

Photo Quiz

by
Bob Curry



The bird in the photo is clearly a long-legged wader, a member of the heron family (Ardeidae) possessing the requisite long legs, comparatively slim build and chisel-shaped bill. Several herons are dark-plumaged, but only immature night-herons have a white-spotted dark plumage. American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*) is dark but the neck is streaked, not spotted, the dorsal surface is essentially plain and unmarked, and the bill is much more dagger-like. Juvenile Green Heron (*Butorides striatus*) is dark with some spotting on the upper wing coverts but, again, is streaked on the neck and breast, has a much more rapier-like bill, and would not appear nearly as long-legged as this bird.

The identification problem becomes, then, which night-heron? The bird is a juvenile, as older birds would be plain-backed with the beginning of the adult head pattern. Generally, in bird identification one should pay close attention to shape and proportions. In this case, the bird can clearly be identified using these features alone. Earlier guides and notes overemphasized plumage differences, and I know of incidents in which observers struggled with the shape, size and extent of spotting in an attempt to find the rare (in Ontario) Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*), and indeed misidentified juvenile Black-crowned (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), overlooking significant and diagnostic structural differences.

Our bird is a **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron**. Black-crowned Night-Heron is a relatively chunky heron with a thick, short neck. The photo bird is quite slender with a thin, but not serpentine, neck and long legs. Atop the slender neck is an oddly large

“blocky” head, and a bill which is very thick at the base (almost as deep as the head itself). In Black-crowned, the head does not seem disproportionately large, and the bill is not so deep at the base. The bill tapers only slightly and forms a rounded or blunt tip, whereas Black-crowned tapers to a point. Virtually every illustration I’ve seen of Yellow-crowned makes the bill tip too pointed. In body proportions and particularly in leg length, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron is more akin to the other herons than Black-crowned. Especially the tibia, above the “knee-joint”, but also the tarsi below the joints are longer. This is the cause of the feet and a section of legs extending beyond the tail in flight, but the different proportions are also evident to the trained eye on a standing night-heron.

There are, nonetheless, differences in the size, shape and extent of white spotting. Black-crowned has more extensive, elongated, tear-shaped white spots or blotches, particularly on the upper wing coverts but also on the back. The spots on Yellow-crowned are smaller, more rounded and squared-off on the bottom. The net effect is that Black-crowned is more blotched, and Yellow-crowned is more spotted. However, at the risk of redundancy, do not rely too heavily on spotting to distinguish these two.

Differences in soft parts colour in the two species are interesting, especially in this photo. There is a tendency for juvenile Yellow-crowned to have brighter yellow legs, but this is a tendency only; furthermore, the legs are often obscured by mud. Any such difference would, of course, not show in a black and white photo. The bill of Black-crowned is mostly greenish-yellow with a dark tip, culmen ridge and cutting edge. On a black and white

photo, this two-toned pattern would be clearly visible. Yellow-crowned has an almost entirely black bill, with just a very restricted light area at the base of the lower mandible. Why then does the bird in the photo appear to have a uniformly light bill with perhaps some duskiess on the lower mandible? I attribute this to an artifact of the photo and light conditions. The uniformity of shade still eliminates Black-crowned. I'm reminded of a colour print of two adult Common Loons (*Gavia immer*) photographed in Algonquin Park some years ago and submitted to the Ontario

Bird Records Committee. In the field, apparently, and in the photo, these birds had what appeared to be gleaming white bills. In all regards these birds were Common Loons. The point is that, particularly in photos, one needs to be wary of colours and shapes. Look at size, shape, and proportions first and you'll determine that this is a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, notwithstanding the apparent light bill.

This juvenal Yellow-crowned Night-Heron was photographed by Jim Flynn at Marentette Beach, Essex County, on 11 October 1994.

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