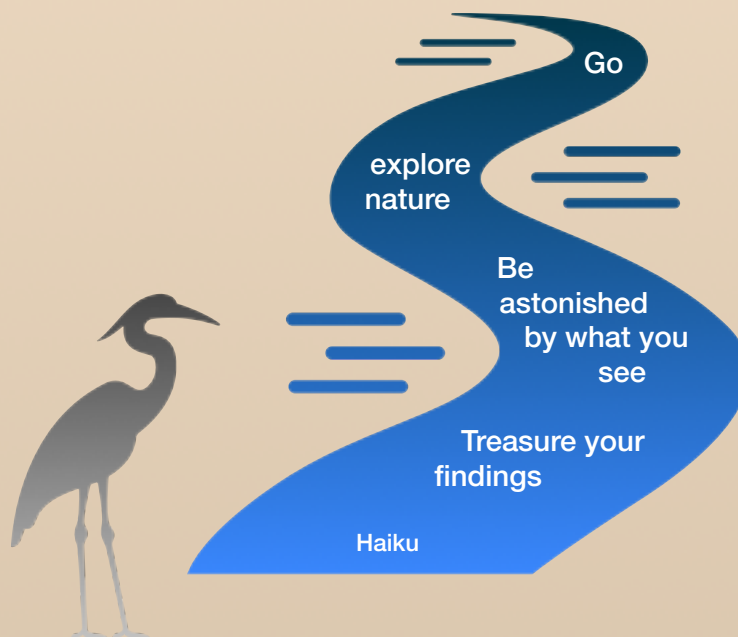
many are in these trees before they disperse to their breeding sites in the other surrounding parks with ponds. Last year I counted **22** which is the highest number I've seen. Hopefully, I will be able to see even more this year.

There are fascinating facts on the Black-crowned Night Heron. Here are some of my favorites.

- The name *nycticorax* originates from Greek meaning *nuktos* for “night” and *korax* for “raven”. This name describes the nocturnal activity and the plastic SQUAWK call like the raven.
- This heron has specialized ornate feathers that are used exclusively for breeding. They are long, slender, white, lanceolate *plume* feathers found on the back of the head. These feathers are important for mate selection during the courtship display. Preferable males will have longer and multiple plumes compared to other males and females.
- The male heron attempts to attract a mate using the *twig ceremony*, *snap-hiss ceremony* and the *overture and display* behaviors.
 - The *twig ceremony* is a symbol of nest making and occurs when the male takes a stick used around the nest, and snaps it with his beak while moving his head up and down.
 - The *snap-hiss ceremony* occurs when the male stands alone near the nest and begins to perform by taking a few steps, then arching his back and lowering his beak to his feet and making a snapping sound followed by a long hiss all while he raises one foot. He will repeat this process, raising the same or opposite foot for eight to ten performances that may each last up to 2 minutes.
 - The *overture and display* routine will occur if a breeding female is attracted to one or both of these behaviors. The male will then raise feathers on the crown, neck, upper back, and the long plume feathers from the head. He will bow, contract his pupils, bulge out his red eyes, and open his mouth. The female will positively respond with a less exaggerated display and a higher voice.

- The *twig ceremony* of the male continues and develops into building the nest. The male will bring twigs and pass them to the female which helps to secure the pair bond.
- Black-crowned Night Herons undergo a plumage color change during the breeding season which causes the crown to become more blueish-gray instead of black. Herons have specialized downy feathers that grow continuously and disintegrate at the tips making a fine powder. This powder is made up of tiny keratin particles which have an oily consistency that can adhere to feathers. As the heron rubs or nibbles on these feathers, the powdery substance is moved from the bill to other feathers over the whole body. More preening is performed during breeding season, thus more powder is applied to the feathers making them look muted in color. Perhaps the “cosmetic” plumage color change has a role in mate selection; this is being considered by scientists.
- Birds in the *Ardeidae* family are entirely carnivorous. Fortunately, the Black-crowned Night Heron has a thick bill for grasping and spearing fish. But, this heron, in particular, has been known to use bait to capture food. This bait-capture technique demonstrates intelligence. For example, one scientist observed a heron flying over a pond to retrieve a piece of bread. The heron returned to its fishing location and continued to soak the bread in the water. Then, patiently waited until a fish surfaced to eat the bread and the heron caught and consumed the fish.

Be sure to look for the Black-crowned Night Heron this spring and summer and think about the amazing survival qualities of this short, stocky, patient, colorful bird!



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