

Goliath Heron

Reuse-reier

Ardea goliath

The largest heron in the world is mainly confined to sub-Saharan Africa (Brown *et al.* 1982), extending marginally into the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent (Hancock & Kushlan 1984). In southern Africa it is widespread, though uncommon. It has a patchy distribution concentrated in the northern and eastern parts of the region. Highest reporting rates were from the Okavango basin, eastern Transvaal lowveld, northeastern KwaZulu-Natal, the Free State, and along the major river systems (i.e. Zambezi, Kunene, Limpopo, Vaal and Orange rivers). It is absent from much of the dry west, especially desert areas. Away from the core areas, its distribution is localized and birds occur on isolated waterbodies, especially in Namibia, the Cape Province and Zimbabwe. There were few records from the eastern Cape Province, the Transkei, inland KwaZulu-Natal, the central Transvaal and Swaziland. The large number of isolated grid cells where it was recorded as a vagrant indicates that it wanders widely and could turn up almost anywhere.

The Transvaal population is unlikely to exceed 300 birds (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b) and there are 300–400 birds in the Free State (Geldenhuis 1984b). By extrapolation, the total population of southern Africa could be c. 3000 birds.

Usually single birds or pairs are encountered. The atlas data are reliable and comprehensive for this conspicuous species, although it is occasionally confused with the Purple Heron *A. purpurea*.

Habitat: Its distribution is dependent on the presence of suitable bodies of open water; it occurs mainly at lakes, both large and small dams, wide rivers and estuaries with extensive shallows. Its long legs enable it to utilize deeper water than other wading birds and it prefers undisturbed open areas in which to feed (Cramp *et al.* 1977; Brown *et al.* 1982). For breeding it often nests on the ground on an island, river bank or lake shore, but also in trees and reedbeds (Geldenhuis 1984b; Dean 1988).

Movements: Although mainly a resident, it is also known to be dispersive and nomadic, moving in response to changing water-levels (Cramp *et al.* 1977; Brown *et al.* 1982). Reports of birds well away from typical localities indicate that movements of several hundred kilometres are not unusual. The models show little variation in reporting rates except in Zone 1, which includes the Okavango Delta, where reporting rates peaked in October, when water-levels in the delta are receding.

Breeding: It usually breeds solitarily, but occasionally in loose colonies (e.g. Dean 1988). It breeds mainly within the core areas, with the largest number of records during the atlas period coming from Zone 7. Breeding was not recorded in Zone 8 and few records were made in Zones 1, 2 and 4, although it must breed regularly within the Okavango (Zone 1). Egg-laying has been reported throughout the year in Zimbabwe and the Transvaal, areas with extensive data (Irwin



1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b); sparse data for KwaZulu-Natal span August–December (Dean 1971); for Botswana January–September (N.J. Skinner *in litt.*); and for Namibia June–December (Brown & Clinning *in press*). The models confirm breeding activity throughout the year in Zones 6 and 7 (peak September–January in Zone 7). In Zimbabwe (Zone 5), breeding occurred April–December, peaking September–October.

Interspecific relationships: About 50% of nests in the Free State were in mixed heronries, shared with Darters *Anhinga melanogaster*, cormorants, egrets and other herons; at Barberspan (2625DA), Goliath Herons also shared breeding sites with Sacred Ibises *Threskiornis aethiopicus* and Grey-headed Gulls *Larus cirrocephalus* (Geldenhuis 1984b; Dean 1988).

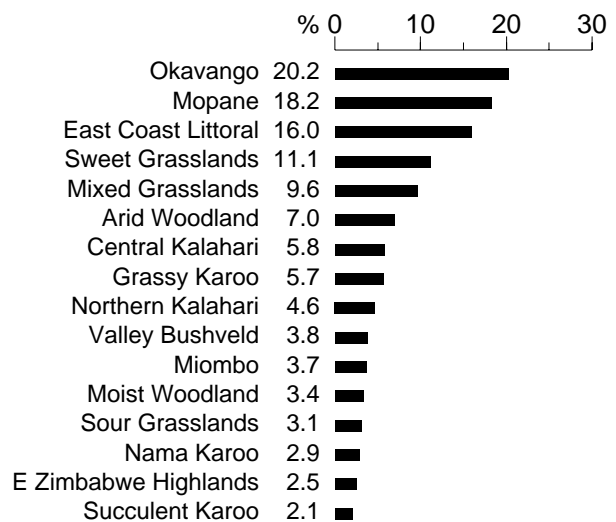
Historical distribution and conservation: The construction of large dams has enabled an increase in range, and probably also numbers (Irwin 1981; Dennis & Tarboton

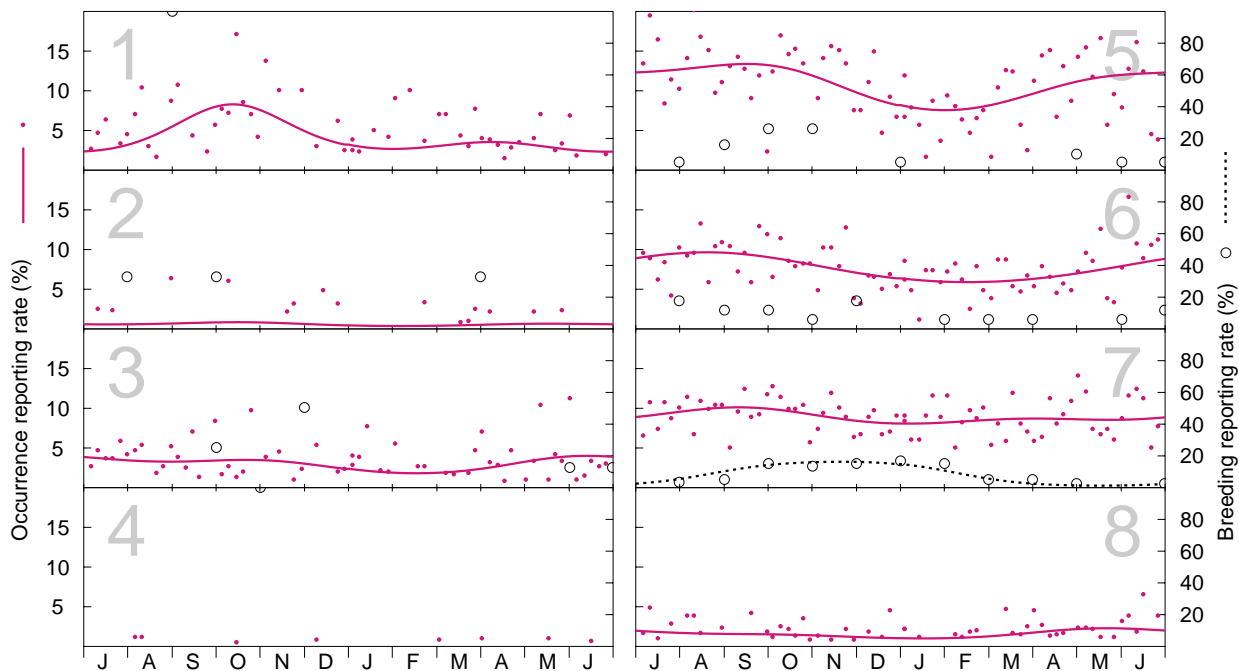
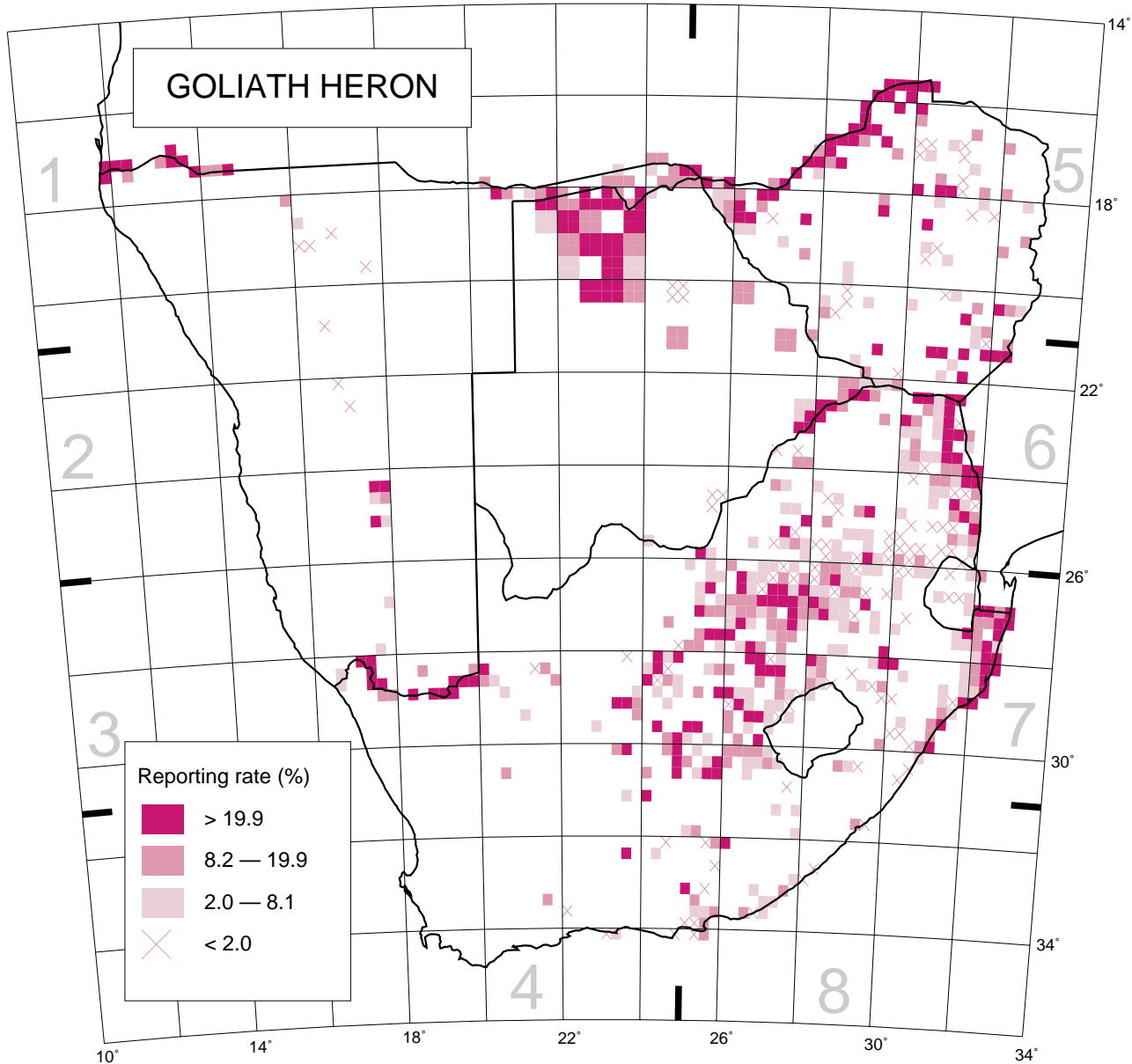
1993). Comparison with earlier distribution maps indicates a range extension westwards into the Cape Province and along the lower Orange River, where it is now common but may have been overlooked previously. Birds originating from large reservoirs in the Free State are probably fuelling this expansion. Although not currently of conservation concern, the total Goliath Heron population in southern Africa is relatively small, and should be monitored (Brooke 1984b).

A.P. Martin

Recorded in 748 grid cells, 16.5%
Total number of records: 8378
Mean reporting rate for range: 12.8%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 136, 21, 170, 9, 959, 869, 1739, 87; Breeding: 1, 3, 8, 1, 19, 17, 79, 0.