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Ornithological Observations accepts papers containing faunistic information about birds. This includes descriptions of distribution, behaviour, breeding, foraging, food, movement, measurements, habitat and plumage. It will also consider for publication a variety of other interesting or relevant ornithological material: reports of projects and conferences, annotated checklists for a site or region, specialist bibliographies, and any other interesting or relevant material.

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"FLOATING" GREY HERON?

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Citizen Scientists participating in ADU Projects

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On 27 September 2014 Rob Boyd observed a Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* which appeared to be floating on a farm dam alongside the main road between Bathurst and Port Alfred in the Eastern Cape. The bird was stationary in a "frozen" pose as typically adopted by the species while feeding/fishing.

Chittenden (2007) makes no reference to the species swimming or floating on water and this behaviour had not previously been noted by RB or fellow birders with whom he consulted.

The only plausible explanation that could be offered (other than that the Grey Heron was, in fact, swimming) was that the dam was of a depth that the heron was standing (possibly on "tip toes?"). The level of the water caused the bird's lower body and tail to be floating, even though its feet/toes were touching the ground (a "tip toe" stance would also tend to cause the rear of the body to tilt upwards, when compared to a normal stance).

The illustration of this species in the Roberts field guide indicates that the vertical dimension from base of neck to tip of the tail of a standing bird has the tail approximately one bill length lower than the base of the neck. The photo (Fig 1) shows the tail is actually higher than the base of the neck, which is typical of a floating or swimming bird.



Fig 1 – The "floating" Grey Heron as photographed by Rob Boyd.

The gist of the foregoing was posted on the Eastern Cape birding forum (ecbirdnet@yahoogroups.com), which elicited a report from SP. He had observed a similar scenario in the Molteno area on 18 September 2014. In this case the Grey Heron was observed in the middle of a small dam, approximately 20 m in diameter, and in a similar pose as seen in Fig 1.

On 19 September 2014 SP received a report from a farmer in the Maclear area, who had observed the same behaviour. In this instance, the Grey Heron was seen in a pond stocked with fry, also floating in the pond.

Could this be a case of evolution, adaption or just lateral thinking by the herons?

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References

Chittenden H 2007. Roberts Bird Guide. The Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town