

Heron Colony Observation Protocols:



Welcome!

Ladies and Gentleman let me start by thanking you all for your participation in heron research; your contributions are absolutely essential to our ability to monitor heron populations and distributions in the state. You may know about colonies that we don't and your contributions improve our understanding of heron population health. We are concerned with the location and populations of Great Blue Herons, Black-Crowned Night-Herons, and Yellow-Crowned Night-Herons as the latter two species are endangered in Pennsylvania and the Great Blue Herons are valuable indicators of habitat quality.

Thanks again and happy birding.

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Where to return data to?

You can email the completed data sheets to herondata@gmail.com if you can't find an answer for a space on the data sheets it is ok to leave it blank. We would love to have any data we can get. If you have any questions you can send an email and we'll get back to you as soon as possible.

How far should I be from the colony?

One of our greatest concerns is minimizing human disturbance at the colony. We do this to limit the stress on the birds and to reduce the chances of predation on chicks. With this in mind we are asking that the colonies be observed from as far away as possible, preferably more than 100 yards. The information we are looking for can be obtained from this range and beyond with binoculars. Great Blue Herons flush from greater distances than night-herons do.

Both night-heron species have a habit of nesting in towns and near areas of heavy human activity. When this happens it is perfectly acceptable to get closer to the colony, the birds will tell you when you are too close. If the birds begin to act as if you're disturbing them move farther away!

Signs that the birds are disturbed:

- Alarmed squawks coming from the colony. These are sharper than the general chatter.
- Adults standing up over nests and moving away from the nests
- Adults flushing from the colony

If this happens do not get closer as the next responses are detrimental to chick survival

- Chicks moving out of nests
- Chicks regurgitating their stomach contents, these burn and cost the chicks a meal
- Chicks fighting, occasionally resulting in falling from the nest and tree all together

All of these are avoidable and very dangerous to the chicks.

When Should I be looking for colonies?

You can start now and observations should be finished by the end of May, sooner is better as this will be much more difficult once the leaves come out. If you find a new colony after May please still send it in!

What am I looking for?

All the heron species we are looking for make stick nests. Many of these are flimsy looking. Active nests will usually be stained white with guano and will be near and often over water. Great Blue Heron nests are typically in standing dead timber and are found in a wetland that is often sheltered by higher geographic features. Nests tend to look like this example from the Poconos.



Both species of night-herons are much more tolerant of human activities and can often be found in and around public areas such as the colonies in York and Wade Island in Harrisburg. These birds tend to nest in live trees and are often, but not always lower in the canopy than Great Blue Herons. These nests can often be located by the dead vegetation underneath them due to guano and very noisy chicks in the nest. Night-heron nests are smaller and appear very flimsy, active nests will be stained white due to guano as seen in this picture from Wade Island.



Black-crown Night-heron chicks in the nest, and a picture of the area under a night-heron nest

What Heron Activities should I note?

Feel free to note anything you see adult birds doing near the colony area, and chicks doing in the colony. Things like standing near or over nests, sitting on the nest (look closely as they really get down in there), feeding chicks, chicks flapping and learning to fly, and anything else you find interesting. This information will help us get an idea for how far along the chicks are without having to disturb the nests to observe them directly.

What Should I Include for Description of Habitat?

In this section what we would like is a general description of the habitat the colony is located in:

- The general area where the colony is located. This can be as simple as in a swamp with dead timber, on an island, in the pine trees around a park, or in a sycamore tree in over a driveway. You will have already provided location in the location sections so here all we need is habitat.
- Example: Colony is located in a swamp with standing dead timber. The swamp is surrounded by higher ground covered in hemlocks and hard woods.

What should I Include for Description of Colony?

This section should include general information about the colony. Things like the shape of the colony, or if the colony is split into different areas of the available habitat should be included in this section.

- Example: The colony is split into three groupings throughout the same patch of dead timber. The first nest has been abandoned and utilized by red-tailed hawks. The first two active nests are approximately 100 yards further to the East and two more nests are located another 100 yards beyond those near the furthest end of the swamp.

What should I include in the Threats to the colony section?

The important things to include here are things that directly threaten the colony. Please note things like:

- Obvious signs of predators
- Human caused risks such as human activities near the colony
- Anything else you think should be noted as a danger to the colony

Again Thank You All for Your Contributions to Heron Research!

If there are any questions please feel free to contact us at herondata@gmail.com if there is a colony you would like us to look at directly please email and we can set up a visit.