

Green Heron *Butorides virescens*



Folk Name: Shy Poke, Fish Hawk, Green-backed Heron

Status: Breeder, Migrant, Winter Visitor

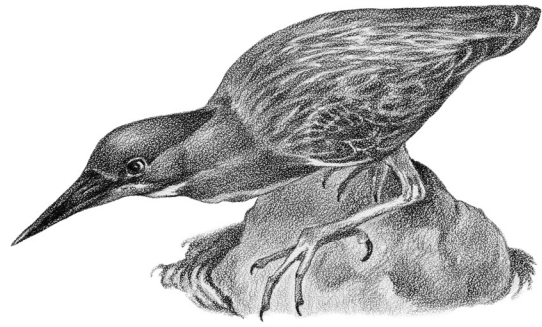
Abundance: Fairly Common

Habitat: Lakes, rivers, ponds, wetlands, marshes

The Green Heron is the second most common heron found throughout the Central Carolinas. It is usually encountered on our smaller lakes and ponds, but it can be found along the shoreline of virtually any shallow aquatic habitat that has adequate vegetation for cover. At 18 inches, the Green Heron is our smallest regularly occurring heron. Like the Cattle Egret, it is a small stocky heron with short legs and a thick neck. Its crested head and back are a greenish-black color, and adults have a dark rufous neck.

Most Green Herons are seen here between April and October, but we have records of birds found during every month of the year, and records of birds spending the winter are increasing. This heron has been reported on almost all spring counts conducted in the region, but usually only 1–5 birds are tallied with the highest total counts over the past 75 years numbering fewer than 20 birds. In this region, the Green Heron is a solitary nesting bird. Multiple nests have not been reported. After nesting is complete, Green Herons migrate south and most will generally winter from the South Carolina coast, southward through Mexico, down to the northern tip of South America.

The Green Heron is one of our best-known wading birds. R.B. McLaughlin reported Green Herons arriving in Statesville on 24 April in 1885, 3 April in 1887, and 16 April in 1888. Leverett Loomis reported this heron as a common summer bird in Chester County around that



time. Elmer Brown reported one arriving in Salisbury on 7 April in 1923. On August 7, 1929, William McIlwaine watched one Green Heron, one Great Blue Heron, and seven Little Blue Herons searching for food in the rocks along the edge of the Catawba River. When he saw this heron, it immediately flushed and flew away with something (possibly a frog) in its mouth.

In 1939, Charlie Sellers recorded his first Green Heron arriving in Charlotte on 14 April and noted it as a “common” breeding bird. He reported seeing his last Green Heron in town on 11 September and reported that he had never found it in winter in Charlotte. In 1940, Sellers reported a pair of Green Herons on 12 May and suspected nesting. Elizabeth Clarkson noted general dates of 1 April through 1 October for Green Heron and provided this description of their nest: “a platform of sticks in a bush or low branch of tree on shores of streams or ponds.” One August, Clarkson was surprised to find a Green Heron eating her goldfish in one of her backyard ponds at Wing Haven. She wrote in her journal that the bird was “fishing in the oval pool and yesterday



Green Heron nest in Charlotte. (Phil Fowler)

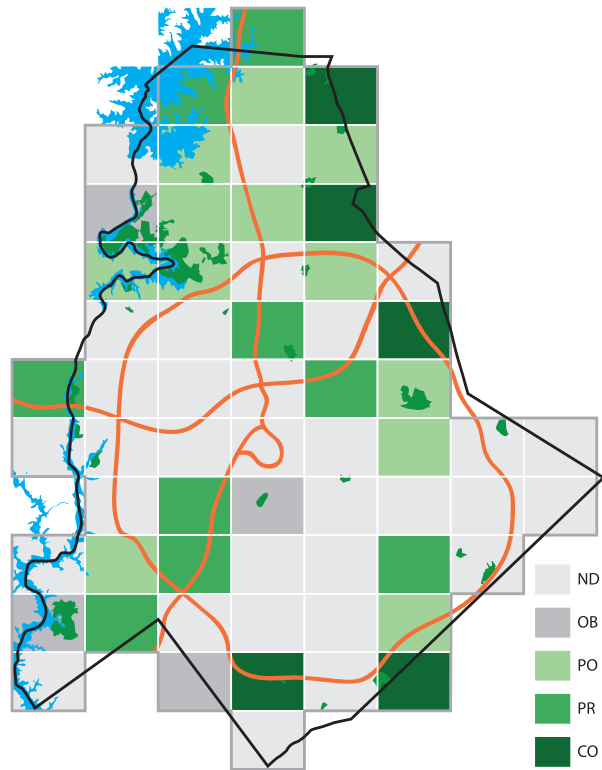


Nestlings in Pineville. (John Scavetto)

he flew into the terrace screen door and back to the pool, surprised but unhurt by his mistake.”

Reports of birds lingering into the fall and winter began in the late 1950s. These may be birds that breed in the North that are not moving as far south as others in the winter. One was sighted on the Stanly CBC both in December 1956 and December 1961. H. Lee Jones found one in Mecklenburg County on November 21, 1961, and Mrs. J.H. Lovell found another a week later on a private pond in Cabarrus County on 29 November. Flo Cobey found an immature bird while conducting the Charlotte CBC in 1967. Observers were able to approach this bird to a distance of 25 feet before it flushed. Single birds or occasionally two birds have been counted in the region from November through February at least 20 times in the past three decades.

Volunteers with the Mecklenburg County BBA discovered several nests during the study. John Scavetto photographed a nest with four young birds on May 11, 2011, in the Town of Pineville. Dave Lovett reported Green Herons nesting for several consecutive years in a small pond in a busy condominium complex in south Charlotte. One year, a pair was present as early as 13 April. John Scavetto found another pair nesting at an “obscure pond” in the Ballantyne area near Pineville on April 13, 2014. He reported: “...finding a male and female courting and the male giving her sticks he freshly picked was a great surprise. She accepted most of them and placed them across low branches that barely extends [*sic*] over this part of the pond.”



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Somewhat Local (PR/9, CO/5)