



Biodiversity Observations

<http://bo.adu.org.za>



An electronic journal published by the Animal Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town

The scope of Biodiversity Observations consists of papers describing observations about biodiversity in general, including animals, plants, algae and fungi. This includes observations of behaviour, breeding and flowering patterns, distributions and range extensions, foraging, food, movement, measurements, habitat and colouration/plumage variations. Biotic interactions such as pollination, fruit dispersal, herbivory and predation fall within the scope, as well as the use of indigenous and exotic species by humans. Observations of naturalised plants and animals will also be considered. Biodiversity Observations will also publish a variety of other interesting or relevant biodiversity material: reports of projects and conferences, annotated checklists for a site or region, specialist bibliographies, book reviews and any other appropriate material. Further details and guidelines to authors are on this website.

Lead Editor: Arnold van der Westhuizen – Paper Editor: Les G Underhill

BLACK-HEADED HERONS PREYING ON WEAVERS

H. Dieter Oschadleus

Recommended citation format:

Oschadleus HD 2016. Black-headed Herons preying on weavers. Biodiversity Observations 7.49: 1–3.

URL: <http://bo.adu.org.za/content.php?id=242>

Published online: 19 August 2016

AFRING NEWS / PREDATION

BLACK-HEADED HERONS PREYING ON WEAVERS

H. Dieter Oschadleus

Animal Demography Unit, Department of Biological Sciences,
University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, 7701 South Africa

Email: doschadleus@gmail.com

Summary

Hérons occasionally prey on birds, both adults and nestlings, in an opportunistic manner. This short note reports on a Black-headed Heron *Ardea melanocephala* that killed a Cape Weaver *Ploceus capensis* in a mist-net, but did not manage to extract it from the net. This is the first confirmed report of a Black-headed Heron killing a Cape Weaver. Other records of this heron preying on weavers are listed.

Attempted predation event

On 6 August 2016 Campbell Fleming and I were ringing at Frogmore, Cape Town (34° 04'S 18°27'E). One line of mist-nets was placed along a road running through a reed-bed, where weavers and warblers in particular are caught. A second line of nets was placed on the other side of the reeds next to a small field of thick grass.

At about 9.15 I heard a weaver distress-calling in the net. Most birds are quiet when they have flown into a net, but some individuals give distress calls, especially if two birds are close together in the net. The weaver called for about a minute and then was quiet. When first heard, I was busy measuring a bird; as soon as I finished, I went to the net. I was surprised to see a Black-headed Heron fly up from the grass next

to the net, but did not immediately connect the heron's presence to the net. Ringers are generally alert to small raptors, mongooses, domestic cats and coucals as predators to be monitored at ringing sessions (de Beer et al. 2001). At the net I saw a dead Cape Weaver (immature male), which had clearly been killed by the heron. Because there were no other birds in the net, I decided to get my camera before taking out the dead bird.

From my car, I saw the heron flying from a nearby tree back to the net, and decided to watch from a few hundred metres distance (Figures 1 & 2). The heron pecked at the weaver and tried to pull it out from the net. It released after pulling and then tried again. For the next 10-15 minutes the same behaviour was repeated while I took a few photos. A second heron flew over and perched on a nearby telephone post but did not come down for several minutes.



Fig. 1. The Black-headed Heron returning to the Cape Weaver (circled in red) that it had killed in a mist-net earlier



Fig. 2. The Black-headed Heron tugging at the Cape weaver that it had killed in a mist-net earlier

When the second heron did fly down to the grass, I approached the net and both herons flew away and were not seen again. At the net, the dead weaver had been decapitated, but both body and head were still entangled in the net.

Commentary on this event

This event is exceptional. 1890 birds of 28 species have been ringed and recaptured at the Frogmore site between 23 July 2008 and 6 August 2016 with no losses due to predators. The top species caught here are Southern Masked Weaver *Ploceus velatus* (489), Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild* (338), and Cape Weaver (293). Herons are occasionally seen in the area, but had not been seen near the nets

previously. Nevertheless, ringers should now add the large herons to the list of species considered as potential threats at ringing sites (de Beer et al. 2001).

The Black-headed Heron as a predator of weavers

The Black-headed Heron has been recorded as preying on at least three weaver species, either on adults or as nest predators.

1. Red-billed Quelea *Quelea quelea*

There are many records of Black-headed Heron predation on the Red-billed Quelea, both on adults (Leuthold & Leuthold 1972, Lourens 1963) and chicks and juveniles in breeding colonies (e.g. Becker & Amir 1993, Lourens 1963, Thiollay 1975).

2. Red-collared Widowbird *Euplectes ardens*

There is a record of a Black-headed Heron stabbing at a nest of Red-collared Widowbird in East Africa (Brown et al. 1982), with no further details given. The heron may have heard chicks calling in the nest.

3. Yellow-crowned Bishop *Euplectes afer*

Black-headed Heron pellets contained remains, presumably feathers, of a male Yellow-crowned Bishop (Anon. 1963).

4. Unidentified birds that could be weavers

There is one record of a Black-headed Heron that hunted (presumably speared) a bird perched in a tree near Wilderness National Park, where the prey appeared to be a Cape Weaver (Hiscock 2011). Nel (1964) found yellow feathers in some Black-headed Heron pellets, which were thought to belong to young weavers. Little et al. (2015) listed the Black-headed Heron as a potential nest predator on grassland birds including the Long-tailed Widow *Euplectes progne*, but this has not been confirmed as a prey item for this heron.

References

Anon. 1963. Records of bird diets and feeding habits received since the publication of the last news sheet. Witwatersrand Bird Club News Sheet 44: 2–4.

Becker P, Amir OG 1993. Effects on non-target birds through spraying operations on *Quelea* roost and colonies in Somalia. *Lanioturdus* 27: 58–63.

Brown LH, Urban EK, Newman K 1982. *Birds of Africa*. Vol 1. Academic Press, London.

de Beer SJ, Lockwood GM, Raijmakers JHFA, Raijmakers JMH, Scott WA, Oschadleus HD, Underhill LG 2001. SAFRING bird ringing manual. Cape Town: Avian Demography Unit, University of Cape Town.

Hiscock CES 2011. More hunting herons. *Africa - Birds & Birding* 16(4): 8.

Leuthold W, Leuthold B 1972. Blutschnabelweber (*Quelea quelea*) als Beute von Greif- und Stelzvögeln. *Vogelwarte* 26: 352–354.

Lourens DC 1963. The Red-billed *Quelea*. A contribution to the bioecology and control. Unpubl. DSc, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Pretoria.

Little IT, Hockey PAR, Jansen R 2015. Predation drives nesting success in moist highland grasslands: the importance of maintaining vegetation cover for bird conservation. *Ostrich* 86: 97–111.

Nel JE 1964. 'n Ontleding van die Swartkop-reier se dieet soos blyk uit 'n ondersoek van sy kosballetjies (food pellets). *Bokmakierie* 16(1): 9.

Thiollay J-M 1975. Example de prédation naturelle sur une population nicheuse de *Quelea qu.* *Quelea* L. au Mali. *La Terre et la Vie* 29: 31–54.