

# THE PRACTICED EYE

## Immature night-herons

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**photographs from VIREO**

In late summer a birdwatcher's thoughts often turn toward waterbirds. The best season for gulls and ducks is still many months away, of course; but now is the time for the peak passage of shorebirds on their way south, and a good time to look for stray southern waterbirds—pelicans, herons, egrets, ibises, and others—that may have wandered north.

The Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) is among our most widespread herons in North America (and elsewhere in the world). By contrast, the Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax violaceus*) has more tropical tendencies. It outnumbers the Black-crowned in parts of the south-



*Adult Black-crowned Night-Heron. Photo: Dan Roby/VIREO (r05/2/108)*

*Immature Black-crowned Night-Heron. Photo: J.R. Woodward/VIREO (w04/7/001)*



*Immature Black-crowned Night-Heron. Photo: Olin S. Pettingill, Jr./VIREO (p03/10/186)*

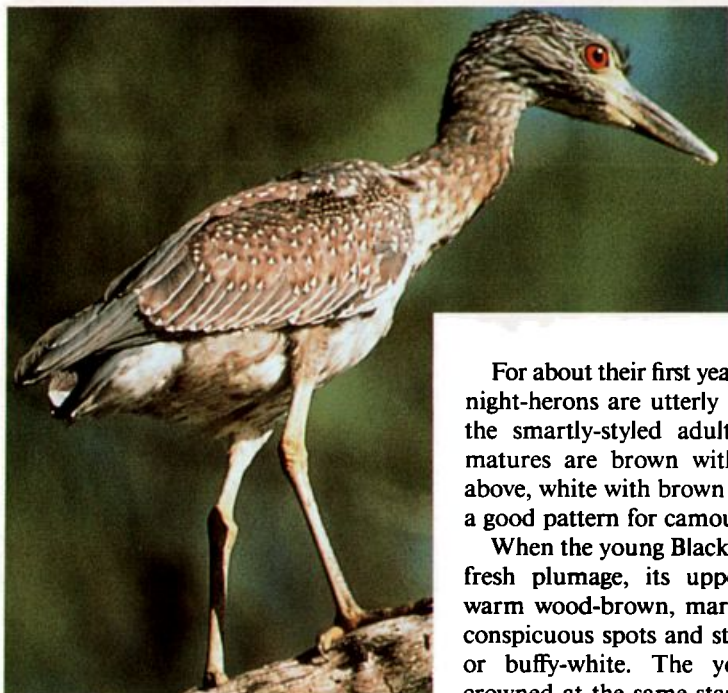


*Immature Black-crowned Night-Heron*  
 Photo: Dale and Marian Zimmerman/VIREO (z01/9/015)

*Adult Yellow-crowned Night-Heron.* Photo  
 Crawford H. Greenewalt/VIREO (g02/10/013)



*Immature Yellow-crowned Night-Heron.*  
 Photo: F.K. Schleicher/VIREO (s19/5/001)



eastern states, becomes less common farther north, and is only a casual visitor in the West. Adults of these two species are so different that they cannot be confused, but immatures are strikingly similar; and since wandering Yellow-crowneds could, theoretically, turn up almost anywhere, a review of their field marks may be useful even for birders away from the Southeast.

For about their first year of life, young night-herons are utterly different from the smartly-styled adults. These immatures are brown with white spots above, white with brown streaks below, a good pattern for camouflage.

When the young Black-crowned is in fresh plumage, its upperparts are a warm wood-brown, marked with very conspicuous spots and stripes of white or buffy-white. The young Yellow-crowned at the same stage of plumage looks darker above, a dull chocolate-brown or grayish-brown. The pale marks on its upperparts are smaller and rounder, dull off-white spots concentrated at the tips of the feathers on the wing-coverts and scapulars. On the youngest night-herons, the crown usually looks darker on Yellow-crowned than on Black-crowned, the reverse of the comparison in adults. The pattern of the underparts is variable in both

species, but young Yellow-crowneds often show darker and more distinct striping on the face and neck.

If these young night-herons in their first season represented the only immature plumages possible, then the overall color and the pattern of spotting on the upperparts would always be enough to separate the species. But it takes these birds more than two years to attain full adult plumage. On the way to adulthood, they go through stages in which both species look darker and more uniform, so that the color patterns of fresh juveniles are no longer relevant. Fortunately, there are also structural points that help to separate the species at all ages.

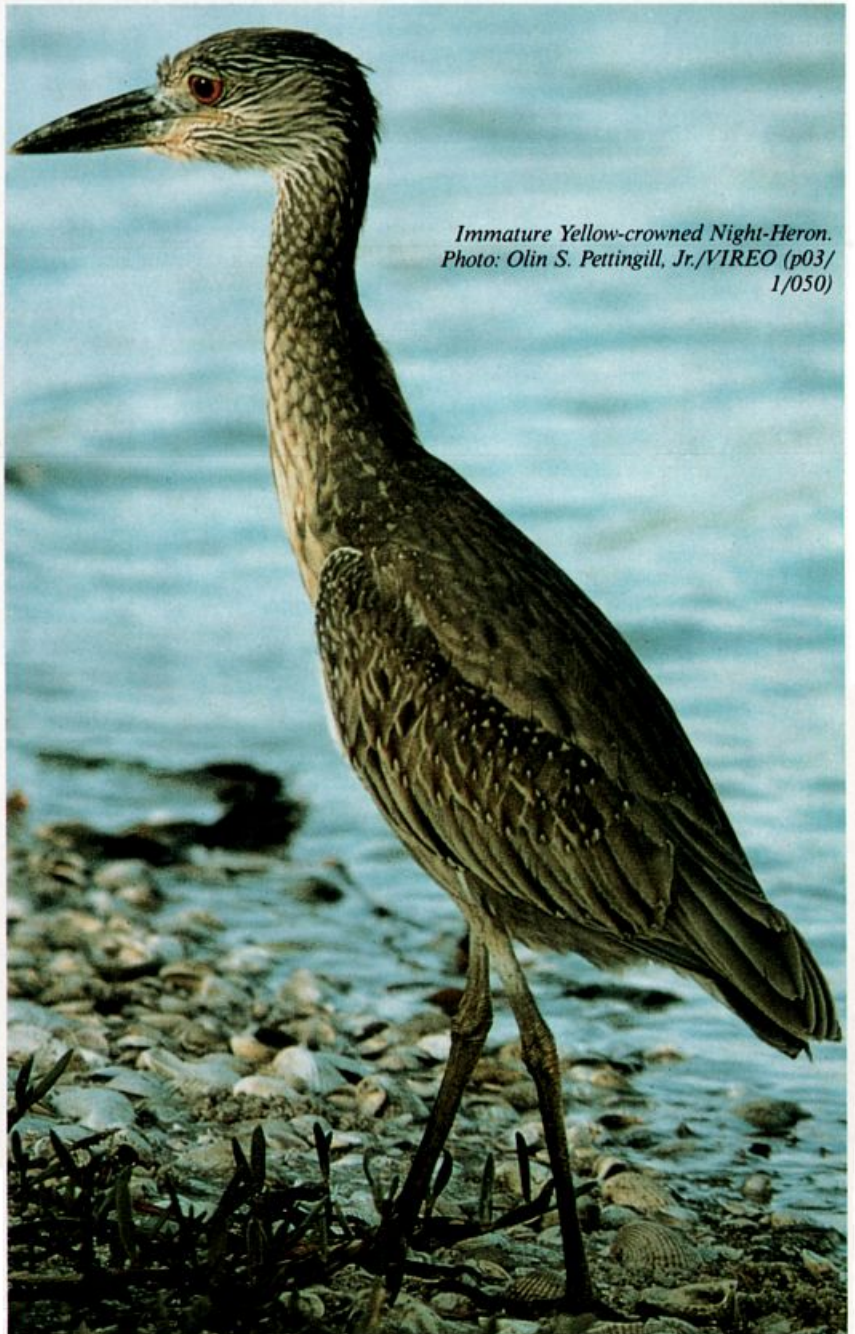
The bill is worth a close look. It is consistently heavier in Yellow-crowned, possibly an aid to crushing crabs, a staple in this bird's diet. Even the color of the bill is helpful: although this is not totally reliable, the bill is usually all-black in the Yellow-crowned, and tends

*Immature Yellow-crowned  
Night-Heron. Photo: Craw-  
ford H. Greenewalt/VIREO  
(g02/26/089)*



momentary posture. But the Yellow-crowned often looks slimmer and more elongated than the Black-crowned, with a longer and thinner neck. This effect is accentuated by its longer legs. For observers mystified by a young night-heron, one recourse is to flush the bird and look for the length of the legs and feet in flight: in Black-crowned, only the toes extend beyond the tail, while in Yellow-crowned the feet are entirely beyond the tail with a bit of the legs showing as well. But with practice, it is also possible to make an accurate judgment of the different leg lengths of the two species when they are standing alone.

*Immature Yellow-crowned Night-Heron.  
Photo: Olin S. Pettingill, Jr./VIREO (p03/  
1/050)*



to be extensively pale at the base in the immature Black-crowned.

Overall shape of the bird is a tricky thing to judge, because any heron can look squat or sleek, depending on its