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Birds of the Rocky Mountains—Species Accounts, pages 66–75: Herons and Ibises

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American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*)

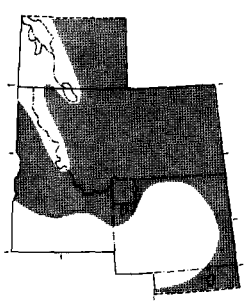
Identification: This heron is an inconspicuous striped brownish bird of moderate size, usually seen standing among emergent vegetation, often with its bill raised in a concealing posture. In flight it appears uniformly brown, and flies in the usual heron manner with its head back on the shoulders. On the breeding grounds it is more often heard than seen, uttering a low and loud pumping sound associated with territoriality.

LATILONG STATUS

s	S	s	
	s	S	M
S	s	s	s

s	M	M	M
S	S		
S	S	M	S

M		M	
M	M	s	M
S	S	s	s



Status: A widespread but rather inconspicuous breeder, with nesting records for Banff, Yellowstone and the Tetons. Probably breeds locally elsewhere, especially in overgrown edges of beaver ponds or marshes.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with reedbeds and other emergent marsh vegetation, and rarely observed feeding in open water in the manner of other herons. Foods include frogs, snakes, and other animal life in addition to fish, and thus the species is not limited to areas where fish occur.

Seasonality: Montana records extend from late April to late October, rarely to December. Wyoming records are from April 15 to October 19. Egg records for the region extend from June 1 to June 27.

Comments: I observed courtship and copulation of American bitterns at Christian Pond, Grand Teton National Park, and later found an active nest there (*Auk* 97:868–9). Unlike most herons, bitterns nest solitarily, and their nests are well hidden among marsh vegetation, or sometimes are located on dry land. The nest is fiercely defended by the female.

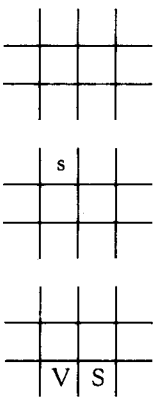
Suggested Reading: Palmer, 1962; Mousley, 1939; Hancock and Elliott, 1978.

Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*)

Identification: This tiny bittern is more likely to be seen in flight than while standing, when its large, buffy wing patches are evident and it somewhat resembles a gigantic moth. In shape it resembles a miniature American bittern, but lacks the striping on the breast and neck, and instead is yellowish buff in those areas.

Status: Rare or accidental throughout the area, except in the extreme southeast, where it has bred in the Fort Collins latilong.

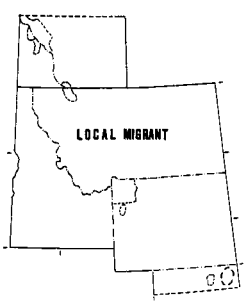
LATILONG STATUS



Habitats and Ecology: Associated with freshwater or slightly brackish marshes and lakes that have extensive stands of emergent vegetation. Those with scattered woody growth are especially favored habitats.

Seasonality: There are no good migration records for the area. In North Dakota egg records exist for the last half of June, suggesting a seasonality similar to that of the American bittern.

Comments: The nests of this species are usually built above shallow water, and consist of a distinctive structure of leafy materials and twigs that are arranged in a spoke-like manner rising a foot or more above water, and arched over with living vegetation. Nests are often placed fairly close together, so territories are probably fairly small. The male's advertising call is a soft and cuckoo-like series of cooing notes, usually in groups of three to five notes. These are most often heard at dawn and again at dusk.



Suggested Reading: Weller, 1961; Palmer, 1962; Hancock and Elliott, 1978.

Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*)

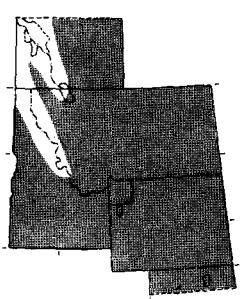
Identification: This is the largest of the common herons of the area, and is mainly bluish gray, with a black crown stripe and crest, and a long, yellowish bill. It flies ponderously, with its long legs trailing and its head held back on the shoulders. During the summer it may be seen perching in nesting trees; otherwise it is usually found standing in shallow water.

LATILONG STATUS

S	S	S	s
s	S	S	S
S	S	S	S

S	S	S	S
S	S	M	S
s	S	S	S

S	S	S	S
S	S	S	S
S	S	S	R



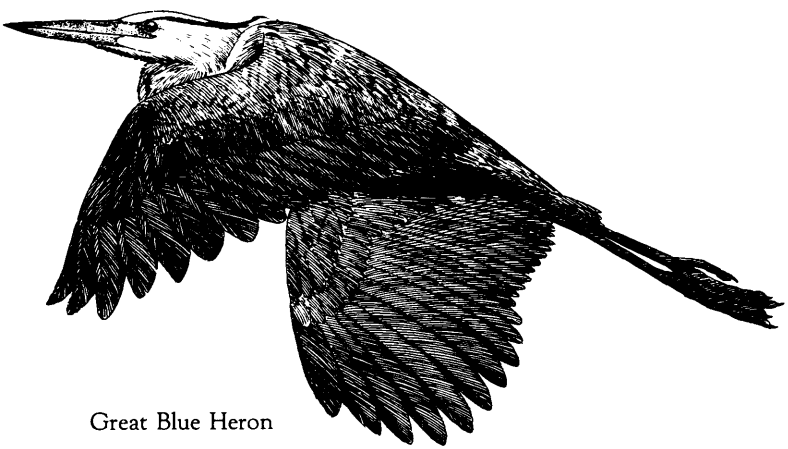
Status: Occurs throughout the area, nesting locally wherever conditions permit, but absent from high montane lakes. It nests regularly in Grand Teton, Yellowstone, and Glacier parks.

Habitats and Ecology: This species occurs in a variety of habitats supporting fish life, but usually breeds where there are trees. However, it rarely nests on the ground, on rock ledges, or among bulrushes. Large cottonwoods are a favored location for nesting colonies in the Tetons, such as in the Oxbow area.

Seasonality: Montana migration records extend from March 25 to late September; overwintering occurs occasionally from about Yellowstone Park southward, where open water is present all year. Nests with eggs have been reported in Montana and Wyoming from April 18 to June 13; nestlings have been observed from May 15 to July 28.

Comments: Herons are monogamous and long-lived, and return to the same nesting areas year after year. Old nests are used to establish breeding territories, and the nests are supplemented each year with new materials. Heronries are sensitive to human disturbance, and ravens often use such opportunities to steal eggs or young from the unprotected nests.

Suggested Reading: Pratt, 1970; Mock, 1976; Krebs, 1974.

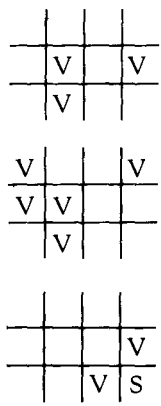


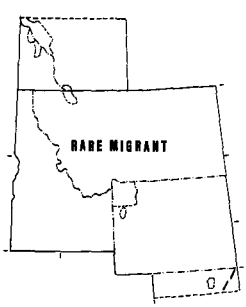
Great Blue Heron

Great (Common) Egret (*Casmerodius albus*)

Identification: This very large, entirely white bird resembles a great blue heron but is entirely white, with black legs and feet, and lacks head plumes. It is likely to be seen in the same habitats as the great blue heron, namely along the edges of lakes and ponds, fishing in shallow and clear water. In flight it has the same profile as a great blue heron, but is entirely white.

LATILONG STATUS





Status: A rare or accidental species over nearly all the area, but breeding has been reported in the extreme southeastern corner (Fort Collins latilong).

Habitats and Ecology: This species occurs in freshwater and brackish habitats, usually foraging in relatively open situations along streams, swamps and lake borders.

Seasonality: There are few migration records for the area, but it is likely to be seen over essentially the same period as the great blue heron, and especially in late summer, when vagrant birds seem to wander freely.

Comments: This species breeds to the east of the region, from Minnesota south to Kansas and Oklahoma, and may gradually be moving northward. Early in this century the species was nearly exterminated in North America by hunters who killed the birds for their plumes, but with protection their range and numbers have slowly increased.

Suggested Reading: Wiese, 1976; Tomlinson, 1976; Hancock and Elliott, 1978.

Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*)

Identification: This small egret resembles the great egret, but has a blackish bill and black legs with yellow feet. The head is also distinctly plumed, at least in the breeding season. In flight the yellow-tipped legs are usually evident.

Status: A regular but rare migrant over much of the area, but more common to the south. There are no park breeding records, although summering birds have been seen in Yellowstone and Grand Teton parks. Breeding occurred in the Choteau latilong of Montana in 1979, and has also occurred in the Laramie, Wyoming, latilong.

LATILONG STATUS

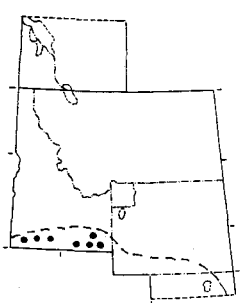
	M		S
	M		M

M			M
M	M		
	M	M	M

M		M	M
M	M	M	S
M	s	S	s

Habitats and Ecology: These birds occur in a wide range of aquatic habitats, but seem to prefer somewhat sheltered locations for breeding, and often occur in company with other larger heron species. When foraging the birds are fairly active, and sometimes rush about in shallow water in an apparent attempt to flush out their prey.

Seasonality: Montana records extend from May 16 to September 12, and Wyoming records are from April 11 to September 5. Nesting in southern Colorado has been reported from June 1 to June 28, and newly hatched young seen on June 28.



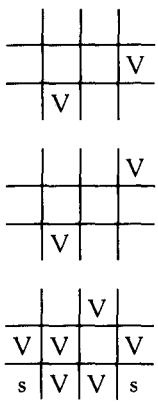
Comments: Like the great egret, this species suffered greatly as a result of plume-hunters, and it has taken a long period for the birds to again become fairly numerous. They nest regularly in southern Colorado, and perhaps the birds are slowly moving northward from this center.

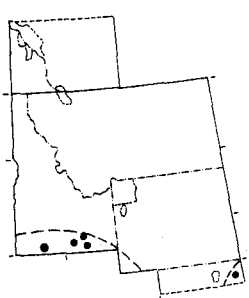
Suggested Reading: Meyeriecks, 1960; Jenni, 1969; Hancock and Elliott, 1978.

Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*)

Identification: This is a fairly small, dryland foraging egret, usually seen foraging in association with livestock, feeding around their feet. Like the snowy egret it is entirely white, but has yellow legs and a yellow bill; in the breeding season the head and breast area are also tinged with buffy yellow.

LATILONG STATUS





Status: A rare vagrant throughout the region, with no definite nesting records for the parks. There are two breeding records for southern Idaho (*Murrelet* 63:88), and a record for the Greeley latilong of Colorado. Breeding has occurred elsewhere in Colorado, and the species is gradually expanding its range in North America.

Habitats and Ecology: Besides various aquatic habitats, this species also is regularly observed on agricultural lands, especially where there are cattle present. The birds forage on grasshoppers and other insects that are stirred up by the movements of the livestock. The species is highly social, and often nests among colonies of other herons.

Seasonality: There are few records for Montana or Wyoming, but regional records extend from September 12 to December 7.

Comments: This species became self-introduced into eastern North America in 1952, and since that time has gradually spread westward. It has become established as far west as southern California, and in the Rocky Mountain area breeds north to Colorado, with post-breeding wanderers sometimes reaching British Columbia and Alberta.

Suggested Reading: Jenni, 1969; Lancaster, 1970; Hancock and Elliott, 1978.

Green-backed (Northern Green) Heron (*Butorides striatus*)

Identification: This small and stocky heron is generally bluish gray on the upperparts, and has varying amounts of chestnut brown on the head and sides, with little white evident except for one (adults) or several (immatures) streaks down the breast. The neck is rarely extended, and thus the bird appears rather "neckless," especially in flight. A loud, sometimes repeated *skowp* note is often uttered upon flushing.

Status: Generally a rare migrant or vagrant throughout the area, but becoming commoner to the southeast, and breeding locally in Colorado east of the Front Range, just outside the limits of this book.

LATILONG STATUS

	M		
	M		
	M	M	
		M	
		M	S
V	V		s

Habitats and Ecology: A wide variety of habitats are used by this adaptable species, which is usually found near trees but also sometimes breeds well away from tree cover. The birds are not very gregarious, and generally are seen as single individuals or territorial pairs. Foraging is done in shallow water; actual baiting of the water to attract prey has been observed in this species.

Seasonality: There are few records for Montana or Wyoming, but in Colorado the species has been observed from April 27 to November 13. In the Great Plains area to the east, nesting records extend from late April or early May to about the middle of June.

Comments: Pairs of this species typically nest in trees, and like other herons the area defended by the male is concentrated on the nest site itself. Various flight displays and displays from perches serve to attract females, and after a pair-bond is formed the female completes the nest. As in other herons, both sexes incubate and care for the young during the nestling period. In some areas two broods are raised in fairly rapid succession.

Suggested Reading: Palmer, 1962; Meyeriecks, 1960; Hancock and Elliott, 1978.

Black-crowned Night Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*)

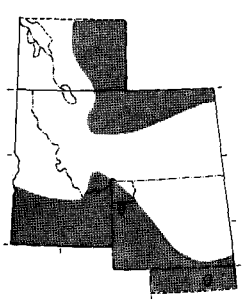
Identification: A small, rather stocky and short-legged heron, with adults having a black crown and back, grayish to white sides and underparts, and bright red eyes. Juveniles also have reddish eyes, but are brownish throughout, with extensive spotting and streaking. A loud, squacking call is usually uttered by birds as they flush.

LATILONG STATUS

	M		
	M		S
V	M		

M	M		M
S	S		M
s	M		M

M	M	M	M
M	M	M	S
S	S	S	S



Status: Generally rare to accidental in the montane parks, but much more common and widespread in prairie and semiarid areas of the region, wherever suitable habitat occurs. The only park where breeding has been reported is Yellowstone, but the species is rare even there.

Habitats and Ecology: This is a highly adaptable species that can use a wide variety of habitats, but in our region it is likely to be associated with shallow bulrush or cattail marshes, often well away from woodlands. The species has very large eyes, and as its name implies, often forages in dim light when it is too dark for most herons to see their prey.

Seasonality: Montana records extend from April 23 to September 29, and Wyoming records are from April 10 to October 21. There are relatively few breeding records, but eggs and young were found in 25 Wyoming nests on June 7, and in northern Utah eggs in an advanced state of incubation were seen on June 3. Colorado nesting records are from May (no date) to July 8.

Comments: As with other herons, males of these species establish a territory that centers around an existing nest or a nest site, and gradually reduce their area of defense to the immediate vicinity of the nest. After finding a mate, the female completes the nest and both sexes participate in the incubation and rearing of the young.

Suggested Reading: Noble, Wurm, and Schmidt, 1938; Allen and Mangels, 1940; Nickell, 1966.

White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*)

Identification: This unusual wading bird resembles a heron, but has a long, decurved bill and a narrow band of white feathers surrounding a reddish patch of facial skin around the eyes. Otherwise the birds are almost entirely brown to blackish throughout; in flight the neck is stretched out rather than retracted.

Status: A relatively rare migrant or vagrant in southern portions of the area, becoming rarer northwardly. Rarely seen north of Yellowstone Park. Has bred at Brown's Park National Wildlife Refuge adjoining Dinosaur National Monument.

LATILONG STATUS

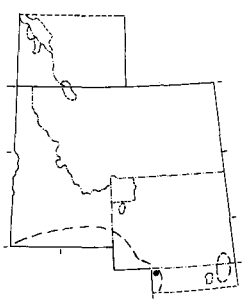
	M		
	M		S
V	M		

M		M	M
M	V		
s	M	M	M

M	M	M	
M	M	M	S
S	M	M	s

Habitats and Ecology: Generally associated with freshwater or brackish marshes having an abundance of cattails, bulrushes or phragmites.

Seasonality: A limited number of migration records from Montana are from April 18 to mid-August, while those from Wyoming are from May 6 to September 17. Four nests believed to be of this species were found at Pakowki Lake, Alberta, on July 3, 1975. Colorado records are from May 22 (eggs) to June 20 (nestlings).



Comments: This is an erratic and perhaps eruptive species at the northern part of its range, often appearing and breeding for a year or two, and then disappearing again. The birds form monogamous pair bonds, and both sexes help construct the nest, which is often on the ground in dense vegetation, but also may be located in bushes or in trees surrounded by water. As with herons, the young are fed by regurgitation, and by the time they are about seven weeks old they are able to fly with their parents to foraging grounds.

Suggested Reading: Burger and Miller, 1977; Ryder, 1967.