

# Black-crowned Night-Herons of the Lake Calumet Region, Chicago, Illinois

Article 3

Nesting Ecology of Black-crowned

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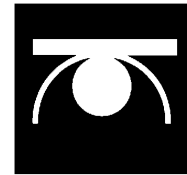
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### Nesting Ecology of Black-crowned Night-Herons at Lake Calumet Wetlands

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## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	95
INTRODUCTION .....	95
METHODS .....	96
2002 .....	96
2003 .....	96
RESULTS .....	96
Nesting Habitat at Lake Calumet Wetlands 1984–2003 .....	96
Arrival and Courtship .....	98
Nesting Phenology .....	98
Clutch Size .....	101
Nest, Egg, and Nesting Fate .....	101
Fledging and Dispersal .....	103
Productivity .....	103
DISCUSSION .....	106
LITERATURE CITED .....	107
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	108

**ABSTRACT**

We examined the nesting ecology of a Black-crowned Night-Heron (

## METHODS

### 2002

The activities of BCNH were observed for two-to-four-hour periods on eight occasions during April 5 to May 10 to document the timing of breeding activities. Nest building, pairing, breeding, and nesting behaviors were recorded. Nest monitoring was initiated at IRM on May 15, when 30 nests were marked by placing plastic flagging on *Phragmites* stems adjacent to each nest. The number of eggs and chicks was recorded for active nests. Additional nests were added May 20 (n= 9), May 26 (n= 6), May 30 (n= 2), and June 4 (n= 1). Nests were checked every four to seven days depending on weather and staff availabil-



Year 1984  
1985  
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smaller isolated patches or clumps to larger blocks of cover. Thus, the area where the breeding colony was located was heterogenous with regard to available cover.

The BCNH colony was comprised of three "sub-colonies," each isolated from each other by an expanse of open water (Fig. 2). The northern subcolony held a greater proportion of the nests than either the eastern or southern subcolonies. Isolation of nesting areas from the shoreline by deeper water and thick emergent cover may have reduced the incidence of mammalian predation and vandalism/disturbance. Least isolated from shoreline by distance or deep, open water, nests in the eastern subcolony did experience greater predation loss in 2002 than in the monitored portion of northern subcolony.

The BCNH constructed nests of the previous year's *Phragmites* stems (occasionally lined with purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) or unidentified woody stems) placed within a clump of standing stems. Nest distribution was generally clumped. There were concentrations of nests in close proximity (some less than a meter apart), generally in areas of sparser cover (i.e., near edges of cover or where *Phragmites* stems were less dense). Occasional nests were located in single clumps of reeds or scattered in denser cover.

### Arrival and Courtship

The earliest date that BCNH have been observed at LCW during the period 1993 to 2003 was on March 10, 1994 (Table 2). During 1993, 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001, and 2003 no herons were observed on earlier (i.e., prior to date first observed) visits; no previous visits were recorded for 1996, 1997, 1998, and 2002. No BCNH were observed on March 29, 1992 or March 23, 1999, thus the herons apparently began arriving after those dates. Although we cannot be sure of the exact date of arrival based on these data, they do indicate that BCNH typically began arriving in substantial numbers during the latter half of March.

BCNH may continue to arrive at LCW well after others have begun nest building and pairing. In 2002 the number of BCNH at IRM greatly increased between April 26 and May 12. Also, no BCNH were observed at nearby Heron Pond (HP) until April 6 of that year. Similarly, BCNH were present at IRM as early as March 10 in 1994, but were not observed at

nearby Big Marsh (BM) as late as May 1, though were known to be successfully nesting there later in the season.

In 2002 BCNH were first observed at LCW on March 17, and were initially seen (n=4) carrying sticks on April 6. Early in the breeding cycle this behavior signifies beginning of nest building by males just prior to courtship and accepting a female at the nest (Meyerriecks 1960, Palmer 1962). Later, after pair formation, the male will present twigs to females prior to copulation and this behavior persists until after the eggs are laid. Gross (1923) reported that the first eggs were laid an average of seven days after start of nest construction; based on this information the first eggs would have appeared at LCW around April 13.

The first pairs were observed at nests at IRM on April 16; the number of pairs seen from an unobstructed vantage point increased from 2 on April 16, to 10 April 23, and 22 on May 2. Circling flights (synchronization of sexual behavior in early pair formation, Meyerriecks 1960) were observed on April 16; precopulatory displays (including billing, feather nibbling, twig presentation, erection of feathers, and neck stretch), and copulation were recorded as early as April 18 and April 19. According to Allen and Mangels (1940) the first eggs are laid an average of 3.3 days after copulation or 4–5 days after pair formation. Based on this information the first eggs would have appeared on April 20 or 21.

In 2003 BCNH were first observed carrying sticks on April 9, thus the first eggs would have appeared at LCW around April 16; in fact, pairs were first observed at nests on April 16. Precopulatory displays (including billing, feather nibbling, twig presentation, erection of feathers, and neck stretch) were recorded as early as April 18, thus the first eggs would be expected to have appeared on April 21. Based on our sample of nests, the first clutches were initiated on April 16, with half the nests initiated by May 8, and the last on May 23.

### Nesting Phenology

The phenology of BCNH clutch initiation, egg hatching, and juvenile fledging/dispersal at IRM was reconstructed based on direct observation (i.e., nest monitoring) and the following assumptions:

BCNH Nesting Colonies (2002–2003)  
Lake Calumet Area

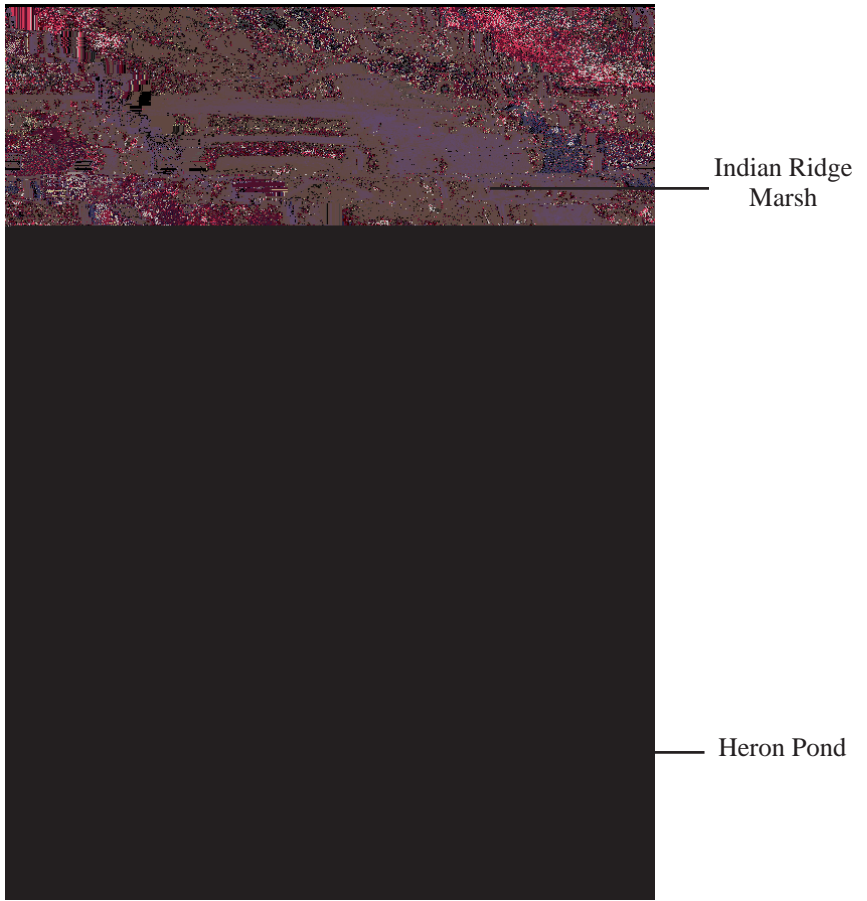


Figure. 2. Location of Black-crowned Night-Heron colony in *Phragmites* cover at Indian Ridge Marsh during 2002 and 2003 and Heron Pond in 2002.

Table 2. Number at first sighting by week of occurrence of Black-crowned Night Herons at Lake Calumet Wetlands, 1993–2003.

Year	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	
Week							No Data					
March 1–7												
March 8–14		1										
March 15–21											16	
March 22–28			14		40	3			2			18
March 29–April 4	25			17					75			

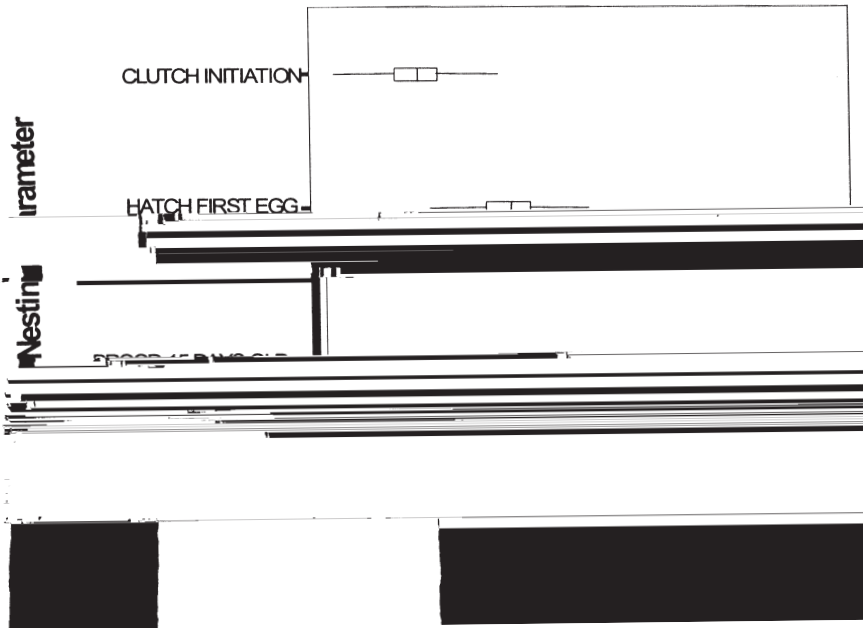
- 1) approximately two days to lay each egg (Gross 1923, Palmer 1962, Tremblay and Ellison 1980);
- 2) an average incubation period of 24 (23.5) days for A-eggs (i.e., first egg laid; Custer et al. 1992);
- 3) hatching one day after pipping, two days after cracking (Custer and Peterson 1991);
- 4) B-egg hatches about one day after A-, and C- hatches two days after B- (Custer et al. 1992); we assumed D-egg hatched one day after the C-egg;
- 5) flight is attained at about six weeks (42 days) of age (Palmer 1962, Wolford and Boag 1971);
- 6) on average, young of the year disperse at 58 days of age (Erwin et al. 1996).

In 2002 we initially marked 30 nests on May 15 and added new nests as encountered in that portion of the colony (n= 9 on May 20, n= 6 on May 26, n= 2 on May 30, and n= 1 on June 4). Based on our monitored sample of nests, we estimated that clutches were initiated as early as April 20, with half being initiated by mid-May, and the last on June 7 (Fig. 3). The last clutches initiated were in recycled nests; excluding second and third clutches (i.e., recycled nests) the latest a clutch was initiated, based on our marked sample, was May 23.

The estimate of April 20 for the initiation of laying coincides with estimates of clutch initiation based on our observations of pre-copulatory displays and copulation and information provided in Allen and Mangels (1940).

The first eggs would have hatched by mid-May, with A-eggs from half of the monitored nests hatching by the second week in June; A-eggs from the last nests initiated would have hatched on July 1 (Fig. 3). Thus, eggs would have been present at IRM over a period of about two and one-half months (April 20 to July 4-5).

Based on a flightless period of six weeks (Palmer 1962), the first and last young, respectively, attained flight on June 25 and August 10 (Fig. 3). Erwin et al. (1996) reported that age of dispersal in BCNH averaged 55 and 60 days in the two years of their study. Thus, based on an average dispersal age of 58 days, dispersal of juvenile IRM BCNH began about mid-July and continued through late August, with most having reached dispersal age by the middle of August. This coincides well with the results of our post-breeding surveys, which revealed a precipitous decline in juveniles observed at IRM between August 10



16% larger than

months. The first young attained flight on July 5, and dispersal of juvenile BCNH from IRM began the first week in July and continued through mid-August, with most having reached dispersal age by the end of July. This coincides well with the results of our post-breeding surveys which revealed that most juveniles had left by mid-August of that year (see Fledging and Dispersal below).

**Clutch Size**

Mean clutch size (all clutches) of BCNH nesting at IRM in 2002 was similar to that of clutches in tree nests at nearby ISPAT Inland Steel (IIS) (Table 3). Mean clutch sizes (all clutches) at IRM in 2002 and 2003 were very similar; clutch size declined considerably at IIS in 2003.

A total of six monitored nests at IRM was recycled (one nest with second and third clutches) in 2002. Mean clutch size for initial clutches was slightly higher than for all clutches (Table 3). We did not document any recycled nests at IRM in 2003.

When sorted by median date of initiation (5/13, see Nesting Phenology above), i.e., early nests < median date, late nests > median date, the average clutch size in 2002 was 0.48 eggs larger in nests initiated on or prior to the median date. Thus, early clutches were nearly



eggs hatch asynchronously and later-hatching nestlings may be disadvantaged, with competition by older siblings leading to starvation, drowning, or trampling of younger nestlings. This was undoubtedly the cause of the disappearance of many nestlings. We frequently visited nests with two or three thriving siblings, and the smaller, less thrifty individual was often missing at our next visit.

Several eggs had apparently been depredated by Ring-billed Gulls (RBG), judging by bill marks, although in at least one case the gulls may have scavenged a previously abandoned clutch. Large numbers of RBG frequented the area and were often seen fishing in open-water portions of IRM. We did not observe Gulls at BCNH nests, although we did note a BCNH briefly chase a RBG that was flying low over the colony. We did find and examine three siblings < 5 days old that had been killed by single pecks to the back of their skull.

Most nests successfully fledged at least one young on 2003 (Table 5); there were no known or suspected losses of entire clutches or broods to predation. Although no eggs were observed in water, all eggs missing from two flat-topped nests were assumed to have rolled out into the water. One nest was presumed abandoned as the marked eggs were present well after they should have hatched. At least 25 eggs were missing or otherwise failed to hatch. Twenty-three nestlings did not survive to fledging (i.e., 15 days post-hatch); of these, 21 were missing, 1 was found dead in nest (cause unknown), another had fallen out of the nest and was found with its neck caught between *Phragmites* stems.

### Fledging and Dispersal

The number of juveniles observed in 2002 increased dramatically between mid-July and mid-August. The first appearance of juveniles between June 29 and July 13 coincides rather well with our first observation of flighted juveniles on July 3 while performing nest checks, and estimated dates that older chicks attained flight. The number of juveniles observed peaked on August 10, before declining precipitously between August 10 and 24 (Fig. 5). This reduction in juveniles is consistent with our expectation, based on nesting phenology (see above), that 97% of juveniles would have reached dispersal age (~58 days

post-hatch) by August 24. In 2003 the number of juveniles observed peaked earlier than in 2002; in 2003 most young were gone from IRM by mid-August (Fig. 5).

### Productivity

While comparisons of productivity between studies are useful, the ratio of breeders to non-breeders, food availability, local weather patterns, climate/growing season (latitude), predation, and a variety of density-dependent factors can influence productivity. Most powerful are comparisons with contemporary local/regional populations. The only sizable colony in the south Chicago area available to us for comparison during 2002 and 2003 was at IIS, located on the Lake Michigan shoreline only 15 km from the Lake Calumet colony (Fig. 1). This colony is located at the same latitude as LCW; the IIS BCNH nested in cottonwood trees during this study.

Daily nest survival rate was similar between the colonies we examined (Table 6). In 2002 clutches at IRM and IIS had a lower likelihood of surviving the incubation period, when compared to 2003 when the survival rate of nests to hatch was relatively high at both locations.

Daily survival rate of nests during the nestling period was similar between the IRM and IIS colonies (Table 6). Survival of broods to 15 days of age was lower at IIS than at IRM; brood survival at IRM was similar between years.

In 2002, nest success (a function of survival rate to hatching and survival rate to fledging) at IRM was greater than at IIS, which was poor (Table 6). Nest success at both IRM and IIS improved between 2002 and 2003, although remained poor at the latter.

Egg success, the probability of an egg hatching, was low at IIS during 2002, though improved between 2002 and 2003 at this site and at IRM. Nestling survival was low at IIS in 2002; survival of young to 15 days improved at both IRM and IIS between years (Table 6).

The mean number of young surviving/nest was very low at IIS, whereas "recruitment" was relatively high at IRM by comparison (Table 6). Recruitment increased at both IRM and IIS between 2002 and 2003.

Table 5. Fate of Black-crowned Night-Heron Clutches/Broods at Indian Ridge Marsh, Cook County, Illinois, 2003.

Fate of Clutch	Number of Clutches	Percent of Clutches
Successful <sup>1</sup>	52	94.5

Figure 5. Numbers of juvenile Black-crowned Night-Herons observed at Indian Ridge Marsh colony during





## DISCUSSION

BCNH utilize a wide range of arboreal habitats for nesting including upland orchards (Gross 1923), bottomland forests (Bjorklund and Holm 1997), coastal islands (Parsons 1995), and trees in towns and cities (Farwell 1919, Cunningham 1945). Breeding colonies are also frequently located in emergent vegetation such as *Phragmites* or cattails (*Typha*), with nests located just inches above the water (Nelson 1876–1877, Rockwell 1910, Greenwood 1981). During the 20 years from 1984 to 2003 the Lake Calumet BCNH changed nesting locations as habitat conditions dictated, i.e., when nesting cover was impacted by fire, flooding, or succession (or lack thereof). The colony has maintained a high degree of fidelity to this area in spite of these changes. This supports Graber et al.'s (1978) assertion that the quality of the surrounding foraging habitat is a more important criterion for nesting than the particular habitat in which the nests are actually placed.

There appeared to be a clear preference for relatively open nest sites (i.e., of lower *Phragmites* stem density). A more open nest would seem to result in greater nest predation risk. However, 1) nests tended to be clumped in these more open areas and there may be higher survival of individual nests within groups, and 2) there may be greater inclusive fitness in that parents may be better able to avoid predators at some risk of clutch/brood predation.

Clutch size may be affected by a variety of factors linked to female condition and/or environmental quality (Winkler and Allen 1996). Mean clutch size in our study in 2002 was similar to that of recently-studied colonies in Maryland and the Pacific Northwest. The average clutch size at IRM was at the upper end of the range of average clutch sizes observed in colonies that were thought to be impacted by DDE, and below the range of clutch sizes observed for "clean" colonies in the United States and Canada. Interestingly, mean clutch size for first and second clutches in our study differed by the same amount as those in colonies in Oregon and Washington. The reason for the decline in clutch size between 2002 and 2003 at IIS was unknown.

Early clutches (< median date) were larger, as compared with those completed later (> median date). Custer et al. (1983) noted that BCNH clutches initiated later in the

season had a larger proportion of smaller clutches (i.e., < four eggs) than earlier clutches. It is unclear as to whether such seasonal declines in clutch size are related directly to female condition or an adaptive response to declining resources as nesting season progresses (Winkler and Allen 1996).

Our estimate of April 20 to June 10 for the egg-laying period at IRM in 2002 is similar to April 24 to June 18 reported by Graber et al. (1978) for northern Illinois colonies. However, our estimate of April 20 to May 26 for the egg-laying period in 2003 is somewhat shorter than reported by Graber et al. (1978). In 2002, eggs would have been present at IRM over a period of two and one-half months; this is a longer egg period than in 2003 by about two weeks. This is consistent with the number of juveniles present during our post-breeding surveys; most young were gone from IRM by mid-August of that year, or about two weeks earlier than in 2002. We did not encounter recycled nests in 2003, thus there may have been fewer re-nesting attempts in that year.

Daily survival rate of nests at IRM and IIS during the nestling period were similar to those examined by others. Survival of broods to 15 days of age was lower in tree-nesting BCNH at IIS than the *Phragmites*-nesting colony at IRM or reported in previous studies. Parsons (1995) reported that nestling survival was lower in Cattle Egrets nesting in shrubs as compared to those nesting in *Phragmites* in the same colony (Parsons 1995). We sometimes noted eggs and carcasses of young on the ground below nesting trees at IIS. This colony was directly exposed to winds off of Lake Michigan, and we assume that some of this loss may have been due to high winds and other mishaps causing nestlings to fall out of trees. Brood survival at IRM was similar between years, and was relatively high in comparison with past studies.

Although some eggs and young were lost to predation, we were not able to determine the cause of all losses. It is plausible that RBG were responsible for the disappearance of some of the eggs and smaller nestlings that weren't accounted for. However, predation by this species did not seem to be an important factor at IRM, particularly in light of the large numbers of RBG frequenting this wetland. In contrast, RBG were responsible for the poor productivity of some BCNH colonies in Alberta (Wolford and Boag 1971). Predation by Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*) essentially eliminated production in one colony in the

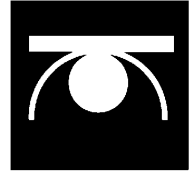


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# Black-crowned Night-Herons of the Lake Calumet Region, Chicago, Illinois



## Article 4

### Population Trends in a Black-crowned Night-Heron Colony at Lake Calumet Wetlands

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## ABSTRACT

The number of active Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) nesting colonies in Illinois has declined significantly over the past century. Habitat loss/degradation and other factors such as exposure to environmental contaminants and competition for nest sites at established colonies may have contributed to this decline. In this study, we examined recent trends in population levels of Black-crowned Night-Herons nesting at wetlands associated with Lake Calumet in southeastern Chicago, Illinois. The number of Black-crowned Night-Herons nesting annually at these wetlands has fluctuated widely over the last two decades. Immigration of herons from riverine colonies may have driven population increases during the mid-1980s and early 1990s. However, this population has remained relatively stable at between 300 and 400 pairs during 1997–2003.

## INTRODUCTION

The decline of the colonial-nesting Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) (BCNH) as a breeding species in the state of Illinois has been documented by a number of authors. According to Bohlen (1989:16), "The Black-crowned, like other heron species, is declining in numbers and has been for the past half-century." Mlodinow (1984:76) reported that, in the Chicago area, "[BCNH] Nesting colonies are steadily becoming smaller and fewer..." And Graber, et al. (1978:54) indicated that their Illinois data suggested "a serious decline in the BCNH population in the past half-century." Results of the Illinois Colonial Waterbird Survey indicated that there were an estimated 1,900 nesting pairs in 1987 (Kleen 1987), compared with 400+ in 1999 (Kleen 1999).

Young-of-the-year BCNH were reported in the Calumet marshes as early as 1874 (Nelson 1876–1877). Although there are no accurate figures for the extent of these wetlands during presettlement times, historic maps suggest that marshland formations totaled at least 22,000 acres on the Illinois side of the state line. Due to the impacts of industry, railroads, waste disposal, urbanization, and hydrologic changes during the 20th century, only approximately 500 acres of wetlands remained at Lake Calumet (LCW) in recent

years (Landing 1986), much of it in an impaired state. Despite these habitat losses and degradation, BCNH have maintained a tradition of nesting at wetlands associated with LCW in southeastern Chicago (Fig.1). The common reed (*Phragmites australis*) has been of primary importance as nesting cover for this colony since 1984; cottonwood trees (*Populus deltoides*) were of secondary importance in some years.

We present the results of weekly population censuses conducted during spring of 2002 and 2003 of BCNH nesting at LCW, along with a compilation of the results of censuses of nests and/or breeding BCNH conducted since 1984.

## METHODS

**Population Levels**—BCNH are largely crepuscular/nocturnal foragers that disperse from their daytime roosts/nesting areas at dusk. During the 2002 and 2003 breeding seasons, BCNH population censuses were conducted at dusk at the northern portion of Indian Ridge Marsh on a weekly basis from the arrival of the BCNH in late March through late May (the final census in 2003 was conducted on June 1). Censuses were conducted under conditions of no precipitation and winds < 15 mph by two observers beginning one hour before sunset and continuing until the rate of departure was < 2 herons/5 minute period. As days lengthened the herons became active earlier and as of May 1 censuses were initiated two hours before sunset.

Although no BCNH were noted at nearby Heron Pond on March 24 and 30, 2002, a number of herons were observed at this site on April 6, 2002. After mid-April 2002 it became apparent that some herons were nesting at Heron Pond and censuses were subsequently conducted on April 26 and May 12, 2002 at that site. Early in the spring of 2003, a wildfire at Heron Pond destroyed essentially all of the emergent vegetation at that site, eliminating the BCNH's nesting substrate for the season. No BCNH nesting occurred at Heron Pond that year.

**Peak Numbers**—Peak numbers of BCNH were based on evening censuses of BCNH leaving nesting colonies to forage, conducted during 1992–2003. Data for 1992–2001







Figure 2. Results of counts of Black-crowned Night-Herons leaving nesting locations to forage during 2002 and 2003.



cally during the latter half of the 1980s and remained relatively high into the mid-1990s. Numbers of BCNH nests at LCW declined throughout much of the 1990s before essentially leveling off at 300–400 nests during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Fig. 4).

DISCUSSION

Many factors have been suggested as causes for recent declines in BCNH populations, including vandalism, disturbance at breeding colonies, drainage of wetlands, and land development for homes and recreation (Davis 1993). A relationship has been demonstrated between chlorinated hydrocarbon pesticide pollution and egg-shell thinning in herons (Faber et al. 1972). Pre-1947 (pre-DDT) and post-1947 (DDT-era) BCNH eggshell thickness measurements taken in 15 U.S. states demonstrate significantly thinner eggshells in post-1947 clutches (Ohlendorf and Marois 1990, Ohlendorf et al. 1978, Ohlendorf et al. 1977), but convincing documentation that DDT (DDE) and other pesticides have caused local BCNH population declines before DDT



1990s corresponded to the severe flooding of the Illinois River floodplain (and resultant desertion of colonies by BCNH) during the same period, suggesting that emigration of BCNH from Illinois River colonies to LCW may have occurred during that time. The Breeding Bird Survey Trend Map (1966–1996) for BCNH also shows decreases ( $< -1.5\%$ ) in Illinois River BCNH populations, and corresponding increases ( $> +1.5\%$ ) in LCW BCNH populations during that period.

Interspecific competition for nest sites may have affected BCNH populations at various Illinois colonies. At Lake Renwick (Plainfield, Will Co., IL) Double-crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) appear to have displaced Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*), Great Egrets (*Ardea alba*), and BCNH from their traditional nest sites. As Double-crested Cormorant numbers increased, the BCNH population at Lake Renwick declined from 273 nests in 1983 to 57 nests in 1990 (Milosevich 1990). Numbers of Double-crested Cormorants have also increased at the Baker's Lake colony in northwestern Cook Co., while the BCNH population there declined from 220 nests in 1989 to 11 nests in 1992. It is plausible that BCNH emigrating from Lake Renwick, Baker's Lake, and other declining Illinois BCNH colonies contributed to the BCNH population increases at LCW during the late 1980s to early 1990s. The decline in the breeding population during the 1990s and relatively stable number of breeding pairs since that time suggests that LCW were ultimately unable to support a higher breeding population resulting from the emigration of BCNH from Illinois River and other colonies.

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