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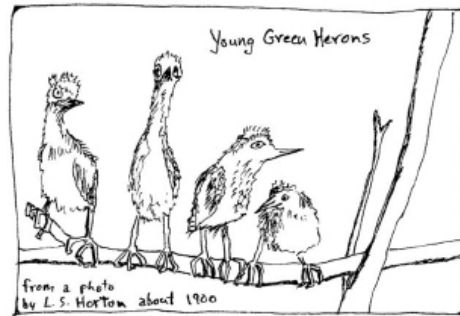
Meet the Little Green Heron

The famous heron in these parts is neither little nor green. It is our long, tall, Great Blue. We know this neighbor, standing in the wet places immobile like a particularly graceful, slim, dead spar in the swamp, upright, with stylish chest feathers long and fringed. Also, a modest sort of crest drooping down the back of the head. These details are practical, letting the big bird blend with the marshy vegetation, all the better to stand silent, invisible, and deadly for when the next meal comes swimming along. The long heavy bill is so powerful it can drive right through a solid oak oar on a rowboat. There is an account of a rower wanting to help an injured heron into the boat, to give some first aid. Quick as a flash, the stout sharp bill rammed right through the blade of the oar, and that is how the boater was able to get hold of the heron.

I don't know how that story ended, or continued, but it made me respectful. I admire the Great Blues and keep my distance. They are "Great."

There is another heron in these parts, much smaller but also great in itself. This is the Green Heron, *Butorides virescens*, a new acquaintance for me. In recent years I can find a Green Heron in spring or summer at a beaver pond I like to visit. There is often a Great Blue there, as well as a Green. I call these "Little Green Herons," though I have not been sure why. Has it been because they are smaller than the Great Blues? Anybody would be smaller than the Blues.

In mid-June I got more intimate with a Green, the way you only can when you find one that has died. I was about to turn off the paved road to visit the beaver pond, and there was a body on the shoulder. It was about the size of a pileated woodpecker, with a crest, but not a red crest. When I got out and picked it up, I was sad to see it was a Green, so lovely with its dark glossy crest and long green back feathers. The legs and feet are yellow, with the feet designed as much for climbing as for walking in the shallows. The bill is greenish-black and there is bare skin from the bill to the eye, and this skin is



yellow, too. In fact there are yellow feathers under the wings on the chest, tucked in where you would never see them. When the bird has died, there is a certain intimacy allowed.

My old book, Edward Howe Forbush's *Birds of Massachusetts and other New England States* (1925), describes the sides of the head and neck as "rich chestnut to dark vinaceous red or maroon." I looked up vinaceous. Of course, it means like wine.

Forbush says the lower surface of the body is "ashy-brown." A hundred years later, my bird books describe the Green Heron as "dark" and then provide color paintings and photographs. Forbush also gives the heron's several names: Green Heron, Little Green Heron, Green Bittern, Poke, and Fly-up-the-Creek. Maybe I looked in this book once before, and that's why I thought of this as a Little Green Heron. More likely I learned it from my dad. This was his book, and before that his mother's. She was my naturalist grandmother, Maude Helen Park. She wrote a nature column in the *Boston Herald*, under a pen name. She died the week I was born, so I never met her, but I have her books, and lots of stories. I wonder if she knew the Little Green Heron the way I do.

I wondered if this dead body had been the only Little Green inhabiting that pond. Then a friend on the scene with me said, "Look, there's another one!" Sure enough, perched on a small stump just above the water, motionless in a crouch, was a dark bird just the right shape. On subsequent visits to this pond, I have even seen two Little Greens at a time, fly up and away.

My grandmother's book tells me these herons can nest in small colonies, but in New England usually each pair nests by itself in a remote quiet place near water. The nest is made

of sticks, worked into the fork of a small tree near water, fifteen to twenty feet from the ground. It looks frail, Forbush says, so much so that you can stand below the nest and look up and see the eggs right through the sparse weaving. But after the eggs are laid and hatching about to start, the nest gets built up with grass and other material until it is much higher and larger. The youngsters learn to climb from the nest farther up into the tree. Those yellow feet can do this, grasping the branches.

The feet can swim, too, and are sometimes used to rake the mud in shallow water to stir up something to eat. Little Greens eat small fish, frogs, leeches, snails, worms, crayfish, and various insects including grasshoppers.

Closing Mothie's venerable Forbush (three heavy volumes, dark green, each one more than four hundred pages), I leapt forward with Google Scholar. Now I want to get back to that beaver pond with my binoculars and stake the place out. Now I know that if I am lucky here is what I could see.

The Little Green Heron is a tool user! It may crouch on a stump, still as can be, waiting for a fish to come by. But it may also do something called "bait fishing." These birds will pick up a berry, a live insect, even a discarded cracker to throw on the water and then wait for a fish to come. They go one step even further and modify twigs to make them just the right size for bait fishing. Folks who have staked out the ponds note that young herons are less successful at this than the adults because they use sticks that are too big. They will learn to modify them, to carefully trim them to the proper dimensions to fool a fish.

The next question is, "How do they learn this?" Or do they. Is there something innate about this behavior, or is it a mix of the two? You get a youngster who is already programmed to bait fish, who is at the same time a learner, a copy-cat. Or an experimenter! A bird who notices things and remembers. And who then teaches.

Thank you, Little Green, for the questions you present. You keep us hopping like we like to do. Keep us wondering. — Bonner McAllester