



## Purple Heron

### Rooireier

*Ardea purpurea*

The Purple Heron occurs throughout much of southern Eurasia and Africa, including most of sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar. North of the equator it is primarily a Palearctic migrant, but to the south it is a breeding resident (Cramp *et al.* 1977; Brown *et al.* 1982). It is uncommon to locally common throughout much of its southern African range (Maclean 1993b). Highest reporting rates were in the Okavango Delta and Caprivi Strip, the southwestern and extreme southern Cape Province, coastal KwaZulu-Natal, Swaziland, southern and eastern Transvaal, northern Free State and northeastern Zimbabwe. It was also frequent along the Zambezi, Limpopo, Vaal and lower Orange rivers. It is absent from much of the dry west, avoiding desert, the Karoo, the Lesotho highlands, much of the eastern Cape Province and KwaZulu-Natal interior, and parts of southern and western Zimbabwe.

A preference for dense reedbeds means that this secretive and shy species is likely to have been under-recorded during atlas fieldwork. It is occasionally confused with the much larger Goliath Heron *A. goliath* because of their similar coloration.

**Habitat:** It has specific habitat requirements, namely dense emergent vegetation in shallow fresh or estuarine waters, and its distribution is dependent on the presence of wetlands with these characteristics. It is thus largely confined to reedbeds, marshes, reed-fringed rivers and lakes, and flooded areas with tall grasses and sedges. In the southwestern Cape Province, Hockey *et al.* (1989) characterized it as tending to avoid artificial waterbodies, except for sewage works with reedbeds. However, this is not the case throughout the atlas region; for example, the Manyame Lakes (1730DC,DD), an impoundment, have the largest concentration of Purple Herons in Zimbabwe, with a peak of 100 birds in November 1988 (Tree 1989a).

**Movements:** It is resident in permanent wetlands but also nomadic, enabling it to utilize seasonal wetlands (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Particularly young birds may disperse widely. Reporting rates are related to visibility, which could be affected by seasonal changes in flight activity and water-levels. Nevertheless, the models for the northern Zones 1, 5 and 6 indicate an increase in reporting rates during the wet summer season, suggesting an influx, and the possibility that Palearctic migrants reach southern Africa cannot be totally excluded. In Zone 1 the highest reporting rates were September–December, coinciding with rapidly dropping water-levels in the Okavango Delta. In the four southern Zones, reporting rates were more uniform throughout the year.

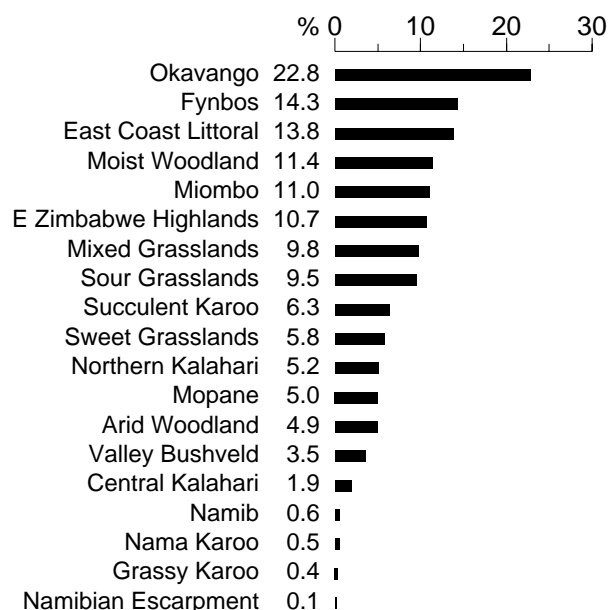
**Breeding:** It breeds in reedbeds, either solitarily, in small groups, or in mixed-species heronries. In the Transvaal, small groups nest August–October, whereas those in heronries nest December–February (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The models indicate that breeding activity can occur throughout most of the year in the north (Zones 5 and 6), with a peak during spring and summer. Breeding activity is earlier and less protracted in the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4), peaking September–November. Published egg-laying data confirm an extended breeding period (all months except May) in the summer-rainfall areas of southern Africa, but most eggs are laid August–February (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; N.J. Skinner *in litt.*).

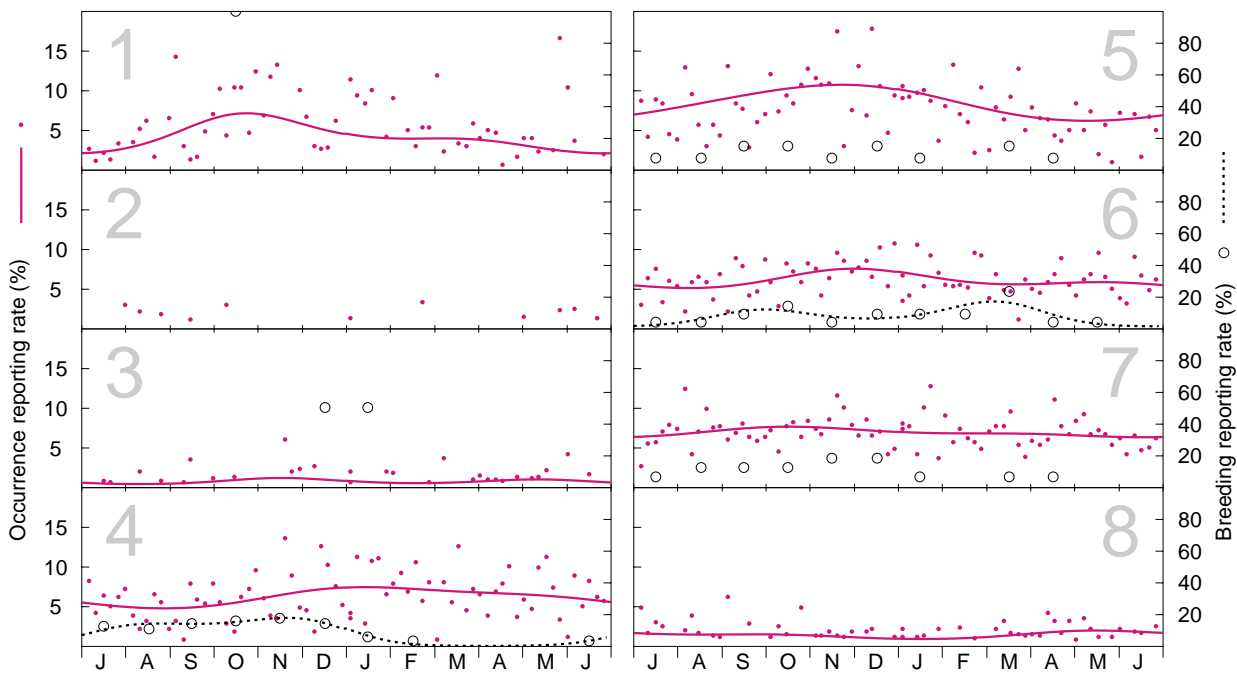
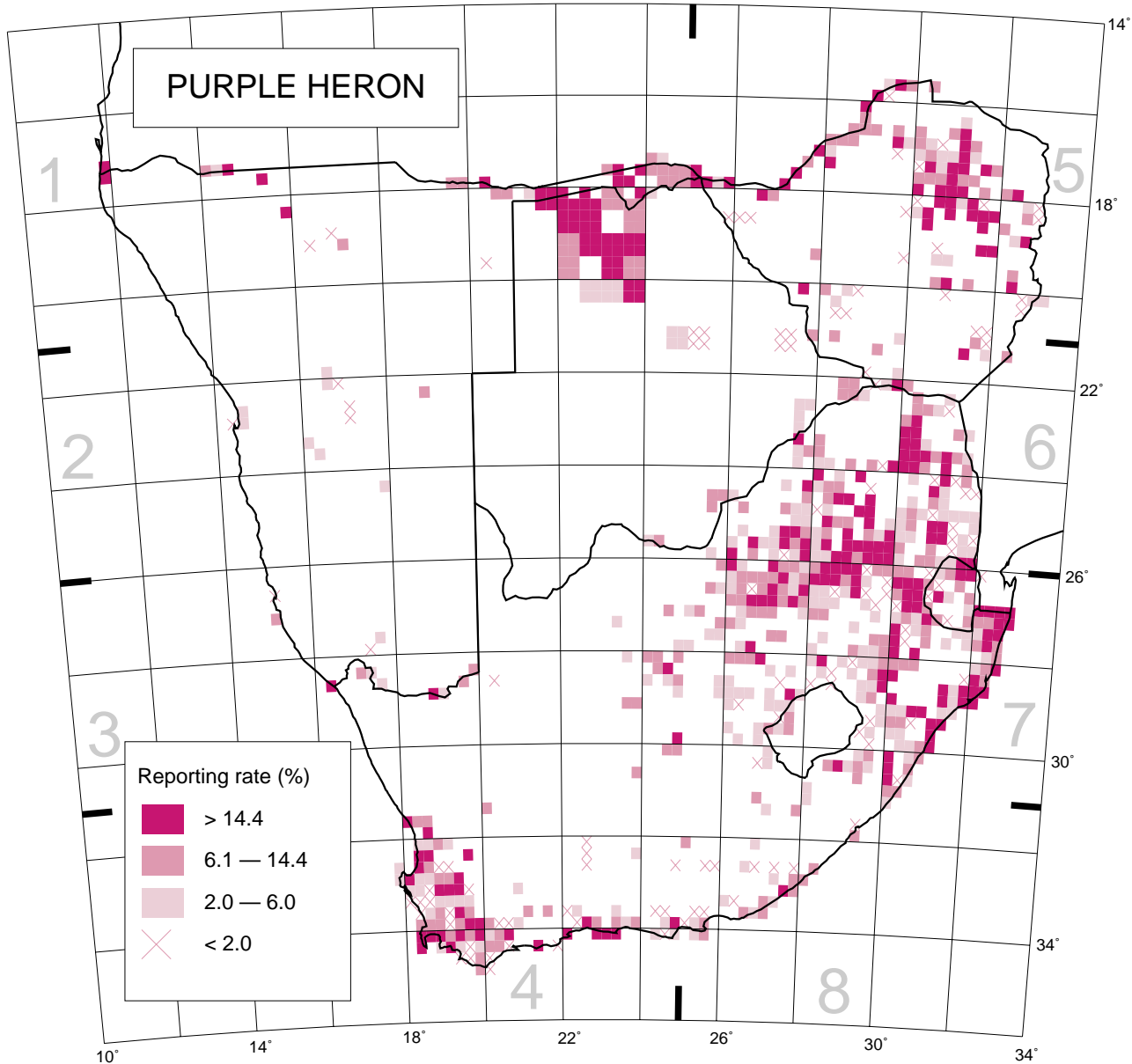
**Historical distribution and conservation:** Comparison with generalized distribution maps indicates that it is less widespread in the eastern Cape Province, eastern Botswana and Zimbabwe than usually indicated (cf. Maclean 1993b). Drainage, canalization and disturbance of wetlands, and encroachment of agriculture into riparian vegetation and reedbeds have almost certainly had a negative impact on the Purple Heron; the extent of its adaptation to artificial wetlands needs to be investigated.

A.P. Martin

Recorded in 863 grid cells, 19.0%  
Total number of records: 11 884  
Mean reporting rate for range: 12.5%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 134, 11, 43, 540, 738, 697, 1360, 80; Breeding: 3, 0, 2, 55, 13, 21, 16, 0.