

Medium to large elegant wading birds with long neck and legs, straight dagger-like bill and long unwebbed toes. Flight strong, typically with heavy languid wingbeats on broad wings, neck folded back and head tucked in, and legs trailing. Sexes alike. Immatures of most species are like adults but duller. Many species have ornamental plumes, which may be on the head, back and chest, sometimes distinctively coloured. The colours of bill, facial skin, legs and feet may become brighter or change as birds come into breeding condition. They feed in shallow water or on damp pasture, walking slowly or standing motionless and lunging at prey. Diet is mainly aquatic animals. All may make a harsh grating call in flight; otherwise silent except at breeding colonies. Many species breed and roost communally, others are solitary. Lay 2–5 blue-green eggs on a platform of sticks built in trees or on cliffs.

NANKEEN NIGHT HERON *Nycticorax caledonicus*

Rare native

57 cm, 800 g. Stocky rounded short-necked heron, rufous brown or heavily streaked and spotted brown. Thick black bill; short yellow legs. Adult has rufous-brown (nankeen) upperparts, paler underparts, black cap. When breeding, 2 long slender white plumes hang from the nape. Juvenile dark brown, heavily spotted and streaked pale buff. In flight, looks heavy-headed, round-winged and short-tailed, and has shallower and faster wingbeats than other herons. Usually feeds at dusk or night and roosts in trees by day. **Habitat:** Margins of freshwater wetlands or tidal lagoons. Vagrant until it started breeding on Whanganui River in 1990s. **Breeding:** Season unknown in NZ.

[Sp 113]



HERONS, EGRETS and BITTERNs Ardeidae

About 65 species; 10 in the New Zealand region, including 5 breeding species. An endemic species, the New Zealand Little Bittern *Ixobrychus novaezelandiae*, became extinct in the late 1800s.

This family occurs worldwide, mainly in the tropics. Their broad-winged flight is ponderous but strong, though the smaller species are faster. Apart from the bitterns and night herons, they are active by day. They have a slender body and long neck and legs; night herons have a stouter body and a shorter neck. All have a straight, dagger-like bill and a short tail. The bill, on a long, often kinked neck, is ideal for seizing or skewering fish.

Patches of powder down are on the breast and rump in bitterns, and the thighs also in egrets. The middle of the three forward-pointing toes has serrations along the side like the teeth of a comb and is thought to remove fish-slime and mud during grooming and preening. All species give a low-pitched croak when alarmed but feed silently.

Egrets and herons are very similar: for example, all have bare facial skin, often distinctively coloured. Egrets are white; herons are usually grey: the distinction is useful but not absolute. Egrets are gregarious and breed in colonies, often mixed with other egrets and with ibises; true herons are solitary. Both typically have plumes when breeding. Their nests are untidy platforms of sticks and twigs. Incubation starts with the first or second egg, and so chicks are of different ages and sizes. Adults feed the young with regurgitated food, not offering whole food. The young start breeding at one or two years old, sometimes still in immature plumage.

Herons, egrets and bitterns feed mainly on fish; also frogs and insects. Larger species may take small mammals and birds as chance offers.

Reading: Hancock, J. & Elliott, H. 1978. *The Herons of the World*. London: London Editions. Hancock, J. & Kushlan, J. 1984. *The Herons Handbook*. London: Croom Helm.

113. NANKEEN NIGHT HERON *Nycticorax caledonicus* Plate 27

Other name: Rufous Night Heron
Size: 57 cm, 800 g
Geographical variation: Five extant subspecies: *hilli* of eastern Indonesia, New Guinea and Australia is presumably the form

recorded in New Zealand.
Distribution: Breed in the Philippines, Micronesia, Indonesia, New Guinea, Bismarck Archipelago, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Australia, and recently in New

Zealand. In Australia, they are a vagrant to Tasmania but common in the north, east and southwest, and are especially common along the coastal rivers of southeastern Australia and the inland rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin.

Unsuccessfully liberated in New Zealand in 1852 (a bird shot near Wellington in 1856 may have been one of these). They may have bred near Blenheim, where an adult and two immatures were seen in 1958 and an adult was again seen in 1959. Birds breeding at Wellington Zoo were released in 1982, all with leg bands; after a year most had dispersed, and three of these birds were reported later: Pakawau (1983), Lower Hutt (1984), and Warkworth, Northland (1984).

Nankeen Night Herons were occasional vagrants from Australia, with records of unbanded birds from Wellington (1972), southern Wairarapa (1977), Owaka, Otago (1980), near Whangamomona, inland Taranaki (1983), and upper Taieri River, Otago (1988), but, have bred on the Whanganui River between Pipiriki and Jerusalem since at least 1995. In 1994, nine birds (six immatures and three adults) were seen in willows along this stretch of river.

Population: Less than 50 birds in 2005.

Conservation: Protected apparently self-introduced native.

Breeding: In Australia, Nankeen Night Herons breed in the dense cover of trees, e.g. mangroves and eucalypts, often high above water level in saline or fresh wetlands, both adults building the usual platform of sticks. They lay 2–3–5 pale green to blue eggs (52 x 37 mm), which both sexes incubate for 21–22 days. Hatching is not synchronous. The young leave the nest 6–7 weeks after hatching. The oldest banded bird of the North American subspecies lived over 21 years.

Behaviour: Gregarious all year but feed solitarily. In Australia, they roost by day in groups in leafy trees, e.g. willow, often low to the ground and within convenient flying distance of water.

Feeding: In Australia, diet is mostly fish; also frogs, freshwater crayfish and insects, taken as opportunity arises. They usually stand and wait, upright or crouched, or walk slowly, in the manner of most herons. They feed mainly at night or in the evening but may feed by day, especially when breeding. They fly out from their roost at dusk with slow, heavy wingbeats to their feeding sites.

Reading: Marsh, N. 1995. *Notornis* 42: 282–283. Marsh, N. & Lovei, G.L. 1997. *Notornis* 44: 152–155.