

## The State of the Wildlife Area



Photo credit: Ann Brice

by Ann Brice, Co-Executive Director

The State of California always seems to be facing financial challenges, and this year it directly affects the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area. A statewide audit review process resulted in spending for operations at the Wildlife Area being frozen. Historically, a significant portion of the operations money here comes from the farming leases. The rice you see being grown, for example, helps pay for gravel for the roads, pumps to move the water, and other maintenance needs.

### Dealing with the bad news

Last winter Wildlife Area Manager Jeff Stoddard suddenly found himself with no money to keep tractors and other equipment running. In fact, there was very little money

to pay for anything on site. The collateral damage includes the portable toilets, so the school children and visitors really need to plan ahead before a visit!

Recently there have been some emergency authorizations so that farming and ranching can proceed while the leases get amended, which should happen in July. There will still be less water in ponds this summer, and the portable toilets will probably not be seen until the fall, but Jeff is optimistic that the situation will continue to improve. He says, “Thanks to support from partners like the Yolo Basin Foundation and Dixon Resource Conservation District, and the dedication of Bay Delta Region, executive level staff and our Director Chuck Bonham, our financial situation is steadily improving. With the

new fiscal year about to start July 1st, things should begin to get back on track.”

### On the bright side

There will be some brood pond habitat maintained—water and cover for the ducks and ducklings. Jeff reports that there is usually nesting by Mallards, Gadwalls, Green-winged, Cinnamon and even Blue-winged Teals.


There will also be discing to enhance bird use. Discing breaks up the soil and disrupts the perennial plants, which don't produce much seed. Then the annuals come in with their abundant seed that the birds love. The discing attracts the Swainson's Hawks in the summer. They can be seen behind the disk looking for disturbed rodents. One Fish and

—continued on p. 2

## Swainson's Hawks at YBWA

Chris Rocco, a Department of Fish and Wildlife Habitat Supervisor, has worked at the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area since it opened in 1997. He does a wide variety of jobs, but one of his favorites over the years has been conducting population assessments of the Swainson's Hawk all over the northern Sacramento Valley. From 1993 through 2009 he gathered data for Region 2, which was then entered in the state's Rare Find database.

This year Wildlife Area Manager, Jeff Stoddard, asked Chris to inventory the number of nests on the property. He has located 22 nest sites, although some may be used by Ravens, Great-horned Owls or Red-tailed Hawks. There are three in the trees near the train trestle north of Interstate 80, several near the deep water ship channel--basically anywhere there are mature trees.

Chris believes that this California threatened species is now stable. “I see kettles of 50 to 75 hawks cruising around the Wildlife Area after the breeding season in July and August,” he says. They like to feed on voles, which are forced into the open when a field is plowed or flooded, but they'll also feed on spiders and grasshoppers. Chris reports that the cities of Davis and Woodland also have significant populations, which venture out to the fields of Yolo County to forage. He adds, “That's why they're called the farmer's hawk. I've seen them sitting on ag equipment just waiting for the farmer to hop on his tractor and start serving up a meal for the birds!” 



Chris Rocco



## Featured Volunteer: Sami LaRocca

Sami LaRocca is one of our “Does it all!” volunteers. A former high school biology teacher, Sami began volunteering at Yolo Basin Foundation after she retired 10 years ago. She started out as a *Discover the Flyway* docent and enjoyed working with the younger children. She was one of the volunteers who liked to go out to the Wildlife Area with the students to help with bird identification after their morning at the Demonstration Wetlands.

As time went on, Sami became more and more drawn to birding through Yolo Audubon, and eventually she gravitated toward being a tour leader at the Davis Wetlands and then the Wildlife Area. Now an avid birder, Sami travels around the country, and even beyond, on birding trips. She also currently serves as field trip chair for Yolo Audubon, where she organizes and leads many trips. She has been a member of the CA Duck Days Steering Committee, and she leads a popular Duck Days field trip to the Delta every year.

According to YBF’s Ann Brice, “It’s always great working with Sami. She’s very good at what she does, and I know we can count on her if she signs on to do something. We’re lucky to have her as part of the team!”

Sami always seems to be challenging herself. She has become an accomplished avian photographer over the last few years and is now interested in learning to identify birds by ear. Here’s a woman who takes retirement seriously!

Thanks, Sami.

### YBF Looking for New Docents

Have you ever considered becoming a volunteer for the *Discover the Flyway* school program? Here’s your chance to learn all about it! The only requirements are that you like kids and the outdoors and that you be able to volunteer on a weekday at least once a month.

We’ll hold the next training in the fall on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup>. All sessions run from 8am to 12:30pm.

Attendance on the first day is mandatory so you can get an overview of the whole school program. The next three days are hands-on workshops where you’ll see and participate in the various learning stations. We ask that you come on at least two of those days.

For more information contact Heidi Satter, Education Coordinator, at 530-757-4828 or [hsatter@yolobasin.org](mailto:hsatter@yolobasin.org).

State of Wildlife Area *continued from p. 1*

Wildlife biologist recently reported counting 128 Swainson’s Hawks in a single Yolo County field!

Staff, with some volunteer assistance, will also be mowing the roads and the walking trails. The trails are marked on the Wildlife Area map available in the Headquarters, the Yolo Basin Foundation office or at the Foundation website. Volunteer Coordinator, Michael Herrera, hopes to begin scheduling regular weekend walks.

### At the Headquarters

Mary Schiedt, Fish and Wildlife staff member and Yolo Basin Foundation volunteer, is busy planting forbs and flowering plants to diversify the plant palette around the Headquarters. Mary is also active with the CA Native Plant Society and has many ideas for “dressing up” the area without spending too much money. She is periodically assisted by groups of volunteers who spend time pruning and planting.

The diversity of the animals at the Demonstration Wetlands has grown along with the foliage. Several water birds have nested in the two ponds. Turkeys regularly prowls along the paths, and a nice variety of songbirds can be heard, as well as Red-tails and Swainson’s Hawks flying overhead. As for mammals, we have jackrabbits, cottontails, and otters dropping in. And gopher and garter snakes are regularly sighted.

Overall, the finances may be tight at the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area, but the staff and volunteers are dedicated in their efforts to make it a great place for wildlife and human visitors alike. 🌱

### Summer Camp for Kids!

During the week of July 22nd, YBF is holding a five-day, 9 to noon camp for children who will be entering 3rd or 4th grade. The campers will explore the world of wetlands through different outdoor science themes each day, including adaptations, water, and dirt! They will create art, participate in outdoor activity stations and listen to stories and music in the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area Demonstration Wetlands. Group size is limited to 12. Please contact Heidi Satter to learn about the details at 530-757-4828 or [hsatter@yolobasin.org](mailto:hsatter@yolobasin.org).

# Black-crowned Night-Heron

by Corky Quirk, Education Associate

Hidden among the cattails and tules is an amazing nighttime hunter, the Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*). When 30 or 40 children plus chaperones approach the permanent pond north of Parking Lot C, often these herons will become active. They use this pond as a day roost of juveniles and adults, practically invisible in the thick plants. But when spooked they fly up, vocalizing their distinctive “quork”. The genus name “*Nycticorax*” means night-croaker.

Using binoculars to view the birds, students comment first on the red eyes of the adults. They seem fascinated and often say that the birds are evil. This leads to conversations about adaptations and why different birds have different eye color and eye size. Being night hunters, Black-crowned Night-Herons have large eyes to let in light. Their iris color changes with age and is likely to establish rank, with adults over juveniles and subadults. The iris is grayish olive in hatchlings, soon changing to yellow, deepening to orange, and then becoming bright red at maturity.

Although no signs of nesting in the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area have been found, it is certainly possible that Black-crowned Night-Herons may nest in the south-eastern section, or possibly across the toe drain where a large rookery can be found. These herons are known to nest both on the ground and high in trees. They frequently join large rookeries with other species. When they nest near other species, like terns, ibises and other herons, they may steal chicks and eggs.

Males bring sticks and reeds to the female who then builds the nest. She lays three to six eggs, laying one every other day. Male and female take turns incubating the eggs, which then hatch asynchronously in 21-26 days. The young are covered in down and unable to leave the nest. Parents take turns bringing food to the young for about two weeks. It is noted that the adults will also bring food to young in other nests. At about two weeks the young are able to hop around on branches and need more food, both parents hunt day and night to keep the young well fed. The young birds can leave the nest fully feathered in 42-49 days.

It will take about three years for the Black-crowned Night-Heron to gain the full black crown and back, grey wings and tail, and the white underparts. For most of the year, the legs of the adult are yellow-green, but by the height of the breeding season, they will turn pink. First year birds are spotted buff and brown, resembling bitterns, with pale olive and brown streaks below, and pale yellow to orange eyes. In the second year they



Photo credit: Jim Dunn

are brown with a buff and white streaked belly. The eyes of the juvenile Black-crowned Night-Heron are yellowish or amber, and the dull gray legs lack the colorful pigmentation of those of the adult.

Most of the year Black-crowned Night-Herons are active at night, foraging in the marshes and shallow ponds, feeding in the same areas that other heron species frequent during the day. When there are young to feed, the adults are active both night and day.

The modified 6th cervical vertebra lets the

bird draw its neck back in an “S” shape. It hides in dense vegetation waiting to ambush unsuspecting prey. Suddenly the head and bill shoot forward with lightning speed. They primarily prey upon crayfish, fish and amphibians, although they are opportunists and will consume rodents, large insects, as well as eggs and chicks of other birds. The night-heron will vibrate its bill in shallow water to lure prey.

Black-crowned Night-Herons are well adapted and are found on 5 continents, including most of North America. They make use of both fresh and salt-water wetland habitats. Powder-down feathers are found on breast and rump patches. These specialized down feathers disintegrate to a powder which is used for preening and helps to waterproof and preserve other feathers. Herons also have a pectinate middle toe. The toe has a comb-like, serrated structure on the inner edge, which is used for preening.

The late 1800s and early 1900s saw huge decreases in populations of many birds, including Black-crowned Night-Herons due to the feather trade. In some areas herons and egrets were almost hunted to extinction. Heron plumes sold for \$32 per ounce - two times the price of gold at that time. 1910 marked the end of the feather trade and the start of the birds’ population recovery.

Again declines were noted in Black-crowned Night-Heron populations in the late 1960s and were attributed to the use of chlorine-based pesticides such as DDT and PCB’s, which were used in transformers, capacitors, and plasticizers. DDT caused reduced clutch size and lower productivity due to the breakage of thin-shelled eggs. PCB’S affected growth, metabolism, reproduction, and behavior. Since the ban of DDT in the 1970s in this country, populations have increased although water pollution and habitat loss continue to be a problem in some areas.

Next time you’re out in the Wildlife Area, watch among the tall, dense tule for these beautiful, stocky birds. Watch for them to fly, with a wingspan about the same as a Red-tailed Hawk, and admire them for the nighttime niche that they fill. 🌱

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