

# A Peculiar Endangered Bird



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**Y**ELLOW-CROWNED night-herons might be the state's most tolerant endangered species. A bird of more serene, swampy settings in the Deep South, yellow-crowns—or at least a loose colony of them—are nesting peacefully above the hustle and bustle of Harrisburg. It's an odd arrangement at first glance. But if you've followed these birds, it seems like a pretty decent arrangement from the birds' perspective.

Yellow-crowns don't have much history as nesters in Pennsylvania. Early 20th century ornithologists such as B.H. Warren and George Sutton didn't mention them in their books on Pennsylvania birds. W.E. Clyde Todd did in his 1940 *Birds of Western Pennsylvania*, but he was referring to a yellow-crown nesting in Ohio in 1928. There are several references to yellow-crowns in Pennsylvania in the early 1890s. After that, it's believed

their range retreated south. Shortly after World War II, a yellow-crown nest was reported near Ambler in Montgomery County, and then in the '50s near Camp Hill, Cumberland County. Closer to Harrisburg, the birds nested on a Susquehanna River island offshore from the Governor's Mansion in the late 1980s and along Cumberland County's Conodoguinet Creek in the late 1990s and first decade of this century. Today, they're still hanging out in Pennsylvania. But they remain one of our rarest breeding birds, according to *Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in Pennsylvania*, published in 2012.

Terry L. Master reported in his 2012 yellow-crown account of the second breeding bird atlas that these birds were involved in a northward range expansion that included Pennsylvania from their roots in southern states from about 1925 through the 1960s. Today, the birds are being seen in Maine and

nesting may extend as far north as Connecticut.

Pennsylvania today has one known nesting colony, albeit a somewhat scattered one. And the yellow-crowns are relative newcomers the Green St. section of Harrisburg, maybe four-year residents. They surfaced in this area shortly before a nesting colony of a half dozen or so pairs in the Bellevue area of Harrisburg dried up after several years. It seems likely at least some drifted from one place to the other.

The new colony contained 12 nests in 2013, topping the previous record of 10 nests in 1987. Their fit in the sycamore branches above the city's streets near the Susquehanna River's east shore seems to be a good one. The colony is growing annually and most nests fledged two to three young yellow-crowns last summer, which indicates a sweet bird nursery set-up. It doesn't always work out that way, though.

In the two years before the yellow-crowns left suburban Bellevue Park, the colony was beset with predator problems. They had become a noticeable seasonal food source to the mammalian and avian predators that hunted the community's parks, woodlots and backyards. There were egg raiders—such as crows and raccoons—pilfering nests. Young also were being taken. In one instance, a red fox ran right past agency videographer Hal Korber and right for a yellow-crown he was filming hunting earthworms. The heron barely got airborne. In another, a young yellow-crown was rescued by Margaret Purdy when it fluttered onto her roof—making a noise to which she responded—and then into her driveway during a nest attack.

Leaving Bellevue, despite its compassionate homeowners—they loved the birds—seemed a colossal necessity. At its height, the Bellevue colony was eight nests or so strong. It broke up after the 2011 nesting season. During their stay, the yellow-crowns, long known as crustacean connoisseurs, had become proficient wormers in Bellevue's parks and yards. When the mowers came through on their weekly schedule, the yellow-crowns followed. That isn't to say the birds didn't hunt crayfish, too. The crawdad parts in the bleach- and pink-colored waste piles under nests confirmed crayfish were still on the menu. Interestingly, the shortest route to the Susquehanna from Bellevue was right over one the city's busiest sectors. The birds seemed indifferent to the commotion.

In their latest colony, closer to the river, these squawking squatters have found a way to fit in. Some passersby know of the birds, or at least not to park under their nests. Others don't have a clue, but are eager to learn. Few motorists who park under a yellow-crown nest make the mistake twice. But if you're desperate for a parking space close to home, sometimes you just have to compromise, one resident said.

Residents have been accommodating when possible. They don't park under nests. They've learned to live with the nestling-created waste spots—and emanating odors—on streets. They also watch out for fledglings. Many are proud to be sharing their street with the yellow-crowns and hope the birds don't leave, like they did in Bellevue.

If you spend a few minutes watching the birds, you might think they seem unconcerned about activities on the street and sidewalks below them. A

booming bass from a passing car may not even draw a look, nor might a man leaving for work. But a calling crow, a walking dog, or anyone lingering under a nest tree usually brings the stink-eye. Not agitation. Nor flight. Just that look, which dissipates quickly if no threat is perceived.

The new location is a couple blocks east of the river and birds depart mostly in its direction. There's little doubt its substantial crawfish buffet helps keep yellow-crowns around. But there seems to be something to that "safety in cities" approach these birds are using to nest and rear their young. If there are fewer predators to worry about when herons nest closer to people, it's reasonable to conclude birds nesting in sycamores between buildings, in branches over city streets, have reduced threats to their nests and young. It isn't exactly swamp country, and the nightlife surely is different, but the yellow-crowns seem to be just fine with Harrisburg.

By July, most nestlings have fledged. They still wait around in the colony trees for food brought by parents—usually dropped in the nest and followed by a free-for-all frenzy until gone—and to groom and sleep. But they also take short flights, often in a circular pattern, using roofs and branches to full advantage. The city's roofs seem to serve as a safety net for the young, ungraceful fliers.

This yellow-crown urban approach to nesting is occurring elsewhere, according to Doug Gross, Game Commission endangered and threatened birds supervisor. "Bryan Watts and others studying yellow-crowned night-herons in Virginia, found that most colonies are in residential areas – more than 80 percent. In these residential areas, they nest over roofs, driveways, roads



and porches.”

Yellow-crowns were listed as a state threatened species in 1990, because of their limited population and restricted range. They were downgraded to a state endangered species in 1999.

Currently, the yellow-crowns nesting near the river's east shore are the only known colony in the state. There is strong evidence they still might nest along Conodoguinet Creek and a good possibility that they might return to Bellevue Park. But for now, all we have is the Harrisburg colony. If you know of nesting yellow-crowns, we'd like to hear from you. Write us through [pgccomments@pa.gov](mailto:pgccomments@pa.gov) and note in the email subject field: Yellow-crowned Night-Heron Nest Information. It will be forwarded to a biologist to investigate. For the record, we believe there are more yellow-crowns nesting in the state; we just haven't found them yet. Maybe you can help!