

# Birders act to protect Black-crowned Night-Heron rookery in Lincoln Park

By Carolyn A. Marsh

Who would have thought that historic Lincoln Park would ever become home to the Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) in the spring and summer? Nevertheless, a rookery was discovered on Lincoln Park Zoo property on a small island in South Pond by Greg Neise in 2006. The 35-acre zoo is on Chicago's lakefront on the north side and serves 3 million visitors per year.

The discovery presented a different kind of challenge to Lincoln Park Zoo staff. Although the organization operates one of the largest zoo-based conservation and science programs in the country, the presence of the Black-crowned Night-Heron rookery created a very real, not artificial, predicament.

At the time of the rookery discovery, the zoo had solidified construction plans to create a \$12-million New Urban Oasis Nature Boardwalk on 14 acres surrounding and stretching across South Pond. As the herons migrate south during the fall, their expected return to Chicago was in the middle of March 2010, and the breeding season would overlap with the premier opening of the nature boardwalk project on 24 June 2010.

Since the night-heron is listed as endangered in the state of Illinois, and nested within the vicinity of the boardwalk project, the Lincoln Park Zoo and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources agreed on a protection footprint that outlined the area within which construction activity



## This Black-crowned Night-Heron young was rescued after a severe storm in 2010.

Photo by Dawn Smith.

would not occur if the bird returned. It also marked where construction could continue outside the perimeter while the species is on site. The zoo counted about 63 pairs nesting on the densely vegetated island in 2008 and 2009.

## 2009

During 2009, in preparation for the restoration project, the zoo pumped out the water in the South Pond. A few Lincoln Park residents, Chicago Bird Collision Monitors and

Chicago Audubon Society notified the zoo they were concerned the night-heron rookery and other wildlife could be harmed by the draw down, and contacted officials about their concerns.

## 2010

However, no one anticipated the ghastly news that broke on IBET (Illinois Birders Exchanging Thoughts listserv, June 2010) that revealed a troubling scene at Lincoln Park.

Joann and Emil Martinec posted on line that most of the nesting activity seemed to have moved off the island in South Pond with the birds relocating into the canopy of the tree-lined prome-

nade that is the major walkway in the park segment extending southward from the South Pond to the LaSalle Drive underpass. They counted about 100 nests in the aftermath of a storm that devastated many of the nests. There were many twigs and eggshells lying about the ground under the trees, some with fresh yolk; perhaps 20-30 eggs in total, though it was hard for them to tell with all the foot traffic having crushed and scattered shell remnants. They reported a few eggs contained fetal birds, in a rather developed state.

Michael Ferguson posted he noticed four more dead night-heron fledglings along the path under the trees. Plus there was a concert stage being set up by the Chicago Park District that he thought was certainly