Japanese Night Heron

Morphology and classification

Classification: Pelecaniformes Ardeidae

- Total length: ca. 490mm
- Tail length: 92-116mm
- Culmen length: 34-41mm
- Tarsus length: 64-73mm
- Weight: 470-530g


Appearance:

Adult Japanese Night Herons are bright chestnut red on the head and dark brown on the back, in the wings and tail (Photo 1). They are cream from the throat to the belly with black vertical stripes, which are longer on the throat in particular. There is no difference in plumage color between male and female. Juveniles are darker on the upperpart with many fine black flecks on the head and in the wings, but some young birds have fine white spots in the wings (Photo 2).

Vocalization:

Japanese Night Herons make a low “Boh, Boh” call continuously from several to more than 100 times in a bout. The calling bouts are repeated with a pause between them. The call also sounds like “Pooh, Pooh” from a distance. They usually call just after sunset and about two hours before sunrise. Although they call primarily one or two weeks before nesting, they are occasionally heard to call in a stopover site while on migration. They sometimes call about a week after their chicks have hatched as well.

Distribution and Habitat

Distribution:

Japanese Night Herons breed up to 1000 m in the forests of Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu (the main islands of Japan). Although one breeding record was reported from Taiwan in the past (BirdLife International 2001), the breeding distribution is mainly separated from that of closely related Malayan Night Herons Gorsachius melanolophus. The observations of this species in Hokkaido (the northernmost main island) suggest a possibility of their breeding there as well, but specific studies are needed to confirm it.

Habitat:

Japanese Night Herons generally use a broad-leaved forest and a mixed forest with coniferous and broad-leaved trees as a breeding ground. They are frequently observed in a deciduous broad-leaved forest, such as Quercus serrata in particular. They usually nest and forage along a mountain stream, probably because food supplies, such as earthworms and freshwater crabs are abundant in the soil along a stream, which is thick and wet.

Incubation and nestling periods:

The incubation and nestling periods are 20-27 and 34-37 days respectively. Since they usually start to incubate when they lay the first egg, the chicks do not hatch at the same time, which is responsible for the difference in body size between the chicks.

Migration:

Japanese Night Herons are assumed to winter primarily in the Philippines, but they spend the winter in the other countries of Southeast Asia as well. During the migration season, they are also observed in Korea, southern China and Russia (BirdLife International 2001). They seem to arrive at the breeding grounds from March to June and leave them from September to November. Since Japanese Night Herons are observed by ones or twos in the stopover sites, it is likely that they migrate singly or in a breeding pair. It was reported, however, that more than 150 herons which were assumed to be Japanese Night Herons migrated in a mixed flock of more than 1,000 herons including Black-crowned Night Herons Nycticorax nycticorax and Gray Herons Ardea cinerea (Enomoto 1927). Since details of their migration including the wintering grounds and migration routes are unknown for lack of information, further studies are required.

Life history

Although Japanese Night Herons are occasionally observed in parks and farmland, they are forest dwellers. They usually forage on a forest floor and do not fly above the canopy very often. They spend hours on the ground and sometimes stand still for 30 minutes or so, which makes it extremely difficult to detect them. Since they call frequently at night, however, their presence is easy to notice.

Topics of ecology, behavior and conservation

- Are Night Herons nocturnal?

Since they are rarely observed during the day and frequently heard at night and, on top of that, their English name is "Night Heron", it is no wonder that they are thought "nocturnal". In fact, some literature describes them as such. But are they really so?

As a matter of fact, however, there is no report about the nighttime feeding of Japanese Night Herons in a scientific paper. On the other hand, many field observations show that they forage during the day. In addition, it was recently reported that a captive bird foraged during the day (Kawana 2009). It is an obvious fact that they call at night, but only this fact is not sufficient to assert them to be "nocturnal". Taking an objective view of the findings obtained until now, it may be said that they do nothing but call at night, and are active during the day.

Yamashina (1941) reported that they left their nest site around sunset to forage for food in the vicinity of a mountain stream and rested in a forest during the day. My observations showed that when the nestling period progressed, the parent birds stayed in the nest in turn during the day, but both of them sometimes left the nest at night. Dr. Yamashina probably reported on their behavior at this breeding stage.

Some bird guides describe that Japanese Night Herons also forage during the day on gloomy days, such as on rainy and cloudy days. When you see Japanese Night Herons foraging during the day, you might think their daytime foraging is an exception if you have the fixed notion that they are "nocturnal". At least, however, my observations showed that they foraged in the daytime every day. Since they are active and relatively easy to observe in the breeding period which coincides with the rainy season, it is no wonder that they are frequently observed to forage in the daytime on a rainy day. Contrary to popular belief, I am convinced that Japanese Night Herons are diurnal. I must be careful not to let this assumption interfere with my future study of the species.

### Japanese Night Herons do not necessarily like fish

It is probably because Japanese people are familiar with fishing herons such as Black-crowned Night Herons and egrets that they tend to associate herons with fish catching behavior. However, the diet of Japanese Night Herons consists primarily of freshwater crabs, land snails and insects as well as soil animals such as earthworms (Fig. 1, Kawakami et al. 2005). Japanese Night Herons have a distinctly shorter and thicker bill than other herons. It is assumed that piscivorous birds generally have a long bill so as to catch larger fish; whereas Japanese Night Herons "articulate" their beak, using their tongue to pluck smaller objects from the water. The head and bill are often observed to be completely filled. In their non-breeding season, they may change their diet and feed on earthworms, small crustaceans and insects (Uchida 1996). Some birds guide the layman (Kawakami et al. 2005). The feathers of the birds are found in pellets, which contain a variety of prey items. The diet consists of crustaceans, land snails, spiders, and insects. In some cases, the diet may include shellfish. The preference for shellfish has been noted in several studies (Fig. 1). The results of a study conducted in 2004 indicated that shellfish were the most common item in the diet of Japanese Night Herons, followed by crustaceans, spiders, and insects (Kawakami et al. 2005).

### The day Japanese Night Herons will become extinct

It is suggested that Japanese Night Herons have been declining across the country since the mid-20th century (Kawakami & Higuchi 2003). In 1993, a study was conducted in the Izu Islands, which are known for their rich avifauna. The study estimated the population of Japanese Night Herons to be around 1,000 birds. However, this estimation is likely to be underestimated, as the study was conducted during the non-breeding season. Studies conducted in other areas have shown similar trends, with populations declining in many parts of Japan. The reasons for this decline are complex and multifaceted, but deforestation and habitat loss are likely to be major factors. The loss of breeding habitat also played a role in their population decline.

### Literature


### Author

Kazuto KAWAKAMI

Forestry and Forest Products Research Institute

Ten years have passed since I started to study Japanese Night Herons. I am getting obsessed with the idea that they bear a striking resemblance to "Kyoro-chan", a bird character of Chocoball produced by Morinaga & Company Ltd. I would like Morinaga to make a box of chocolate balls featuring Japanese Night Herons as well.

kazuto@ifpri.aflrc.go.jp