



Whitebacked Duck

Witrugeend

Thalassornis leuconotus

The distribution of the Whitebacked Duck is similar to that of the Fulvous Duck *Dendrocygna bicolor* in that it is largely tropical to subtropical, but there were scattered occurrences further south as far as the southwestern Cape Province. In southern Africa its distribution is centred on the wetter parts (the uplands of KwaZulu-Natal and the Transvaal) and the larger bodies of still water (e.g. the Okavango Delta). It is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar, the Madagascar population being recognized as subspecifically separable as *T. l. insularis*.

In Zimbabwe it is scarce and irregular, but more widespread than formerly (Irwin 1981). It is widely but thinly distributed in KwaZulu-Natal, the Transvaal, Swaziland and the Free State (Cyrus & Robson 1980; Earlé & Grobler 1987; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Parker 1994). It is an uncommon and localized resident in the southwestern Cape Province with some summer influx (Hockey *et al.* 1989). In Namibia it is largely confined to large rivers in the Caprivi, but occurs on scattered dams elsewhere. Reporting rates were relatively low overall, and show records concentrated in major wetlands and around urban areas.

The Whitebacked Duck is an unobtrusive species and often overlooked, but is easily identifiable by its mottled black-and-ochre plumage, white back (visible in flight and when the wings are drooped) and white gape patch.

Habitat: It is found in quiet, clear, inland waters of any size, whether permanent or seasonal, with emergent and floating vegetation, mostly natural pans, floodplains and river backwaters (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), but it has adapted to impoundments with the right conditions.

Movements: It is somewhat nomadic, with no clear pattern of movement (Irwin 1981; Maclean 1993b). The models bear out this conclusion with a wide scatter of points and almost uniformly flat curves. In the eastern Cape Province it is an erratic visitor, most often found September–May (Tree 1987c).

Breeding: Egg-laying occurs mainly February–June in Zimbabwe and March–April in the Transvaal, but breeding has been found in all months in both regions (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The atlas data are probably based mainly on sightings of ducklings and also show

breeding to occur throughout the year, but mainly during March–September in the east and January–May in the southwestern Cape Province. Breeding seems to peak earlier in the south (Zone 7) than in the north (Zone 5). Breeding depends on the stability of water-levels in natural freshwater pans (Clark 1979).

Interspecific relationships: Owing to similar habitat requirements, this duck is often found in association with the Pygmy Goose *Nettapus auritus* where their ranges overlap (Irwin 1981). It may be adversely affected by the cichlid fish *Tilapia rendalli* which destroys aquatic vegetation (Irwin 1981).

Historical distribution and conservation: Its southern African range has not changed in recent times, except perhaps in Zimbabwe and on the Zambezi River, where Stark & Sclater

(1906) said 'it has not yet been met with . . . though probably to be found there.' It was recorded historically from Verlorenvlei (3218AD) by Andrew Smith, as well as all along the southern littoral into KwaZulu-Natal, the Transvaal and Botswana (Stark & Sclater 1906).

The Whitebacked Duck is not threatened, but its natural habitat needs monitoring. Its ability to adapt to small farm dams ensures its continued survival and spread.

G.L. Maclean

Recorded in 649 grid cells, 14.3%
Total number of records: 3674
Mean reporting rate for range: 5.1%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



