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QUAWK QUAWK OF MARSH LANDS

By William L. Finley and
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There is an ancient tale which has come down from the dim past to the effect that the night heron can throw out a light from its breast that shines on the water and attracts a fish, enabling this canny bird to seize it with a swift stroke of its powerful beak. As the story is told, the light shines from the fore part of the bird's body and is bright like the glow from a number of fire flies.

This is typical of many stories that are reported about birds, when often a casual observer may wonder how a bird can see or hunt at night. With a stretch of the imagination, he often reaches a wrong conclusion. No expert ornithologist has ever recorded such an experience with the black-crowned night heron.

As the twilight deepens, this bird may be seen flying toward its favorite feeding places. This is the time when one may hear the loud raucous "Quawk," which gives this bird one of its popular names. Its preferred feeding areas are shallow tidal creeks, the edges of ponds, or the open water of some swamp. It is not a wader that hunts solely for fish, because it has a strong taste for little frogs, salamanders, leeches, and even mice.

While the range of the night heron is from the Atlantic to the Pacific, it is not attracted so much to the North. Its choice of residence in Oregon is the alkaline lake region of the southeastern portion of the State. It is one of the fea-

thered residents that adapts itself to conditions and circumstances. It likes to hunt like a hermit, yet it prefers a village where a group can nest in the same locality. In some regions, these birds are found nesting near the ground in a tule swamp. Such a place may be selected if it is surrounded by water where they are protected from roving mammals.

Often times the Quawks may start a village in the trees. They are not expert nest makers, for a home usually looks like a mere botch. The nests are not hollowed out, but mere platforms. On a windy day, the eggs might roll off if the mother didn't sit to hold them on. There is not much danger after the eggs are hatched, for the baby herons seem to kick themselves loose from the shell with one foot while they wrap their long angular toes of the other foot around the nearest twig.

The young night heron is well adapted to climb from limb to limb by reason of his angling toes and the ability to hook his neck or bill over a limb and draw himself up as a parrot does. He seems to know instinctively that falling to the ground below means death, not because he is hurt in the least by the fall, but the parents never descend to the ground below a nest tree. The ground under the trees is likely to be strewn with the bodies of several young birds. The young are fed in the tree-tops and those that fall below starve in the very sight of their parents.

In a night heronry, one may occasionally see one or more of these mottled gray birds hanging dead in the branches.

In walking about the limbs, a young bird may catch his foot in a crotch and hang with his head downward. It is not unusual for one to be seen hanging by the neck. In one case we saw where a young heron hung himself on a limb rather than fall to the ground. He had over-balanced and hooked his chin on a branch and could not regain his perch. His clutched right foot showed that the death struggle had been a reaching and stretching to regain the limb. The head was not caught in a crotch, but simply hooked over the bend of a twig. Had he thrown his head back a little, he would have dropped to the ground. This was demonstrated by turning the bill to an angle of 45 degrees, and his body dropped to the bushes twenty feet below. It was hard to realize how this youngster could hold his rigid position throughout the death struggle. It was a case where the force of instinct was so strong that it held even to death.

Mother Nature has an effective way of developing members of the same family in different forms. The common great blue heron has a long neck and legs, while the black-crowned night heron is just the opposite, with short neck and legs. One is tall and slim, the other short and stubby. Perhaps this came from their different methods of hunting. The Blue heron or crane stands rigid and knee-deep in water as a big fisherman does. He is as motionless as a stump, quietly waiting for a fish or frog to swim within reach. The night heron moves about briskly with head lowered ready for a quick

stroke when he comes within range of his prey.

The wide range of the night heron shows that he is an old and established resident of the world. He is nearly cosmopolitan, except that he doesn't range very far north. Closely related forms of the same species are found in South America, Europe, Asia and Africa. It has a shiny black patch on the top of the head and a gray body with a black back. As long as these birds can find some protected place to nest, they are sure to remain in spite of our civilization. A colony of them still nests in the maples of a dense swamp only a few miles from New York City.

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~~NIGHT HERON~~

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