



## Great White Heron

### Grootwitreier

#### *Casmerodius albus*

Four subspecies of Great White Heron occur over the warmer parts of Europe, Asia, Australasia and the Americas; *C. a. melanorhynchos* is found in sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar (Brown *et al.* 1982; Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). In southern Africa, highest reporting rates were in the warm and mesic northeast, becoming scarcer southwards (Irwin 1981; Hockey *et al.* 1989; Maclean 1993b). The species' stronghold in southern Africa is the Okavango Delta. It is frequent in the Caprivi Strip, Zimbabwe (especially along the Zambezi River valley), the Transvaal, Free State and KwaZulu-Natal; gaps in distribution in these regions correspond mostly to woodland, mountains or escarpments. Reporting rates attenuate westwards along the southern coast of the Cape Province. Scattered records in Namibia and the interior of the Cape Province indicate that nomads may visit suitable waterbodies.

The population of the African subspecies was estimated by Perennou (1992) to be *c.* 30 000 birds. The number in southern Africa is unknown. The Great White Heron feeds alone, in small groups, or with other wading birds. Confusion with the Yellowbilled Egret *Egretta intermedia* may have resulted in some erroneous records.

**Habitat:** It requires shallow open water at lakes, rivers, floodplains, flooded grasslands, marshes, salt pans and estuaries, and it also occurs at artificial wetlands such as dams and sewage works. The breeding habitat is reedbeds or trees.

**Movements:** It has previously been described as resident but dispersive and nomadic, moving to areas with suitable feeding and breeding habitat (Irwin 1981; Brown *et al.* 1982). The models show seasonal variation, peaking from midwinter to early summer in Zones 1 and 5–8. In the eastern Cape Province (Zone 8), peak reporting rates coincide with the time of highest census figures August–November (Martin & Baird 1987). In the western Cape Province (Zone 4) it is mainly a summer visitor (Hockey *et al.* 1989). The consistent patterns in reporting rates are more likely to be due to regular movements than to changes in conspicuousness, and this species is a migrant in other parts of its range (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). Considering also the small number of breeding records in relation to sightings, the atlas data suggest that partial migration occurs between southern Africa and breeding areas further north. Breeding in Kenya, and presumably in neigh-

bouring states in central Africa, peaks April–June (Brown *et al.* 1982); post-breeding movements from that region would coincide with peak reporting rates in southern Africa.

**Breeding:** Breeding is colonial, but localized and infrequent, e.g. on the Nyl River floodplain (2428DA), Transvaal, 200–250 pairs may breed, but only in years of good rainfall (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Breeding occurs mostly during the main rains in mid- to late summer (Irwin 1981; Ginn *et al.* 1989; Maclean 1993b). The model for Zone 7 supports this. In the Okavango Delta it has nested August–October, the period of receding waters (Berry 1968; Ginn 1974; Ginn *et al.* 1989; N.J. Skinner *in litt.*), and substantial colonies were observed along the upper Boro River (1922B) in October 1995 (M. Herremans pers. obs).

**Interspecific relationships:** It resembles the Grey Heron *A. cinerea* in habits and size; its generic status remains uncertain because it shares

characteristics of both the herons of the genus *Ardea* and the egrets of the genus *Egretta*, but is now usually placed in the genus *Casmerodius* (Curry-Lindahl 1971; Tomlinson 1976; Sheldon 1987).

**Historical distribution and conservation:** Populations in southern Africa appear not to have been affected by the plume trade during the late 19th and early 20th century to the same extent as American and European populations (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). Although the Great White Heron had not responded to the increase in artificial waterbodies in Zimbabwe as dramatically as some species by 1980 (Irwin 1981), it has done so subsequently, and several hundred birds have been recorded on the Manyame Lakes (1730DC,DD) (A.J. Tree *in litt.*). It is more frequently recorded in the Cape Province than previously, especially at estuaries (Martin & Baird 1987; Hockey *et al.* 1989).

A.P. Martin

Recorded in 1250 grid cells, 27.6%

Total number of records: 13 337

Mean reporting rate for range: 13.0%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types



