

Grey Heron

Bloureier

Ardea cinerea

The Grey Heron is widespread in Eurasia and Africa. In Africa it is primarily a Palearctic migrant north of the equator, and a breeding resident to the south (Brown *et al.* 1982). In southern Africa it had high reporting rates throughout the moist eastern and southern areas, including the Okavango basin, Zimbabwe, Transvaal and adjacent eastern Botswana hardveld, Swaziland, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State and the eastern, southern and southwestern Cape Province. It is less frequent in the drier west where it concentrates along the coast and major river systems (e.g. the Orange River). It is scarce in arid areas such as the Kalahari and Namib Desert and the northwestern Cape Province. The low reporting rates over much of the Transkei are probably linked to excessive disturbance.

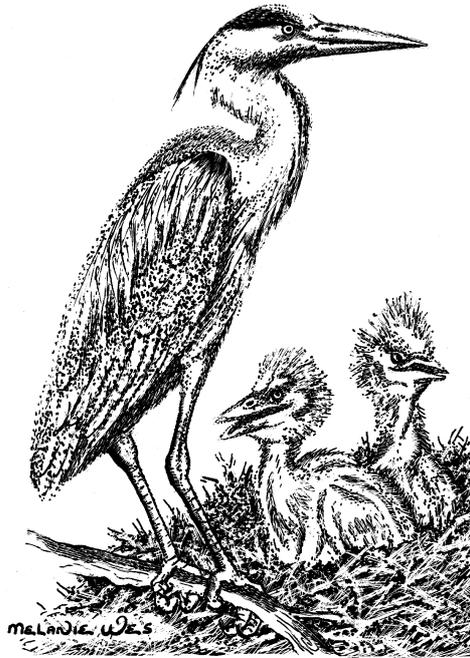
A colonial breeder, it is generally found singly or in small groups when feeding. The Transvaal population was estimated to be *c.* 500 birds (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b) and, by extrapolation, the total population of southern Africa could be 6000–10 000 birds, rather less than its relatively high reporting rates would suggest. The atlas data are reliable and comprehensive for this conspicuous species, although it may occasionally be confused with the Blackheaded Heron *A. melanocephala*.

Habitat: The distribution is dependent on the presence of suitable bodies of shallow open water. It is associated with a wide variety of wetlands such as rivers, dams, marshes and estuaries, provided that sufficient shallow water is available in which to feed. Along the shore, and particularly on the coast of the northwestern Cape Province, it feeds in intertidal rock pools. It prefers tall trees for breeding and roosting, but will also use reedbeds and cliffs, and even sand-dunes along the Namib coast. In mountainous areas it keeps to valleys.

It usually breeds in mixed heronries and suitable sites may limit its breeding distribution, especially in the drier, flatter, treeless parts of its range. In the northwestern Cape Province, it breeds singly on utility poles associated with diamond-mining infrastructure (L.G. Underhill *in litt.*).

Movements: It is resident in southern Africa, and there is no direct evidence that numbers may be augmented by Palearctic migrants (Ginn & McIlleron 1982). The models for most Zones show conspicuously uniform reporting rates throughout the year, providing no indication of movements. Concentration around breeding colonies occurs in summer, and there is subsequent post-breeding dispersal, as well as movements induced by the flooding and drying of suitable waterbodies. Movements of several hundred kilometres are on record; e.g. a bird ringed on the Kafue Flats, Zambia, in May 1974, was recovered near Plumtree (2027DB) in September 1975, *c.* 520 km to the south (Tree 1980c).

Breeding: Breeding activity was recorded in all months, especially in the four central Zones. There were small geographical differences in peak periods; in Zones 2 and 5–7, breeding was mainly August–February; in Zone 8, October–January; and in Zone 3, September–December. In the summer-rainfall region, breeding was concentrated at the start of the



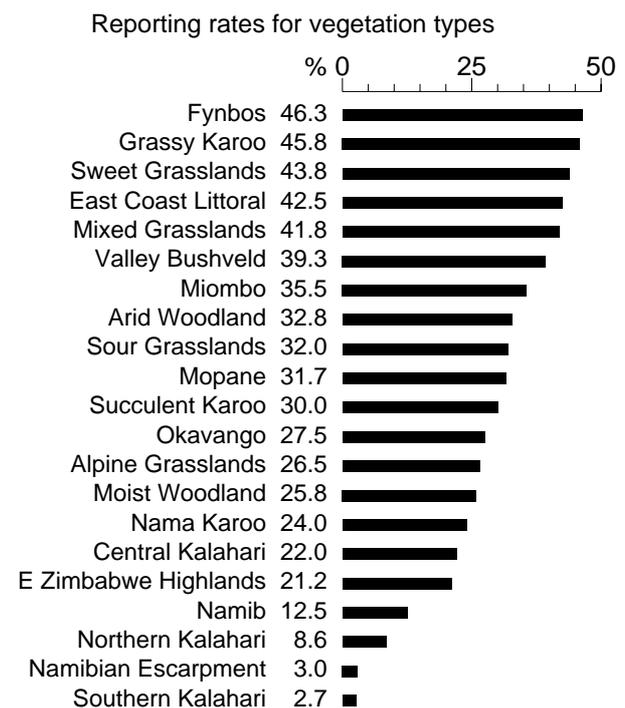
rains, probably to enable the young birds to become independent before wetlands dry up. In the winter-rainfall area (Zone 4), breeding activity was greatest in spring, September–November. Egg-laying data confirm an extended breeding period in southern Africa; the overall pattern is a peak in late winter and spring (July–September) in most regions, a gradual decline through summer, and minimum activity in autumn and early winter (March–June) (Winterbottom 1968a; Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Brown & Clinning *in press*; N.J. Skinner *in litt.*).

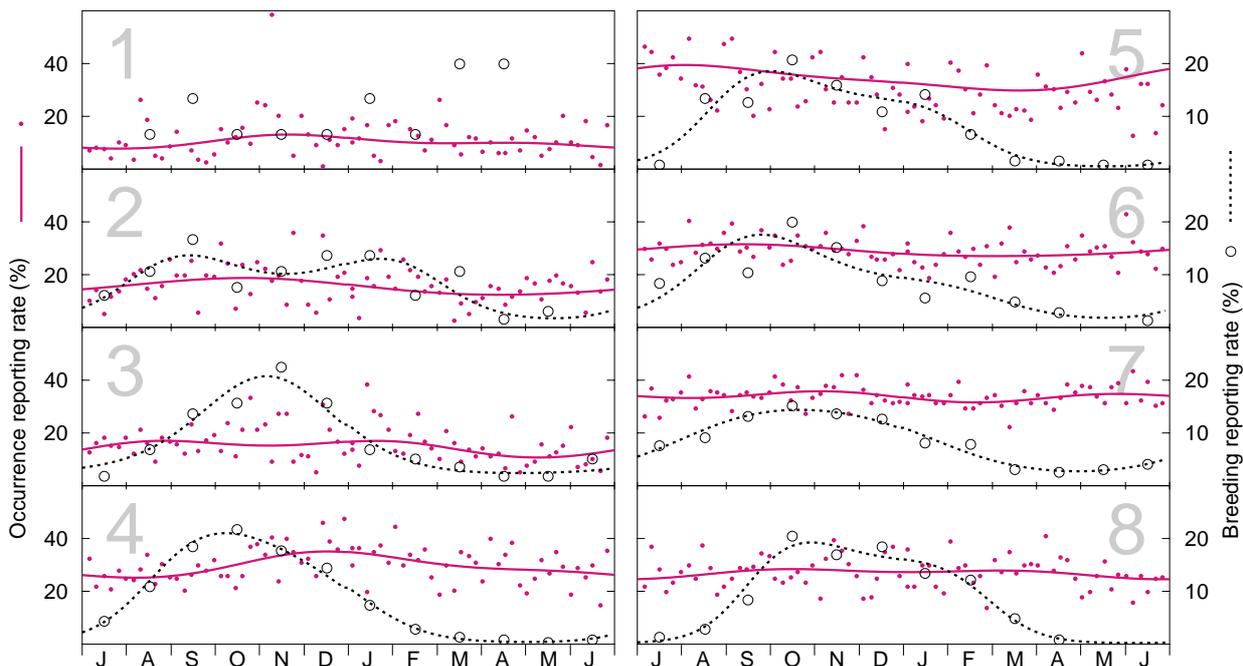
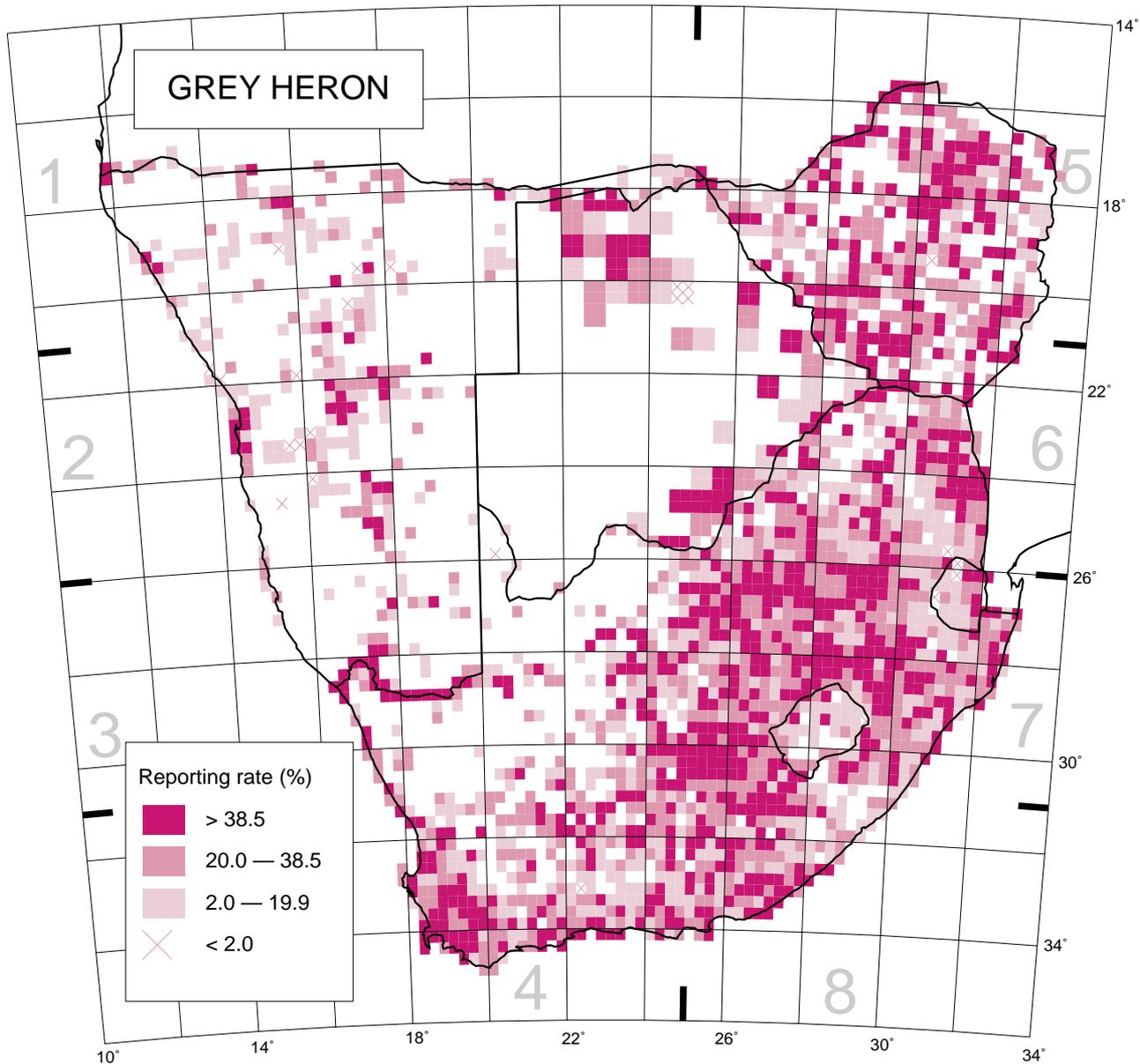
Interspecific relationships: Differences in habitat preference reduce competition with the Blackheaded Heron, a dryland feeder, and the reed-bed-dwelling Purple Heron *A. purpurea* (Snow 1978).

Historical distribution and conservation: During the 20th century there has probably been an expansion in range and an increase in the number of heronries as a result of the creation of artificial waterbodies, irrigated grasslands and the planting of alien trees in which to roost and nest (Irwin 1981; Hockey *et al.* 1989). Although the Grey Heron currently has a favourable conservation status, its total population is not large, and needs to be monitored.

A.P. Martin

Recorded in 2317 grid cells, 51.1%
Total number of records: 50 100
Mean reporting rate for range: 37.2%





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 329, 539, 803, 2561, 3018, 3301, 6617, 1481; Breeding: 15, 66, 58, 323, 120, 145, 562, 141.