

Black Egret

Swartreier

Egretta ardesiaca

The Black Egret has a wide range in sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar (Hancock & Elliott 1978; Brown *et al.* 1982). Its southern African stronghold is in the Okavango Delta. It occurs along the Zambezi River, on the highveld areas of Zimbabwe, the southern Transvaal and Free State, and in northern KwaZulu-Natal. There are scattered records in the northern and eastern Transvaal, eastern Botswana, eastern Cape Province and elsewhere in Zimbabwe. It is a vagrant in the drier south and west, with summer records prior to 1968 at Mossel Bay (3422AA), Rondevlei and Lakeside (3418AB), and Beaufort West (3222BC), and sightings at Verlorenvlei (3218AD) in December 1980 and November 1993 (McLachlan & Liversidge 1957; Winterbottom 1968a; Ryan *et al.* 1988; Allan 1994c).

It is solitary or gregarious in groups of up to 50 or more birds (Hancock & Elliott 1978; Brown *et al.* 1982). A total of 500 were counted at Lake Ngami in February 1979 (Douthwaite 1979). It can be confused with the Slaty Egret *E. vinaceigula*; their ranges in southern Africa overlap mainly in the Okavango Delta. Its unique feeding habit, forming a canopy over its head with its wings, makes confusion unlikely.

Habitat: It occurs at inland and estuarine waters: shallow rivers, marshes, flooded grasslands, dams, mangroves, and tidal mudflats. It will also occupy deeper water if the vegetation is sufficiently dense. In southern Africa it is most common in the Okavango. The distribution is related to the distribution of perennial, and to a lesser extent seasonal, wetlands in southern Africa.

Movements: Although it is generally described as resident, with anecdotal evidence for local movements (Brown *et al.* 1982; Maclean 1993b; Hancock & Kushlan 1994), several reports consider it a summer visitor south of 22°S (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Barnes & Bushell 1989; Abernethy & Herremans 1994; Penry 1994). The atlas data confirm summer occurrence, with reporting rates greatly reduced outside the Okavango basin in winter, mainly May–August. This is primarily due to migration out of the region, but also to a contraction into the Okavango basin in the dry season. Emigration is supported by a ring recovery; a nestling ringed in the Bangweulu Swamps, Zambia, in August 1975, was recovered

near Norton (1730DC), Zimbabwe, five months later (Irwin 1981).

The seasonal distribution maps show that some birds remain in southern Africa all year, particularly in northern KwaZulu-Natal, supporting earlier reports of overwintering (Calder 1962). Although reporting rates in the Okavango (Zone 1) were lower in winter, the species was still frequently observed, possibly over a more extensive area because peak floods occur in winter. The Okavango wetlands may provide a dry-season refuge.

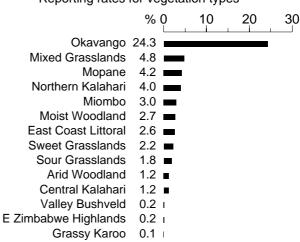
Breeding: It breeds infrequently in Zimbabwe and the Transvaal (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The only record for Botswana is at the Makgadikgadi Pans in April 1974 (Tree 1978b); there are no confirmed records from the Okavango (*contra* Penry 1994), the single report being based on circumstantial evidence (Fry *et al.* 1986). It breeds colonially in trees in mixed heronries with species such as Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* and

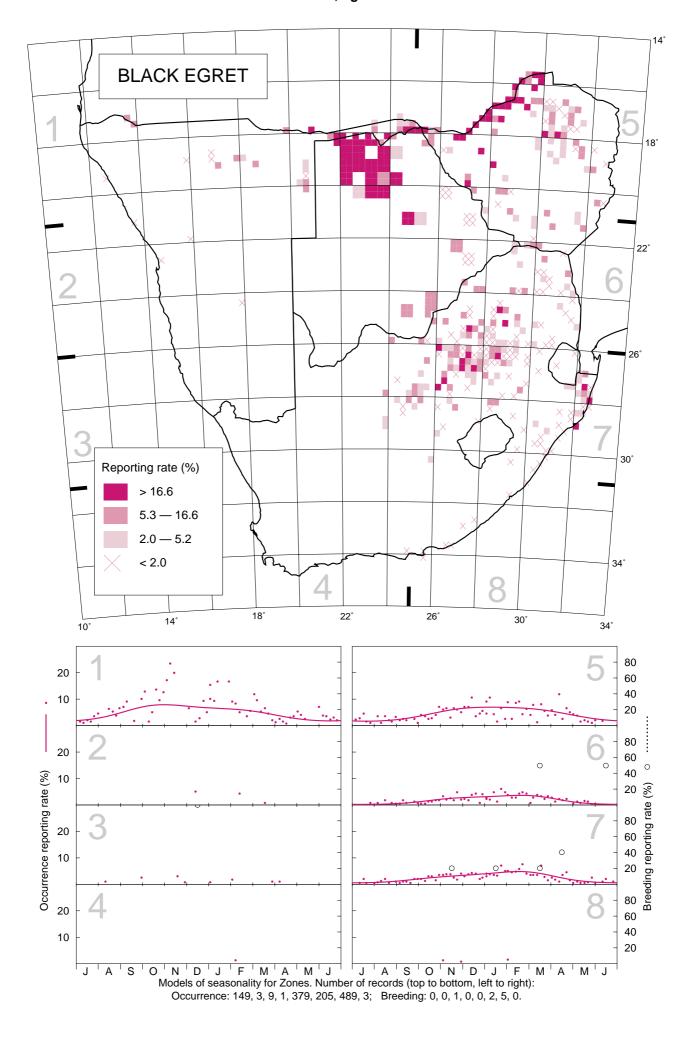
Blackheaded Heron Ardea melanocephala (Lawson 1964b; Brown et al. 1982). It breeds after the peak of the rains, November-January near Durban (2931CC) (Lawson 1964b) and January-March in the Transvaal (Schmitt 1971; Milstein & Hunter 1974; Tarboton et al. 1987b). Egglaying in Zambia occurs March–June (Benson et al. 1971). The one breeding record from Namibia is in June (Brown & Clinning in press). Historical distribution and conservation: Although Stark & Sclater (1906) were aware of its wide distribution in tropical Africa, they knew of only two records south of the Zambezi River, from Potchefstroom (2627CA), and Durban Harbour (2931CC). Once considered a vagrant in Zimbabwe, the Black Egret has steadily become more common; Irwin (1981) reported groups of up to 50 birds and A.J. Tree (in litt.) observed concentrations exceeding 100 during the 1990s. Taken overall, the atlas data suggest that the majority of birds in southern Africa are summer visitors from breeding areas to the north. Although it appears to have increased in abundance and range in southern Africa, breeding is frequently unsuccessful owing to predation. It appears to be particularly vulnerable to human disturbance (Del Hoyo et al. 1992).

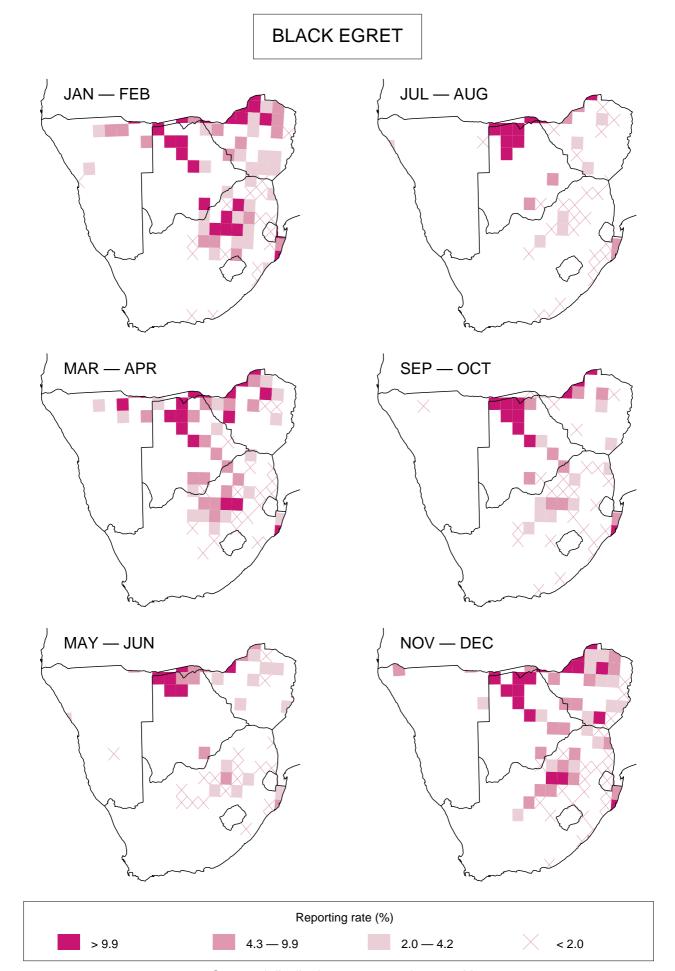
M.D. Anderson

Recorded in 460 grid cells, 10.1% Total number of records: 2708 Mean reporting rate for range: 5.7%

Reporting rates for vegetation types







Seasonal distribution maps; one-degree grid.