



## Illinois Lakeshore Birds



### LONG-LEGGED WADING BIRDS

All herons, bitterns, and egrets belong to the family *Ardeidae*.

#### **Great Blue Heron** (*Ardea herodias*)

The great blue heron is a common migratory species and summer resident throughout the state from early March to late November, typically leaving Illinois during September and October to migrate southward. Great blues are most readily spotted in marshy areas and along



Courtesy: The Nature Conservancy

lakeshores and rivers. They also can be seen perched in trees.

A tall, lean bird, great blues reach about 4 feet in length from tip of beak to tip of tail.

They are mostly grey-blue in color with white about the head, have a long neck and legs, and a long, yellowish, daggerlike bill. Their wingspan approaches 6 feet, and their neck folds back into an 's' shape when in flight. Their call is a deep croak: "craank craank."

Great blues commonly feed on fish but have been known to eat whatever they can swallow, including insects, frogs, and small birds and mammals. Feeding during both day and night hours, herons typically hunt by standing motionless in shallow water until prey comes within striking distance.

Nests are constructed of sticks and are almost exclusively found in tall trees amidst large tracts of bottomland forest habitat. They can be found nesting together in colonies called *heronries* or *rookeries*.

After a number of years in decline, primarily due to the destruction of habitat, the great blue heron population is making a strong comeback. Great blues are wary of humans and should be viewed from a distance.

#### **Black- and Yellow-Crowned Night Heron** (*Nycticorax nycticorax* and *Nyctanassa violacea*)

The black- and yellow-crowned night herons are similar in size and appearance with a stocky body, short neck, relatively short legs, stout bill, and plumes on the head. While both species are about 2 feet long, the black-crowned night heron has a black crown (with white plumes during breeding season), black back, and a white breast and belly; the yellow-crowned night heron has a black head with white cheeks and a yellowish crown and plumes, and is otherwise almost uniformly grey. Both species' voice is a flat "quark!" As their name implies, these birds are most active at night.

The black-crowned night heron breeds throughout the entire state from early April to late October, but is only found year 'round in extreme southern Illinois. This species is state-endangered with only four sizable colonies remaining, and thus is protected by law.

Undisturbed and unpolluted foraging areas seem to be the most important factor for sustaining populations of this species, though nesting sites also are essential. Black-crowned night herons can be found in open water and wetland ecosystems feeding primarily on fish



Courtesy: Robert A. Montgomery



(particularly gizzard shad) but resorting to other food sources when fish aren't readily available.

The yellow-crowned night heron also is endangered in Illinois. It is less common than the black-crowned night heron, with only small populations existing in the state. It is most commonly found during the spring breeding



Courtesy: Scott Robinson, Illinois Natural History Survey

season and summer along the major rivers of the state, primarily in southern Illinois. It is an uncommon migrant and summer resident in central Illinois, and more rare to the north. Like all federal migratory species, it is protected by law.

Yellow-crowned night herons are found in open water and wetland ecosystems and also may be seen feeding in upland agricultural fields. However, crayfish and other crustaceans are this species' preferred food source.

### Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*)

The little blue heron is about 2 feet in length and slate blue in color with a maroon neck and dark legs. Its long, spearlike bill also is slate blue with a black tip. Little



Courtesy: Scott Robinson, Illinois Natural History Survey

blues are occasionally seen throughout the state, mostly in the south. This species does not maintain a large breeding population in Illinois. It is commonly found in wetlands and along streams, lakes, and reservoirs, and nests in thickety trees,

sometimes near other heron species. Small fishes and crayfish are the little blue's principal food source, though other aquatic animals and insects also are commonly eaten. Like other heron species, the little blue experienced a population decline due to habitat loss and has been listed as state-endangered since 1977.

### Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*)

This species, also known as the green-backed heron, is much smaller than its cousin the great blue, reaching approximately 20 inches in length. Its back and wings are blue-gray or blue-green in color, it has a chestnut

neck with white stripes, yellow-green or orange legs, and tends to adopt a fairly squat posture.

This common migrant and summer Illinois resident is well camouflaged and difficult to spot along vegetated shorelines.

Look for this bird to be perched in trees along the shoreline, scanning the water for prey. Their call is a low pitched "kyow!" or "skyuk!"

Its diet consists mostly of fish and insects, hunted during day and night hours, but may also include frogs, lizards, and mice. The green heron also has been known to attract fish by dropping a small item on the surface of the water and striking fish that rise to investigate.

Its stick-built nest is typically found near or over water, but also can be found in tree groves away from water. Populations of this species are increasing.



Courtesy: Richard D. Andrews

### Great Egret (*Casmerodius albus*)

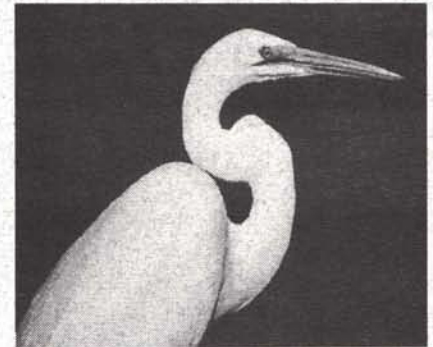
The great egret, which is entirely white except for a yellow bill and black legs, reaches about 3 feet in length and boasts up to a 5-foot wingspan. As such, it is easy to spot in marshy areas or open water, often leaning slightly forward as it forages for food during daylight hours. The great egret may nest in rookeries, sometimes with other heron species. Their nests, up to 2 feet in diameter, consist of sticks and twigs and may be lined with softer material. Great egrets feed on insects, fish, frogs, snakes, mice, small birds, and vegetation.

Historically, the great egret was hunted for its beautiful plume feathers for women's hats; it almost was hunted to extinction.

Another population crash occurred between the 1950s

and 1970s when the pesticide DDT was a common source of egg and young mortality. The great egret population has recovered significantly since then.

A low-pitched croak is apparently all this otherwise elegant bird can muster. Just like the great and little blue herons, during flight the great egret's neck is folded back into an 's' shape.



Courtesy: Scott Robinson, Illinois Natural History Survey



## American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*)

This heron, a rare summer resident, is brown and stocky, with streaked underparts, a black neck stripe, and blackish outer wings when viewed in flight. It reaches approximately 2 feet in length and stands with a stiff posture. When threatened, it points its bill upward and may sway slightly from side to side.

This vertical posture camouflages the bittern as it blends into the structure of the reeds and rushes along the edges of lakes and marshes.



Courtesy: Scott Robinson, Illinois Natural History Survey

The bittern's ability to stand motionless

also aids its hunting technique in which it holds still until prey—including large insects, small fish, and other marsh dwellers—happens by. Unlike the other heron species described above, the bittern rarely perches in trees and is highly secretive. Its presence can be detected by listening for its distinctive call described as a gulping “oonk-ka-choonk.”

Populations of the American bittern appear to depend on ponds and wetlands. As such areas in Illinois are destroyed, bittern populations are in decline and sightings are increasingly rare. It is a state-endangered species.

## SMALLER WADING BIRDS

### Sora (*Porzana carolina*)

This small (10 inches) member of the rail family (*Rallidae*) has a short yellow bill, black patch on its face and throat, and grey-brown plumage. Its shrill descending whinny or its startled “keek!” also help



Courtesy: Robert A. Montgomery, Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation

identify this species. Sora sounds can usually be elicited by making a loud noise or tossing a stone into the marsh or pond.

The sora is common near open water and wetland habitats where it feeds on seeds, plants, and some insects. However, this secretive species, like

many rails, is rarely seen and is more commonly heard as it lurks in dense marshy vegetation. In fact, when one does happen to spot this species, it is usually walking on the ground or marshy vegetation and flicking its short, cocked tail rather than flying.

Nests are shallow baskets of marsh vegetation which sit a few inches above the water and are exceptionally well camouflaged. They can be found nesting near their close relative the **Virginia rail**, which is similar to the sora in most respects, including its secretive nature, except that its diet requires more animal protein. Populations of both species tend to mirror the presence and decline of wetland habitats.

## Sandpipers

The following species belong to a family of birds called sandpipers (family *Scolopacidae*) and are similar in appearance, making them somewhat difficult to distinguish. All but the spotted sandpiper and common snipe are only migratory visitors in Illinois.

### Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes* and *Tringa melanoleuca*)

These yellow-legged shorebirds are frustratingly similar, yet the lesser is slightly smaller (approximately 10 inches in length) than the greater (14 inches). Also, while the bill of the lesser is straight, the bill of the greater is usually curved upward at the tip. The lesser also is tamer than the greater, allowing a much closer approach before it flies a short distance away. Both species have a brown streaked back and wings, contrasted with a whitish belly. A typical meal consists of aquatic insects and fish, snatched with their long, thin bills.

### Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*)

The solitary sandpiper is smaller than the lesser yellowlegs (about 8 inches in length) with a shorter bill, a white eye ring, a dark rump, and greenish legs. It is dark brown above with heavily spotted, buffy white underparts. It bobs its tail when on the ground, and calls out a shrill “peet weet.” Aquatic insects make up the majority of this species' diet.



Courtesy: Robert A. Montgomery, Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation

### Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*)

This diminutive shorebird (approximately 5 inches) is similar in appearance to other sandpipers, yet smaller with a short, slightly downcurved bill. It is brownish above with a distinctly streaked, buff-colored breast. Smaller sandpipers such as this are called “peeps.” Its diet consists of aquatic insects and plant material.



## **Pectoral Sandpiper** (*Calidris melanotos*)

The pectoral sandpiper is about 7 inches long with yellow legs and striped brown coloring on its buffy white breast. It is essentially a larger edition of the least sandpiper. It is distinguished from other sandpipers by an abrupt break between its brown breast and white underbelly. Its call is a “krrriek,” similar to the common snipe (see below). It feeds on aquatic insects and vegetation.

## **Spotted Sandpiper** (*Actitis macularia*)

The spotted sandpiper is a common migratory species that also nests throughout the state. It is seen most commonly in northern Illinois in the summer months and is less commonly seen in central and southern Illinois. It is found along lakeshores and other waterbodies including streams and wetlands.

The spotted sandpiper is approximately 7 inches in length and is grey-brown above with a white underside. This species tends to bob up and down (“teetering”) when standing still, a good identification characteristic. Its call is a shrill “peet weet.”



Courtesy: Scott Robinson, Illinois Natural History Survey

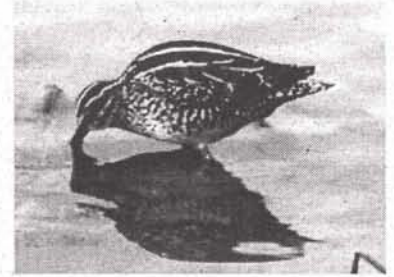
This species most commonly eats insects found on both land and in water by probing the soil and mud along the shore. However, they also have been

know to feed on small fish and other aquatic creatures. A rapid pecking motion characterizes its feeding technique.

Spotted sandpipers often will build nests with grasses and other vegetative material along or near water. Other nesting sites include ledges of rocks and under logs.

## **Common Snipe** (*Gallinago gallinago*)

The stocky common snipe, with a body length of about 10 inches, has shorter legs than the rest of the sandpipers but has an extremely long bill in proportion to its head. It uses this slender bill to probe in soft ground for aquatic insects, snails, and small crustaceans, yet also will eat fish and vegetation. Its brown striped coloring is common to a number of shorebirds, as is its white underbelly. In its zig-zag flight, its long, pointed wings and short, orangish tail are distinctive.



Courtesy: Robert A. Montgomery, Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation

The snipe displays a behavior known as “winnowing” in which it creates an ascending series of woo-woo-woo notes by the vibration of its tail feathers during aerial dives. Its call is a sharp “skipe.”

Preferring open wetlands, snipes nest in depressions on small tussocks of sedges or grass, or on mounds of moss. This species is known to nest in northern Illinois and overwinter in southern Illinois.

## **A Note on Lakeshore Management**

As with other animal species, diversity of habitat influences the diversity of bird species using a particular area. Landowners along Illinois’ lakes who maintain or restore lakeshore and adjacent wetland vegetation may be able to increase the number of bird species using their property, as well as the number of opportunities to view these species.

**Lake Notes . . .** is a series of publications produced by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency about issues confronting Illinois’ lake resources. The objective of these publications is to provide lake and watershed residents with a greater understanding of environmental cause-and-effect relationships, and actions we all can take to protect our lakes.

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For more information about other publications in this series and to request copies, please contact: Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, DWPC-Lake and Watershed Unit, P.O. Box 19276, Springfield, Illinois, 62794-9276; 217/782-3362.

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