



Blacksmith Plover

Bontkiewiet

Vanellus armatus

The Blacksmith Plover has an African range, breeding from Kenya and Angola southwards. It occurs over most of southern Africa. The distribution is fragmented in northeastern Zimbabwe, the Namib Desert and the northern Cape Province, with conspicuous 'holes' in the most arid parts of the Kalahari in Botswana, in Lesotho and in the Transkei;

During the breeding season it nests in solitary pairs, although breeding territories may be contiguous. After breeding, family parties break up fairly quickly and, while parents may remain on territories, the young form nonbreeding flocks.

It is unmistakable, boldly marked, and has a distinctive, repetitive metallic call. The species was particularly well recorded, perhaps resulting in poor discrimination between relative densities.

Habitat: It inhabits moist, short grasslands and mudflats on the edges of dams, pans, lakes, rivers and, with increasing frequency, estuaries. It also feeds on grasslands, both natural and irrigated, as well as areas of mown grass such as sports fields, golf courses and airports. Because of its association with moist habitats it does not enter desert, forest or mountainous areas except where there are artificial wetlands or grasslands.

Movements: No large-scale, regular migrations are known, apart from post-breeding dispersal (Johnsgard 1981). Reporting rates fluctuate narrowly and do not suggest widespread seasonal movements. Irregular movements occur in response to flooding and drying out of habitat, but the models mask these events by combining several years of data.

In high-rainfall years, birds leave Zambia (Tree 1969, 1980a) and a northbound return passage through Zimbabwe occurs from late March to June when birds carrying substantial fat deposits have been ringed (Tree 1993c). In southern Zimbabwe, especially during years of low rainfall, concentrations may be found January–March as northbound birds pass through (e.g. Tree 1994c,d). In Botswana numbers and concentrations fluctuate widely between years, apparently dependent on the availability of habitat (Tree 1980a).

Ringed studies suggest that young do not return to natal areas to breed and that few adults are faithful to a breeding site for more than a year or two (A.J.T. pers. obs).

Breeding: In most Zones breeding peaks late winter to early summer (July–November). It thus breeds prior to the main rains throughout the summer-rainfall region, and just after the

winter rains in the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4). In Botswana and Namibia, most breeding is also in the dry season, except for the coldest months, resulting in a bimodal peak in autumn and spring (Zones 1 and 2). However, it breeds opportunistically throughout the year (Maclean 1982). A major requirement for a nest site is complete visibility so that the approach of an intruder can be detected, and met with characteristically aggressive nest defence. Dry mudflats and floodplains provide suitable nest sites, but flooding becomes a concomitant risk (Maclean 1982), thus breeding takes place in spring before the main summer rains in most of southern Africa. In the winter-rainfall area of the southwestern Cape Province, where it is a relatively recent colonizer, spring is the season of receding water-levels, and it has not needed to modify its breeding season. In Zones 1 and 2, the autumn breeding peak is also at a time of receding water-levels.

Interspecific relationships: During the breeding season, interspecific aggression occurs most frequently with congeners such as the Wattled *V. senegallus* and Longtoed *V. crassirostris* Plovers, as well as with the African Jacana *Actophilornis africanus*. It is partly commensal with humans.

Historical distribution and conservation: At the beginning of the 20th century, the only locality south of the Orange River where it had been recorded was Colesberg (3025CA), and it occurred on the KwaZulu-Natal coast only in winter (Stark & Sclater 1906). It was first recorded in the southwestern Cape Province in 1939, with breeding first reported in 1947 (Broekhuysen 1942, 1948); by the atlas period this had become a core area of distribution. The southward expansion was attributed by Hockey *et al.* (1989) to the construction of farm dams and other artificial wetlands. The Blacksmith Plover is common and widespread and has adapted well to man-modified habitat, increasing both its range and overall abundance.

D. Ward, L.G. Underhill and A.J. Tree

Recorded in 2894 grid cells, 63.8%
Total number of records: 69 177
Mean reporting rate for range: 49.9%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



