NYCTICORAX CALEDONICUS.

Nankeen Night Heron.

Ardea Caledonica, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. ii. p. 679.—Gmel. Edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., vol. i. p. 626.
Caledonian Night Heron, Lath. Gen. Syn., vol. v. p. 55.—Cook's Voy., vol. ii. p. 111. pl. 50.—Lath. Gen. Hist., vol. ix. p. 59.
Nycticorax Caledonicus, Less. Traité d'Orn., p. 571.
Ardea Sparmannii, Wagl. Syst. Av., sp. 32.
New Holland Night Heron, Lath. Gen. Hist., vol. ix. p. 62. young.
Gnal-gañ-ning, Aborigines of the lowland districts of Western Australia
Quaker and *Nankeen-bird* of the Colonists.
Al-ŏr-woon, Aborigines of Port Essington.

This beautiful species is universally dispersed over the continent of Australia, but is far less abundant on the western than on the eastern coast. In the southern latitudes it is only a summer visitant, arriving in New South Wales and South Australia in August and September, and retiring again in February. As its name implies, it is nocturnal in its habits, and from its frequenting swamps, inlets of the sea, the sedgy banks of rivers, and other secluded situations, it is seldom seen. On the approach of morning it retires to the forests and perches among the branches of large trees, where, shrouded from the heat of the sun, it sleeps the whole day, and when once discovered is easily procured, as it seldom moves unless shot at or driven from its perch by some other means, and when forced to quit its perch it merely flies a short distance and again alights. Its flight is slow and flapping, and during its passage through the air the head is drawn back between the shoulders and the legs are stretched out backwards after the manner of the true Herons. When perched on the trees or resting on the ground, it exhibits none of the grace and elegance of those birds, its short neck resting on the shoulders, as shown in the smaller figure on the accompanying Plate. When impelled by hunger to search for a supply of food it naturally becomes more animated, and its actions more lively and prying; the varied nature of its food in fact demands some degree of activity—fishes, water-lizards, crabs, frogs, leeches and insects, being all partaken of with equal avidity.

It breeds in the months of November and December, and generally in companies like the true Herons; the favourite localities being the neighbourhood of swampy districts, where an abundant supply of food is to be procured; the branches of large trees, points of shelving rocks and caverns, are equally chosen as a site for the nest, which is rather large and flat, and generally composed of crooked sticks loosely interwoven. The eggs, which are usually three in number, are of a pale green colour, and average two inches and five-eighths in length by one inch and a half in breadth.

So little difference exists in the colouring of the sexes, that it is extremely difficult to distinguish the male from the female, and never with certainty unless dissection be resorted to; both have the three beautiful elongated occipital plumes, the use of which except for ornament is not easily imagined. The young, on the contrary, differ so greatly from the adult, that they might readily be regarded as a distinct species.

The following is a faithful description of a mature bird and a young one of the first year:—

The adult has the crown of the head and the nape black; occipital plumes white; back of the neck, all the upper surface, wings and tail rich cinnamon-brown; stripe over the eye, sides of the face, neck and all the under surface pure white, the white and cinnamon gradually blending on the sides of the neck; bare space surrounding the eye greenish yellow; irides orange; bill in some specimens black, slightly tipped with yellow, in others black with a streak of greenish yellow along the lower mandible, and a wash of the same hue along the lower edge of the upper one; legs and feet jonquil-yellow; claws black.

The young bird has the whole of the upper surface striated with buff and blackish brown,—narrow and lanceolate on the head and neck, broad and conspicuous on the back and wings; primaries and tail-feathers dark chestnut-red, deepening into black near the extremity and tipped with buffy white; all the under surface buffy white, with a stripe of brown down the centre of each feather; irides yellow.

The figures represent the old and young nearly the size of life.