



Blackcrowned Night Heron

Gewone Nagreier

Nycticorax nycticorax

The Blackcrowned Night Heron is one of the most cosmopolitan herons. It is found in the warmer parts of Eurasia, much of North and South America, throughout Africa, except the deserts and equatorial forests, and in Madagascar (Brown *et al.* 1982; Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). In southern Africa it is a breeding resident, a partial migrant and a nomad. It is concentrated in the wetter eastern and southern parts, avoiding mountainous and desert areas and is very sparsely distributed in the dry west.

It is largely crepuscular and nocturnal, spending the day roosting in trees or skulking in dense riparian vegetation. Consequently it is likely to have been somewhat under-recorded, although it is more conspicuously active during the breeding season.

Habitat: It is usually associated with dense vegetation along the edges of shallow, still or slow-moving water such as lakes, pans, rivers, marshes or seasonal floodplains and estuaries. During the night it may feed in open areas. It roosts and nests communally in trees near water, or in reedbeds.

The highest reporting rates were from the Okavango and Fynbos and in the Mixed and Sweet Grasslands of the Free State, southern Transvaal and eastern Cape Province. Elsewhere it was recorded less frequently, although it may be locally common where suitable habitat is available, e.g. KwaZulu-Natal coastline, scattered localities in Zimbabwe and central Namibia. It is rare in the driest habitats, and highland areas above c. 2000 m are avoided.

Movements: It is nomadic, taking advantage of seasonal rains and dispersing over long distances. The seasonality models suggest that it is a partial migrant. Reporting rates were highest November–December, at the height of the breeding season when the birds are most active, and lowest March–

August; this is especially noticeable in the north, in Zones 1 and 5–7. Local movements to coastal areas of the eastern Cape Province may have masked migratory movements within Zone 8.

Many southern African birds are probably intra-African migrants because, in addition to local movements, a bird ringed in Cape Town (3318CD) has been recovered in Mozambique and a bird from the Transvaal highveld recovered in Zaire (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Hockey *et al.* 1989). However, a Romanian-ringed bird recovered in Mozambique (Maclean 1993b) indicates that Palearctic birds may also reach southern Africa, although most are thought to remain north of the equator (Brown *et al.* 1982).

Breeding: Most breeding was recorded in Zones 4 and 7. The models indicate that breeding activity can occur in any month of the year but mainly during the rainy summer months, peaking October–February in Zones 6–7. In Zimbabwe it breeds opportunistically in high-rainfall years (Vernon 1976a; Tree 1978b). In the winter-rainfall region of the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4), peak breeding occurred September–December, immediately following the wet season; breeding here is both earlier and more synchronized than in the summer-rainfall region. Egg-laying data confirm these patterns (Winterbottom 1968a; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Interspecific relationships: Its nocturnal habits enable it to avoid competition for food with other herons occupying the same habitat.

Historical distribution and conservation: In Europe it is increasing in numbers after declines during the 19th century (Cramp *et al.* 1977). In southern Africa, provision of artificial waterbodies such as sewage works, and the planting of trees, has probably led to an increase in range and numbers (Irwin 1981; Hockey *et al.* 1989), although the Blackcrowned Night Heron is vulnerable to wetland drainage and destruction of riparian vegetation.

A.P. Martin

Recorded in 906 grid cells, 20.0%
Total number of records: 8057
Mean reporting rate for range: 8.7%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



