

SPECIES OF THE MONTH**YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT HERON****AUGUST 2025**

Yellow-crowned Night Heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*), first reported in Arizona in 1968, is a casual visitor to the state, reported in Cochise, Gila, Maricopa, Pima, Pinal, Yavapai, and Yuma counties. A Cochise County report 31 May to 19 June 2025 and a Yavapai County report 1 July 2025, if accepted by the Arizona Bird Committee, will be the seventh and eighth records.

The first report of Yellow-crowned Night Heron in Arizona was an adult in Tucson (Pima) in 1968. The second state record was an immature bird at Imperial Dam (Yuma) in 1973. Eleven years later the third report was an adult at the lower San Pedro River near Dudleyville (Pinal). In 2005, the fourth state record was an immature among numerous Black-crowned Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) at Painted Rock Dam (Maricopa).

Almost another 20 years passed until the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth reports followed in succession. Another immature was reported at Seneca Lake Recreation Area (Gila) in 2022. An immature at Gilbert Water Ranch (Maricopa) stayed almost 3 months in fall 2023/winter 2024. In 2025, adults were at Hereford Bridge/San Pedro River (Cochise) and Camp Verde (Yavapai). In total, the 8 reports consisted of 4 immatures and 4 adults.

The adult plumage is distinctive, with little confusion with adult Black-crowned Night Heron, a common species in the state. Distinguishing juvenile Yellow-crowned Night Heron from juvenile Black-crowned Night Heron is more challenging. Juvenile Yellow-crowned Night Herons have tiny white spots on the wing coverts, appearing as small, neat triangles, rather than the larger, messier white spots of the Black-crowned Night Heron. The Yellow-crowned Night Heron juvenile has a dark bill rather than a mostly yellow bill, and the breast is overall grayer and smudgy instead of having broad streaks. There are subtle differences as well, with the Yellow-crowned Night Heron looking more gangly and less hunchbacked than the juvenile Black-crowned Night Heron.

The reports of adults and one immature Yellow-crowned Night Heron occurred from mid-April to early July. In contrast, reports of juveniles were from mid-August to early February.

Two subspecies are named in North America. The one that occurs in Arizona is the Bancroft's Yellow-crowned Night Heron (*N. v. bancrofti*), which is found in Baja California and the Pacific coast from Mexico south to El Salvador. The Eastern Yellow-crowned Night Heron (*N. v. violacea*) nests in eastern United States south to eastern Costa Rica. The 2 subspecies have differences in bill size and plumage tone but are not considered identifiable in the field.

Recently the *bancrofti* subspecies of Yellow-crowned Night Heron has expanded its range to southern California, with nesting confirmed. The eastern subspecies wanders westward along the Rio Grande River, regularly reaching El Paso. These range expansions may account for the recent increase in Arizona reports, with 4 of the 8 state records occurring in the past 4 years.



Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Cochise County, 14 June 2025. Photo by Brian C. Johnson