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OBSERVATIONS OF THE COURTSHIP DISPLAY OF A WHITE-BACKED NIGHT HERON FROM SOUTH AFRICA

Dominic P Rollinson and Patrick L Rollinson

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COURTSHIP DISPLAY

OBSERVATIONS OF THE COURTSHIP DISPLAY OF A WHITE-BACKED NIGHT HERON FROM SOUTH AFRICA

Dominic P Rollinson^{1*} and Patrick L Rollinson²

¹ DST/NRF Centre of Excellence at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town, Private Bag X3, Rondebosch, 7701, South Africa.

² Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, University of Cape Town, Private Bag X3, Rondebosch, 7701, South Africa.

* Corresponding author: domrollinson@gmail.com

The White-backed Night Heron (*Gorsachius leuconotus*) is a rare, nocturnal and secretive species which inhabits slow-flowing perennial rivers with sufficient overhanging vegetation. Throughout southern Africa it occurs mostly along the east coast as far south as Knysna, Western Cape (Hockey et al. 2005). It is known from a number of localities in northern South Africa and occurs along most major rivers in the Kruger National Park (Chittenden and Whyte 2009). However due to its secretive and nocturnal habits, very little is known of the biology of this species. An exhaustive search of the literature could not produce any formal description of its courtship display and thus our observations from Marloth Park, Mpumalanga are described here.

Approximately 15 minutes after sunset on 24 June 2016 a small dark heron was observed flying out onto an exposed sandbank along the southern bank of the Crocodile River (-25.3668, 31.7572), bordering the Kruger National Park. Despite the very poor light the most

obvious feature of the bird was the white lower back; fairly long white plumes were puffed out and were immediately noticeable. On further inspection, the dark cap and yellow legs were observed.

The bird proceeded to walk along the water's edge taking very slow, deliberate steps whilst continually making low grunts. The bird would pause, briefly tuck its head into its shoulders and then suddenly point its head skyward, raising its shoulders at the same time and producing a harsh grunt. The bird was observed performing its display for approximately 3 minutes before it flew off into nearby thick vegetation.

White-backed Night Herons are known to breed throughout the year, except June (Hockey et al. 2005), and thus it is likely what we observed was in fact its courtship display. Although no other individuals were seen in the immediate proximity, it is possible that a female was nearby in thicker vegetation, obscured from our view.

References

Chittenden H, Whyte I 2009. Roberts Bird Guide: Kruger National Park and adjacent lowveld. The Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town, 108.

Hockey PAR, Dean WRJ, Ryan PG (eds) 2005. Roberts Birds of Southern Africa, VIIth ed. The Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town, 598-599.