

Do Night Herons Read Tide Books? by Ranger Brad Barker

If a Black-Crowned Night Heron could jump for joy, you would've seen it happen during the first week of March. That's when the grunion returned for their first amazing "run" of the year.

Now, I'm pretty sure Black-Crowned Night Herons don't know how to read a tide book. Maybe they're getting tipped off by a rogue grunion. But you can count on this: a couple of hours before every grunion run, the herons line up on Doheny's shoreline - sometimes by the dozens - licking their chops. They're eagerly anticipating high tide, which will deliver a feast of flopping, egg-laying grunion, which sometimes appear in such great numbers that the wet sand is blanketed by their silvery sheen.



This grunion activity, which usually starts in March and occurs every two weeks through August, appears to kick off the nesting season for Doheny's Black-Crowned Night Herons. On a sunny March day, during the first week of grunion runs, I stopped near what the initiated call "the poop tree," to check out this year's heron activity. (If you would like to be among the initiated, stand under the poop tree, which is next to the snack bar. Compliments of a nervous heron, you may soon feel a fine, white, fishy mist cooling you and coating your sunglasses.) On this day, as I stood



back from the tree, I saw more heron activity than I had ever witnessed in my years at the park.

A small crowd of visitors – dog walkers, stroller pushers and joggers – gathered with me to watch the famous tree bustle with activity. We counted 17 adult herons and 17 nests in the tree. We watched birds flying in all directions.



We saw several herons fly to nearby trees, clumsily snap off twigs and then struggle to add them to their flimsy nests. Other herons flew to the crowns of nearby palm trees, which are also regularly used for nesting. One of our group



was excited to have found a juvenile heron that was watching us warily from his perch.

We also spied two adults that appeared to be courting. They were sitting next to each other and romantically touching bills, setting their red eyes aglow. Then, as one woman put it, the two herons did “what love birds do.” Or, as she continued, “Now we know which one’s the

male and which one’s the female!” I have to admit that this moment was a little awkward for me - I wasn’t sure whether to put my binoculars down or pass them around. (I passed them around.)

Most of this daytime activity will subside soon. But, if you come to Doheny during a summer night, you will discover why the bird is called a *Night Heron*.

Throughout the dark hours, the adult herons regularly fly overhead, letting out their trademark “quawk.” To some they sound like dogs (this week, I had two people tell me that they thought there were barking dogs up in the trees). Meanwhile, the nestlings make it their business to make noise. They make a racket at night. They squawk, cluck, chip, screech and squabble to the point that it sounds to me like one bird is maiming another, helping to create an eerie atmosphere for the lonely night ranger.

While all of this noisemaking is going on, the chicks grow amazingly fast. In only a few weeks, they are still brown, but they are nearly as big as their black, gray and white parents. The fledglings come down from the trees and walk goofily around the picnic areas, trying to figure out what to do with their lives.



Sometimes, we find them looking dreamily through the chain link fence near San Juan Creek. Assuming their happy place is the creek, where they can find food and cover, we’ll often help them find their way there.



Black-Crowned Night Herons have become fixtures at Doheny State Beach and they have become the highlight of many bird walks. They're big and easy to discover. They're elegant - with their handsome coloring and long, regal plumage hanging off the backs of their crowns. They're awkward - with their hunched shoulders and their funny vocalizations. There are lots of 'em.

In fact, I like to tell our visiting school groups that, if we had a Doheny mascot, we should call ourselves the mighty Doheny Black-Crowned Night Herons!