

First Sighting – Date: _____ **Location:** _____



Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*)

This small heron is at home in both salt water and fresh water and can be found along most shoreline habitats from streams and ponds to rivers and bays. Its name seems misleading – up close, it appears more bluish than green. It has a shaggy, green-black cap, chestnut on the sides of the head and most of the neck, a dark back and under parts. The eyes are yellow to deep orange and its legs are yellow or bright orange. Immatures are heavily streaked below. Green Herons in the Mid-Atlantic are migratory, spending the winter from Florida and Mexico southward, and returning north between late March and late April. This local fisherman – both patient and stealthy – knows every inch of its territory’s waterways. If you take care of your neighborhood streams and ponds, or even create your own backyard wetland pool, your yard and community may be visited by this skilled wetland hunter.

What Green Herons Need

Food: Small fish, frogs, crayfish, snails, many insects, leeches, earthworms, small snakes and mice. Green Herons can stand patient and motionless on a stick over water, waiting for small prey to swim by, stabbing it with a lightning strike of its pointed bill. Sometimes, it will wade slowly through the water, stop to rake the bottom with its outstretched toes, then peer down to watch for moving prey.

Shelter: Green Herons are shy and often “hide in plain site” by remaining perfectly still for long periods of time. They look for thickly vegetated shorelines to enhance this ability to hide, so prefer plant-filled watersides to bare ones. They roost in trees, often pines.

How You Can Help

- Create a small pond or wetland pool in your yard, using liners or fiberglass forms, and plant the edges with showy native wetland plants like Blue Flag Iris, Pickerelweed, Duck Potato, Cardinal Flower, Rose Mallow, Lizards Tail & Bullrush. Avoid aggressive exotic plants such as Parrot’s Feather, Water Lettuce, Water Hyacinth and exotic water lilies. Add branches and rocks for heron perches and a small pump or Bt mosquito dunks to deter mosquitoes, and you may be visited by this quiet water stalker.
- To enhance their ability to find food and safe shelter, keep streams clear of trash, reduce your use of pesticides and fertilizers and work with your neighborhood to stop any mowing or clearing of local stream banks, pond shorelines or other wetland buffers. Work with friends to preserve and restore marshes and forested wetlands.

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Breeding: During courtship, males erect neck plumes, swell the throat and call, hopping from one foot to the other in front of the female. They nest singly, or occasionally in small colonies. The nest, 10-15' high, is made on forested edges of aquatic habitats, often suspended over water. In treeless marshes it will be constructed on a tussock of emergent vegetation. Flat, it's made of interwoven sticks and usually unlined. Incubation(2-4 eggs) is shared by both sexes. Young take 1st flights around their 22nd day. Parents continue to feed them while they learn to fly and hunt.

- To continue enjoying the beauty and behavior of this intriguing species, we must insure that wetland habitats abound and streams are kept clean to provide adequate food supply and promote continued breeding success.
- Allow trees to grow along pond and stream banks and keep dogs on-leash when near heron nesting sites. Keep invasive exotic species like Snakehead Fish, Hydilla and Fragmites out of our local wetlands to insure that Green Herons and other wading birds have plenty of aquatic prey and healthy, in-tact habitat.

Other: Fishing line, six-pack yokes, pollutants and clearing of shoreline buffers are threats to this heron.

Vegetated shorelines, healthy aquatic plant communities, decent water quality and a few well-placed hunting perches, combine to attract this stealthy hunter.



Resources:

Native plants—available at DeBaggio Herbs, Nature by Design, Merrifield Garden Centers and other nurseries
Pond liners and Fiberglass forms—local home improvement and garden stores

Model Habitat and Observation Sites:

Huntley Meadows Park - www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/huntley/
Reston Parkland - www.reston.org
Bles Park - www.loudoun.gov/prcs/parks/other.htm

Visit audubonva.org for more information and other Fact Sheets