

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

HERONS IN NORTHUMBERLAND

By Clive E. Goodwin

The herons are a mixed bunch. We have exquisite things like egrets that are hard to miss in the sombre greens of the marshes, and bitterns that seemingly can vanish into an isolated tuft of grass. There are herons that nest in noisy treetop colonies, and herons that nest alone deep in the depths of cedar bogs. And then there are birds like ibises and spoonbills, which share the same order and may nest with more typical herons, but which look quite different.

As a group they're great wanderers. In June 2007 a Glossy Ibis graced the Brighton water treatment ponds for a while, but it was just the latest in a succession of such visitors here over the years which have added some excitement to the local birding scene. All are southerners, and we have had Snowy Egrets, Little Blue and Tricolor Herons as well as the ibis. Many of our records of the latter are of '*Plegadis*' ibis, a reflection of the fact that the two dark ibises in the genus *Plegadis* can be very difficult to separate, although Glossy is by far the most likely to appear, as the White-faced Ibis is a more western bird. Cattle and Great Egrets have visited as well; however, both have nested here, so we'll look at them separately.

For the rest, with the exception of a single Tricolor Heron in 2000, we have had seven or eight visits of each in total over the years, spread rather evenly over the decades. Only the very sociable ibis has shown up in numbers, with up to 11 birds in May 1976. Traditionally in Ontario many of these wandering herons appear in the fall. This is usually attributed to post-breeding dispersal, where young birds travel widely after they are fledged, often pioneering a new colony in the subsequent year in a locality they visited in autumn. However, only three birds have appeared in the fall here, and the bulk have been seen from mid- to late May, with three in each of April and June.

Exciting though these birds are, it's the herons that nest here that make up the bulk of our records. Six species have done so, but the Cattle Egret is now no more than an irregular visitor to the county. Its story is an interesting one, as it was an immigrant from Africa to the New World, apparently first appearing in numbers in South America in the 1930's, and arriving in North America some ten years later. Birds didn't appear in Ontario until 1956, and our first was one sitting, appropriately enough, on the back of a cow, in a field near Presqu'ile on May 14, 1962, and seen by John Crosby. On the 19th five birds were seen at Davey's Pond near Dale, and in July of that year a pair was found nesting in a Black-crowned Heron colony at Presqu'ile. It was the first nesting in the Province, together with another at Luther Marsh in Wellington County the same year, and there was great excitement and much speculation about how far north the expansion would go.

It turned out that Presqu'ile was that limit, at least for the present. The birds never became established either here or in the Province as a whole. They last nested at

Presqu'ile in 1965, and we have 33 records of the species from the '60's. Since then the '70's yielded only 7 birds, the '80's produced 8, and we had 13 in the '90's. The current decade has produced only 4 birds so far, with 2 in 2001 and singles in 2002 and 2006.

By contrast the Great Egret story is one of slow, gradual expansion. Our first bird was a report at Pratt's Pond in 1937, and that would have been one of the very first for the Province as well. The species gradually moved into south-western Ontario, with the first nesting on Lake Erie in 1953. It has now been established in the south-west for many years, and a steady increase in Northumberland sightings has followed as well. There was one in 1949, 2 in 1955, and 4 in the '60's. Numbers seen in succeeding decades then were 9, 22, and 40 respectively. Finally the 2000's arrived, and we have 165 so far, with the birds nesting at Presqu'ile since at least 2000. It looks as though we may have a new and very attractive addition to the nesting birds of the county. However, we should be careful before we proclaim success. The 'high' year so far for the egrets was 2001 with 29 seen, and last year only yielded 10 reports: a drop that could mean nothing at all: for example, one reason might be that as birders get used to a bird being resident they tend to stop reporting it. But, remembering the Cattle Egrets, it does take time for a species to become fully established, and some don't make it.

Unfortunately the picture is far less rosy for some of our more familiar species. I have put the totals of birds reported for the five species in each decade from 1961 on into a table:

| | 1961-1970 | 1971-1980 | 1981-1990 | 1991-2000 | 2001- 2007 |
|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| Am. Bittern | 9 | 61 | 303 | 217 | 120 [171]* |
| Least Bittern | 10 | 11 | 53 | 48 | 38 [54] |
| Great Blue Heron | 42 | 407 | 1285 | 2334 | 1630 [2329] |
| Green Heron | 12 | 79 | 163 | 195 | 363 [519] |
| B. C. Night-Heron | 185 | 484 | 580 | 121 | 582 [831] |

*The figures in brackets are the decade-to-date totals extrapolated to a full 10 years, just to put the 2000's in perspective: in practice it's unlikely the next 3 years will be exactly like the first part of the decade.

The counts above for Black-crowned Night-Herons are not comparable with those of the other four species. This is because an examination of the night-heron records revealed that almost all of them came from Presqu'ile. This probably means that birds from the same group of nesters were being counted repeatedly, and the totals would be more a measure of how many persons counted them than of the birds themselves. Fortunately, nests have also been counted almost annually at the Park, and while there was some variability in the approach to the counting, I thought a more accurate picture might be given by using this nest count, and doubling it to arrive at the number of birds.

Unfortunately, in the 1990's it appears we only have the totals of birds nesting on Sebastapol Point, so the figures for that decade are low, and the 2000 totals are not up to date.

Regular readers of 'Gleanings' will recall that the number of records in the database has increased dramatically in the last 20 years, so the numbers of birds reported does so as well; hence increases are shown in all five species to the end of 1990. But it's the post-

1990 the picture for the bitterns that is of concern, as it reveals decreases in both species. This is despite the fact that the atlas was underway in 2001-5, and this would probably increase the number of records of more cryptic species like these two. [Perhaps the dramatic increase in Green Herons is a reflection of this]. It's likely that the end of the decade will see lower totals than those shown in the extrapolation.

The reason for these declines is not clear. Loss of habitat is traditionally offered as a cause of marsh bird declines, but the bitterns would not seem to have suffered much significant loss of habitat in our area since 1990. Degradation of wetlands, however, is an on-going process, and this could well be having a cumulative impact. Such degradation may not be confined to silting, pollution or changes in drainage patterns. The impacts of alien plants such as purple loosestrife and European frog-bit could be particularly serious for these species, which use the more vegetated parts of the marshes and prey heavily on insects and other invertebrates as well as the more familiar heron fare. The declines in frog populations also could be a factor. And eutrophication – the enrichment of waters by fertilizer run-off and the like – is reported to encourage the growth of parasites which can prove fatal to the birds.

So, some gains and some losses: as I said at the beginning, herons are a mixed bunch.