

Whitebacked Night Heron

Witrugnagreier

Gorsachius leuconotus

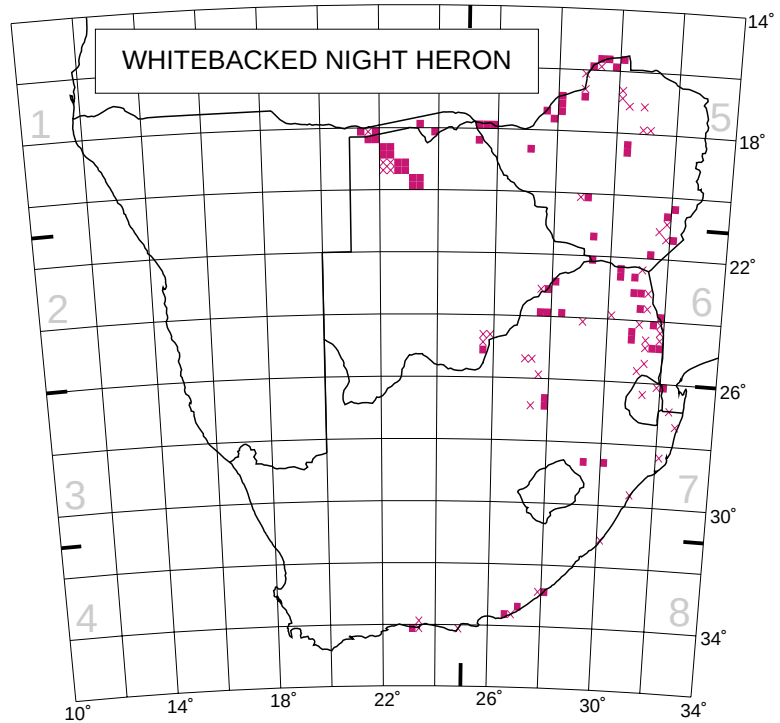
This elusive, nocturnal heron is endemic to sub-Saharan Africa, where it is fairly widely distributed; in southern Africa it is local and scarce. During the atlas period it was rare along the coast, occurring in the southeastern Cape Province westwards to Knysna (3423AA). Regular records came from the lowveld rivers crossing the Kruger National Park, with scattered records elsewhere in the Transvaal, Swaziland and in the Limpopo catchment to Gaborone (2425DB), with isolated records near Ladysmith (2829DB). In Zimbabwe, it occurred along the Save and Zambezi rivers and at isolated localities elsewhere. Highest reporting rates were from the Okavango, where it is particularly regular in the Panhandle.

Individuals or pairs prefer quiet, heavily wooded, clear, slow-moving, perennial rivers, roosting in densely foliated trees (Brooke 1984b; Maclean 1993b). There are insufficient atlas data to interpret seasonal movements. Low reporting rates in many grid cells may be either because of nomadic movements or because of the unobtrusiveness of the species.

It often appears to be sedentary, with many birds occupying a particular site for years, but influxes may occur in summer or after good rains (Brown *et al.* 1982; Brooke 1984b). Most breeding was reported from Zones 5–8, though breeding is also known from the Okavango and along the Chobe River (Skinner 1989, 1996b; Randall 1993b, 1994d). Breeding is mainly during early summer (Maclean 1993b).

Classed as 'indeterminate and decreasing' in South Africa (Brooke 1984b), its elusiveness hinders data interpretation. Atlas records indicate that a small population, thought to have been lost, persists on the Vaal River (2627D) (Brooke 1984b). In comparison with Brooke (1984b), it appears to have declined in KwaZulu-Natal, and it was not found along the lower Orange River where it had been observed near Aussenkehr (2817AD) in dense riparian woodland in December 1978 (Shaughnessy & Shaughnessy 1980). Disturbance, destruction of overhanging trees and increased water turbidity because of erosion are the main threats to the Whitebacked Night Heron (Brooke 1984). It uses artificial dams (Ginn *et al.* 1989) and has bred successfully on a crocodile farm (Randall 1994d).

A.P. Martin



Recorded in 121 grid cells, 2.7%
Total number of records: 337
Mean reporting rate for range: 2.5%

Reporting rates for vegetation types

