



**A Snowy Egret files in for a salt marsh brunch**



**An immature  
Black-crowned Nigh-Heron**

## **Brunswick Wildlife Little Waders**

Birds called waders are always lurking around the salt marsh. Some are large and some small. They drop by to scrounge up some grub, especially when the tide is low, a time when mud flats are exposed and fish are concentrated into small pools of shallow water called pannes.

This article is about two of the little guys. The big guys like the Great Blue Heron and Great Egret can wait for a later article. They are so large and photogenic they get enough attention. I am pretty sure every Brunswick County resident who owns a camera has taken a photo of them by now.

The white bird is the Snowy Egret and the streaked bird is a juvenile Black-crowned Night-Heron. Both are members of the family Ardeidae, which along with three other families are commonly called waders. Both may be found year-round in the Lower Cape Fear.

Hérons and egrets are long-legged like all waders. They have long necks and long sharply pointed bills. Other waders like ibises and Wood Storks have specialized bills adapted for probing the muck.

Identifying the Snowy is a bit easier than the Night-Heron, so let's go there first. The Snowy might be confused with a Great Egret or an immature Little Blue Heron. If you see its yellow feet, there is no question...it is a Snowy Egret.

The Great Egret is about fifty percent taller and weighs almost twice as much. The Snowy has yellow lores between the eyes and the base of its black bill. The Great Egret's bill is mostly yellow.

An immature Little Blue Heron is approximately the same size as the Snowy; however, it does not have yellow feet plus its legs are pale green and its bill is bluish. Unfortunately, during their first summer juveniles of both species have pale legs and bills so you are on your own.

Just kidding! Remember to carefully study the bird in your binoculars until you note all field marks before going to the field guide...in case the bird leaves before you finalize your identification.

For adult Night-Herons, differentiation is fairly easy. Is the crown black or pale yellow? If pale yellow the bird is a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. Be careful not to let the two long, white plumes of the Black-crowned affect your identification.

Also, the Black-crowned is stockier and has a notably shorter neck or as Pete Dunne so well describes in his new field guide companion: "...its head is characteristically couched, just looks like a thickset thug."

In differentiating the heavily-streaked juveniles of both night-heron species, you are on your own. I know I've already used that joke, only this time it is closer to being true since the differentiation may be very difficult. The stockiness and posture still works for juveniles but may be hard to distinguish from a distance.

Fortunately, the immature Yellow-crown's bill is dark while the immature Black-crown's is yellowish. There are also subtle differences in streaks, eye color, size of the white spots on their upper wings, thinness of bill, and length of legs. Overall the coloring of the immature Black-crowned is flat brown where the Yellow-crowned juvenile is darker with a purplish sheen. The immature Black-crown's eyes are yellow to amber, like the bird in the photo.

All of the above are subtle field marks or, depending on lighting and distance, difficult to detect. It takes time and patience to sort them out. Again, study the bird intensively and pour over that field guide. Good luck!

Although they may be found all along our coast, I recommend looking for these guys at Sunset Beach's Twin Lakes. At high tide, they may be easily found roosting along with other herons, egrets, ibises, and Wood Storks in trees ringing the lakes and on the golf course. Night-Herons mostly forage at night so they may be found roosting most of the day.

The westernmost corner of the west lake, the corner nearest the highway, is a particularly good roost to check. The Twin Lakes are also recommended because it is relatively easy to find adult Night-Herons along with juveniles. Since it takes juveniles three years to reach adult plumage some of the birds you see may have plumages between juvenal and adult.

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