



Greenbacked Heron

Groenrugreier

Butorides striatus

The Greenbacked Heron has 30 commonly recognized races (Payne 1979), two of which (*B. s. virescens* in North America, and *sundevalli* in the Galapagos) are considered full species by some authors. The Greenbacked Heron has a world-wide distribution in a band extending from about 48°N to 40°S. The race *atricapillus*, which occurs in southern Africa, is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa but avoids most of the dry areas.

The Greenbacked Heron is mostly restricted to north-eastern southern Africa; it is widespread in Zimbabwe, in the Okavango Delta, eastern Botswana, northern and eastern Transvaal, and northeastern KwaZulu-Natal. It occurs at isolated localities in Namibia, the Free State, eastern Cape Province and along the Orange River.

This highly polymorphic species shows surprisingly little variation in size and coloration throughout sub-Saharan Africa. It is a small heron, with a dark green crown, back and wings, and grey on the neck and underparts; usually it is seen in a hunched position, and it walks with body held almost horizontal and legs bent. The heavily streaked juveniles may readily be confused with the Dwarf Bittern.

Habitat: It is found in a variety of aquatic habitats, both fresh and saltwater. Densely vegetated rivers, estuaries, streams, lakes, ponds, swamps and mangroves are favoured, occasionally in open flood plains and open waters (Hancock & Elliott 1984). It is also found on mudflats and intertidal zones (Cramp *et al.* 1977). It was most frequently reported from the Okavango; it also occurred in many other vegetation types with suitable wetland habitat.

The main prey are fish, frogs, crabs, shrimps, molluscs, insects, small reptiles (Hancock & Kushlan 1984). Usually solitary, it tends to be crepuscular and nocturnal, except in places where the daily rhythm is regulated by the tides.

Movements: In sub-Saharan Africa the Greenbacked Heron is a sedentary species, but can move locally in response to rains (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). This is revealed by the occurrence models which show a degree of seasonality for Zone 1 (mainly the Okavango and Caprivi) but not for the other Zones.

Breeding: Greenbacked Heron nests are well hidden in low bushes or branches of mangroves and other trees, over water or ground; usually solitary, but sometimes in loose colonies with 5–15 nests in the same or neighbouring trees (Cowles 1930; Cramp *et al.* 1977). The breeding models show that, in southern Africa, breeding takes place throughout the year in Zimbabwe and northern Transvaal (Zones 5 and 6), with a spring peak in Zone 5 and a summer peak in Zone 6. The data for Zones 1 and 7 suggest that breeding is in winter in the former and in summer in the latter. In areas with highly seasonal rainfall, breeding is initiated after the first rains (Hancock & Kushlan 1984).

Historical distribution and conservation: There is little information on population sizes owing to the difficulties of making an accurate census; globally, it is considered a common species and is not threatened (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). The historical distribution has not been documented, but apparently it has not changed in recent times in southern Africa. The main concern for this species is habitat loss due to the increasing human pressure on the wetlands on which the species depends; it is adversely affected by human disturbance and pesticides (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992).

R.A. Navarro

Recorded in 809 grid cells, 17.8%
Total number of records: 8381
Mean reporting rate for range: 13.8%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



