

Green Herons

Text and photo by Tammy Mercer

Every Saturday morning a group of birders wanders the prairies, forests and wetlands in and around the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden. One old friend we always look for in marshy wetlands is the green heron.

Relatively smaller and with shorter legs than other herons, the green heron is roughly the size of a crow. It can be tricky identifying this heron because when in flight or hunting for food, it scrunches up its neck and looks like a much more compact bird. But when it strikes out at its prey, you will see that its neck is really much longer.

This bird used to be called the green-backed heron. On a cloudy day or while in the shade, it just looks like a dark bird. But when the sun strikes its back feathers, they are an iridescent bluish-green. The neck, chest and lower face are a rich chestnut brown, and the crown is a bluish-black. When irritated or threatened, green herons raise their crest.

Unlike other herons, they nest in loose colonies or alone. They may also nest near another heron or egret rookery. They build a rough stick nest in a tree or shrub, usually near water. Both parents incubate eggs and

feed their young by regurgitating partially digested food.

Green herons do not sing, but when startled into flight they emit a short, gruff “skeow.”

Green herons sometimes use a small twig, feather, or insect as bait to catch fish! They will arrange their bait on the surface of the water and wait patiently for a fish or frog to investigate. Then they spring forward to grasp or stab their prey.

I hope you will join the Early Birders on our Saturday morning walks and enjoy the many birds of forest, prairie and wetland.

—Tammy Mercer leads Saturday morning bird walks at the Wildflower Garden.

REFERENCES:

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