



## Blackheaded Heron

### Swartkopreier

*Ardea melanocephala*

Endemic to sub-Saharan Africa, the Blackheaded Heron is the only *Ardea* to feed predominantly in terrestrial habitats. Nevertheless, it prefers moist areas and is often found in the vicinity of inland waters. In southern Africa the overall distribution is strikingly similar to that of the Grey Heron *A. cinerea*, being concentrated in the eastern and southern areas. Highest reporting rates are in the high-rainfall agricultural areas of the southern Transvaal, northern Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, eastern and southern Cape Province. It is more widely distributed in the northwestern Cape Province than the Grey Heron, but is encountered less frequently in Namibia and northern Botswana. It is absent from much of the Namib Desert and Kalahari. Good rains are likely to see the species temporarily extend its range into desert and semi-desert areas.

A colonial breeder, it usually feeds solitarily. With the exception of much of Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia, reporting rates were generally higher for the Blackheaded than for the Grey Heron, supporting statements that it is a commoner species than the latter in South Africa (Clancey 1964b; Maclean 1993b). The atlas data are reliable and comprehensive because it is a conspicuous species.

**Habitat:** It is found in open habitats, preferring grassland, especially pastures and fields of 'stubble'. It favours areas close to wetlands, though it is not dependent on these. The highest reporting rates were recorded in grassland habitats and in other high-rainfall areas modified by agriculture. It is less frequently reported from closed woodland and unmodified savanna (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Hockey *et al.* 1989). It has adapted to urban areas (Brown *et al.* 1982), even tolerating heavy traffic as it forages on road verges. Tall trees or reedbeds are required for breeding and roosting. It is a colonial breeder, often in mixed heronries. Lack of suitable sites may limit its breeding distribution, especially in the drier treeless parts of its range, e.g. Zones 1 and 2.

**Movements:** It is resident, though movements of several hundred kilometres are not uncommon, especially during juvenile dispersal (Irwin 1981; Brown *et al.* 1982; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). In other parts of its range, regular movements following rains have been noted (Brown *et al.* 1982). The models show uniform reporting rates throughout the year, and provide no suggestion of migration in southern Africa. However, there are likely to be local movements associated with seasonal changes in food availability.

**Breeding:** In the eastern areas, and particularly in Zone 7, breeding activity continues throughout the year. However, in all regions there was a spring peak, October–December. Egg-laying data confirm an extended breeding season in most regions, peaking August–October in Zimbabwe, January–April in Transvaal, October–December in KwaZulu-Natal, and August–December in the western Cape Province (Winterbottom 1968a; Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Brown & Clinning in press; N.J. Skinner *in litt.*).

**Interspecific relationships:** Its terrestrial habits preclude competition with aquatic-feeding relatives. However, competition for breeding sites may occur in some situations, especially as the peak breeding of the Grey Heron is about a month earlier in most Zones.

**Historical distribution and conservation:** Agricultural development, particularly the clearing of woodland and the creation of pastures and cultivated lands, has increased feeding habitat, and the creation of artificial waterbodies and the planting of alien trees has provided additional breeding habitat. This has resulted in an expansion in range and an increase in the number of breeding colonies (Irwin 1981; Brown *et al.* 1982; Hockey *et al.* 1989).

The Blackheaded Heron is vulnerable to poisoning in agricultural areas because invertebrates and small rodents make up a substantial part of its diet (Brown *et al.* 1982; Stuart & Dürk 1984). Breeding success is generally low (Brown *et al.* 1982; Morake 1994).

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Recorded in 2192 grid cells, 48.3%  
Total number of records: 53 941  
Mean reporting rate for range: 40.6%



