



Rufousbellied Heron

Rooipensreier

Butorides rufiventris

The Rufousbellied Heron is endemic to southern and central Africa (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). In southern Africa it is rare, except along the Okavango, Linyanti and Chobe rivers and associated swamps in northern Botswana (Brown *et al.* 1982; Brewster 1991; Penry 1994) and in the Caprivi Strip (Hines 1989). Elsewhere in Namibia there are scattered records from the north, including Bushmanland (1820, 1920) (Hines 1989), with vagrant records from central Namibia. There were scattered records from along the Zimbabwe–Botswana border and elsewhere in Zimbabwe, mainly in the north and east. It is extremely scarce in Swaziland (Parker 1994). In South Africa there are isolated records from the Transvaal and northeastern KwaZulu-Natal, and a single atlas record (October 1990) from a sewage works site in the Free State (2926AB).

It is usually encountered singly when foraging, sometimes in small groups, and it roosts and breeds communally (Brown *et al.* 1982). It is readily identified (Brown *et al.* 1982) but, owing to its scarcity, all atlas records outside its northcentral strongholds were carefully vetted.

Habitat: It occurs in tropical and subtropical rivers well vegetated with aquatic grasses, sedges, papyrus and reeds, also floodplains, pans and coastal lakes in woodland regions (Uys & Clutton-Brock 1966; Mwenya 1973; Cyrus & Robson 1980; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). Vagrants are occasionally found at dams (e.g. Parker 1994), sewage works and any other aquatic habitats (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). It occurs at both permanent (e.g. Okavango Delta) and seasonal (e.g. Nylsvley 2428DA) wetlands.

Movements: It is considered a resident at the Okavango, Linyanti and Chobe river systems (Koen 1988; Penry 1994). Irwin (1981) thought its movements in Zimbabwe to be unclear, but considered it to be more common during summer. Four Swaziland records are from summer, September–February (Parker 1994), and it occurs at Nylsvley mainly December–May (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Most KwaZulu-Natal records span September–January (Cyrus & Robson 1980). The models confirm these pat-

terns, apart from Zone 5, Zimbabwe, where the model suggests residency. It was recorded in northern Botswana and Namibia (Zone 1) throughout the year, with a small peak in reporting rates October–November; the South African records (Zones 6 and 7) are from summer, mostly November–February.

Breeding: Egg-laying in Botswana is February–October, mainly August–September and, to a lesser extent, February–March (N.J. Skinner *in litt.*). Two Namibian egg-laying records come from March and September (Brown & Clinning *in press*). This suggests a bimodal breeding season in northern Botswana and Namibia. Breeding has been recorded in Zimbabwe at three localities, with egg-laying February–April (Irwin 1981). To the south, breeding has been recorded only at Nylsvley and then only during extremely wet years. At this site, breeding (by never more than 10 pairs) occurred five

times during 1958–70 (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), with egg-laying December–May, and was suspected again in early 1996 (W.R. Tarboton *pers. comm.*). The single atlas breeding record was from Zone 1 in August.

Interspecific relationships: It roosts and breeds in association with other waterbirds, e.g. Reed Cormorant *Phalacrocorax africanus*, Darter *Anhinga melanogaster*, storks, and other herons and egrets (e.g. Child 1972; Fry *et al.* 1986; Randall 1990). When breeding it may be especially associated with Squacco Herons *Ardeola ralloides* (Uys & Clutton-Brock 1966; Tarboton 1967; Mwenya 1973) and Slaty Egrets *Egretta vinaceigula* (Fry *et al.* 1986; Randall & Herremans 1994).

Historical distribution and conservation: There is some evidence that it is now less commonly recorded in South Africa than previously. There are two late-19th-century specimens from the eastern Cape Province, a region where it is unknown today (Skead 1967b; Brooke 1984b). The type specimen, and several other specimens, were collected from the Mooi River near Potchefstroom (2627CA) in the 19th century, and it has not been recorded there since (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). The Rufousbellied Heron is listed as 'rare' and the conservation of Nylsvley is crucial to the survival of this bird as a breeding species in South Africa (Brooke 1984b).

D.G. Allan

Recorded in 178 grid cells, 3.9%
Total number of records: 770
Mean reporting rate for range: 10.2%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



