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Andy Branfield

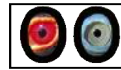
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REED BANKS USED REGULARLY AS A DAY TIME ROOST BY WHITE-BACKED NIGHT-HERONS IN THE KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

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The White-backed Night Heron *Gorsachius leuconotus* is an uncommon but generally overlooked nocturnal resident (Allan 2005). It is probably found throughout the Park in suitable habitat such as along perennial rivers (Chittenden and Whyte 2007). There are an estimated 40-60 pairs in the Kruger National Park (Barnes 2000).

I will confine this article to my sightings within the boundaries of the Kruger National Park. These have been along the Letaba, Matjulu and Sabie rivers since 2004 while atlasing (Pentads 2340_3125, 2525_3125, and 2455_3140). As some of these sightings occurred before the official start of the SABAP2 two sightings are incidental and two meet the full protocol criteria. All birds seen were single adult birds and were not obviously breeding. The birds were all seen either returning to cover early in the morning or leaving cover to hunt in the early evening. In almost all of my sightings the favoured choice of cover was reed banks – dominated by *Phragmites mauritianus*. I have had a single sighting of an adult bird in more typical habitat that is an overhanging branch with dense foliage.

The behaviour of often being solitary while roosting in dense vegetation in the day is typical (Allan 2005). It is, however, not so typical to choose habitat with dense vegetation overhanging water. The preference for clear and slow-flowing perennial rivers and



Fig 1 – A White-backed Night-Heron © JC van Rensburg
(<http://vmus.adu.org.za/?vm=BirdPix-2100>)

streams with overhanging vegetation in these cases is also typical although the usual habitat, which is abundant, is not always selected. Reedbeds as an occasional alternative habitat is mentioned (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). The species roosting in reed banks at Hippo Pools on the Mazoe River in Zimbabwe is mentioned in one source (Carlyon 2011). The species information page of the IUCN-SCC Heron Specialist group mentions that this heron also uses reed beds and even dry forest as roosting habitat (IUCN Heron Specialist Group, 2015). The Birdlife International species account mentions dense marshes as a secure day time roost utilised by this species (BirdLife International 2015).

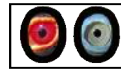


Fig 2 – A White-backed Night-Heron – depicted in habitat very similar to those favoured by the bird in the Kruger National Park as daytime cover.

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I have been incredibly fortunate to see this illusive medium sized heron on a number of occasions since 2004. Early in the morning of 12 July 2004 I saw a single adult bird returning to its dense day time roost along the Letaba River at Shimuwini Camp (pentad 2340_3115). This happened every morning I was in camp and over a number of visits thereafter. On one occasion the bird saw me, called angrily and flew off to seek a quieter roost. The roost selected was always dense green reeds even though plenty of densely foliaged overhanging branches were available.

Before sunrise on 3 July 2009 in Berg-en-Dal camp (pentad 2525_3125) I saw a single bird returning to dense reed banks along

the Matjulu River just beyond the dam wall. I have also seen a single bird on another occasion in more typical habitat skulking on an overhanging branch.

More recently – on 27 June 2014 – while enjoying sun downers on the low level bridge over the Sabie River (pentad 2455_3140) just after sunset I watched a single adult emerge from reed banks and start hunting in a pool nearby.

As mentioned in all but one of my sightings of this illusive night-heron had been in reed banks along perennial rivers. My experience is that this choice of roosting habitat is perhaps more often selected than previously thought even when other more typical habitat is abundantly available. The birds I saw were also single and not obviously breeding. My sightings were all in June and July (austral winter). Duncan McKenzie has observed the heron roosting in reed banks in the Okavango Delta but not in the Kruger National Park where he has seen them in more typical habitat (McKenzie, pers. comm.). He has also seen them foraging far from cover at night on game drives at the Crocodile River near Malelane and the Levuvhu River near Pafuri. Peter Lawson has seen them on a number of occasions roosting in dense vegetation near water as well as hunting after dark but not specifically in reed banks (Lawson, pers. comm.). He has also seen them at night foraging far from cover on a drift on a river.

This species is most certainly under recorded in atlas surveys because it is nocturnal and is rarely seen in the day. It is also confined to dense vegetation close to water making the areas the night heron inhabits difficult to access especially in the Kruger National Park. It is crepuscular so dawn and dusk I have found are the best time to see this species. At night it often hunts in the open

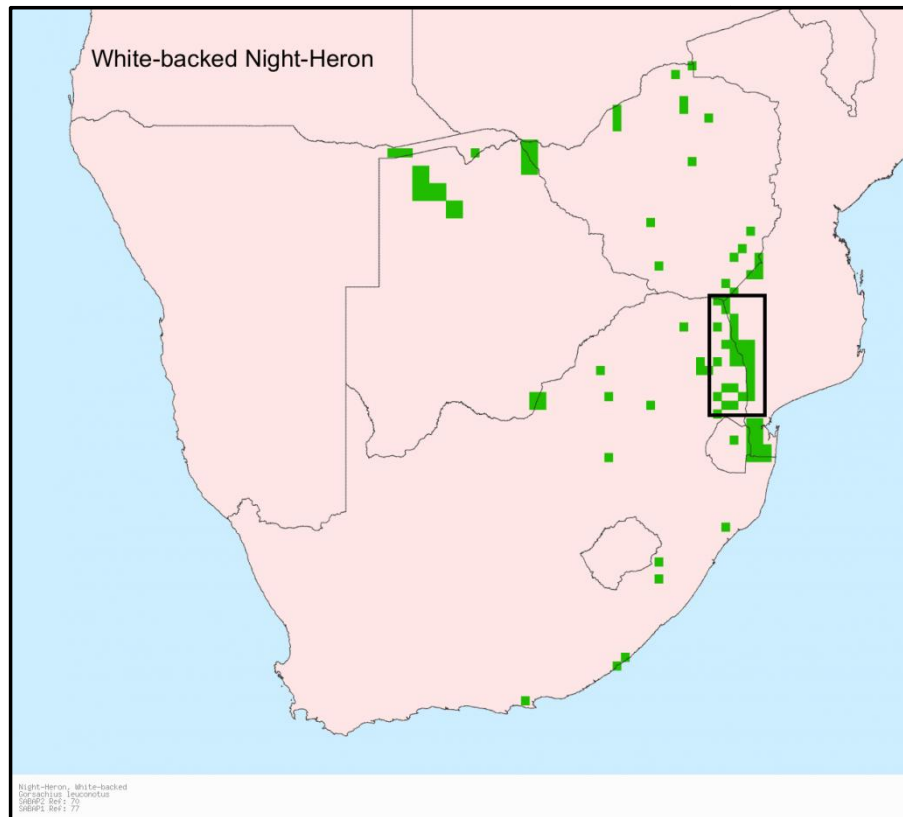
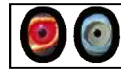


Fig 3 – Derived map of the distribution of the White-backed Night-Heron in both SABAP1 and SABAP2. Note the distribution in the Kruger National Park outlined in black.

emerging from cover at dusk.

It certainly is a privilege to see this illusive but spectacular night heron. My limited experience with this species suggests that it is probably more common than previously thought. It also is not only confined to dense vegetation overhanging slow flowing rivers and pools but certainly also roosts during the day in reed banks – most

probably when not breeding. All my sightings have been in the winter months (June and July). It may be found in any dense vegetation cover in suitable habitat during the day. It also occurs in unexpected places like Berg-en-Dal Camp and Lake Panic (Carlyon, 2011).

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Duncan McKenzie and Peter Lawson kindly commented on my sightings and added some of their own experiences with this species. Duncan McKenzie added some additional references.

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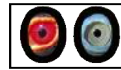
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