

THE REEF HERON (*Egretta schistacea* EHRENBERG,
IN INTERIOR EAST AFRICA

By

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That the Reef Heron is exclusively a bird of the marine littoral has been a long and firmly held impression. Archer & Godman (1937:51), for example, stated categorically that this heron "is confined to the sea-coast, appearing nowhere inland". More recent publications, by omission of reference to the accumulating inland records, have tended to perpetuate this impression. Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1957:46), although they had previously contributed to delineation of the species' inland range (see beyond), made no mention of this and Williams (1963) likewise omitted any comment as to occurrence inland.

Records from the interior of the Continent are widely distributed. Berlioz (1922:397) reported a specimen from Lac Abbay, Ethiopia. Chapin (1932:433) called attention to a specimen collected at Lake Albert by Sir Frederick Jackson in 1901. Grant & Mackworth-Praed (1933a:195) gave the range of this species in the interior of Africa as "up the Nile" and again (1933b:245), having examined the specimen referred to by Chapin (*loc. cit.*), revised the range to include distribution up the Nile as far as Lake Albert and they predicted that the heron would be found to occur all the way up the Nile to Lake Victoria. A specimen of the Reef Heron in the collections of the National Museum of Kenya, which had been collected at Lake Rudolf in March 1947, was cited by North (1966:231) who also gave a recent sight record at Lake Nakuru in May. Forbes-Watson (1966:233) reported that between the period July 1960 and October 1962, he had, on occasions, seen Reef Herons at Ferguson Gulf, Lake Rudolf.

Herewith are three additional records of the Reef Heron, all from Lake Rudolf. In 1958, as a member of the R. E. Maytag—University of Miami Expedition, I collected two specimens and made observations of a third. Pertinent data are:

- a ♂, Dec. 1, Allia Bay, weight 638 grams
- a ♀, Dec. 5, Allia Bay, weight 644 grams
- a sight record, Nov. 9, El Molo Bay

The specimens are a part of the University of Miami Research Collections (UMRC). The male was examined by Dr. Dean Amadon of the American Museum of Natural History. He regarded it a subadult, judging by the amount of brown on the neck, the blackish back, and the lack of occipital plumes. The female resembles the adult grey phase plumage of the species; it lacks, however, plumes on either the back or head. The bird observed at El Molo Bay was similar to the latter, although it was not noted whether plumes were present or not. In these three birds, feathering of the chin, gular area, and anterior area of the jugulum was white. All were recorded as having yellow-orange mandibles, and the irides of the two specimens were yellow. The stomach of one bird contained a partly-digested *Tilapia*.

North (*loc. cit.*) regarded it "odd" that present Kenya records of the Reef Heron are from inland. The number of such records now at hand suggests that the species is of more than accidental occurrence in interior East Africa. Indeed, considering that ornithological observation at Lake Rudolf has been limited, the number of records now at hand from *this* area indicate that, at least in small numbers, the species is present there during a considerable portion of the year.

It is to be hoped that those concerned with future inland records of the Reef Heron will pay particular attention to certain kinds of information. The concept of polymorphism in birds has been elucidated only recently. It is evident that the "morphs" of a species—in the Reef Heron morphs being evidenced by colour or plumage phases—may vary proportionately within the species' range. Ratio-clines which thus exist suggest that the morphs may have differences in adaptability to the ecological situations. This is a consideration which has already received attention with respect to some reef herons (see, e.g. Thomson, 1964:658). The plumage patterns of inland visiting birds, therefore, should be noted in detail. At this time practically all of the records for which there is adequate information seem to be those of the grey morph or of those which appear to be intermediate between the grey and the white morph. The number of such records is probably still too small to be treated as significant and bias is no doubt inherent in the accumulation of this information, for white morphs which may occur inland are probably more easily overlooked by virtue of other white-plumaged herons. The record presented by Berlioz (*loc. cit.*) is apparently one instance of a white morph from inland. There are a number of plumages of the Reef Heron which are those of neither the typical grey nor the typical white morph. To what extent these are intermediate plumages (one assumes of hybrids between the morphs) or are attributable to age or seasonal change is not at this time at all clarified. Certainly these render difficult designation of birds observed in the field as immature or adult. Plumes, particularly occipital ones, should be looked for carefully.

The locality, both geographically and ecologically, should be described as accurately as possible. "Lake Rudolf", apparently the only notation as to the locality at which the specimen in the National Museum was taken, is hardly adequate. The three records herein contributed, from El Molo and Allia Bays, were all from areas of sandy, shallow shores, all three birds being encountered on narrow spits of sand. These situations were characterized by a sparsity of aquatic vegetation.

Observations of feeding behaviour are of interest. One of the herons I collected, the one incidentally with an empty stomach, was resting in shallow water on its tarsi, its yellow toes extended in front of it. The wings, barely spread, were drooped, their tips dangling in the water. During the half hour or so that I watched this heron from close range, it gave no outward indication of fishing. Its wing tips rocked gently at times by the ripples, its head slightly elevated above the horizontal, the bird gave the appearance of sunning or, at times, of being asleep.

Of much interest are sightings which may be indicative of route(s) the herons follow inland. Jackson's (1938:45) record from Witu, while only fifteen miles or so from the coast, suggests that feeding situations may originally attract birds away from the coast. One may hypothesize that to such birds, river valleys (in this case the Tana River Valley) or other features of the terrain might afford avenues inland. Amadon (*pers. com.*) regards the birds that ascend the Nile as immature or off-season wanderers. With respect to those Reef Herons which do come into the interior along this route, it is interesting to contemplate the fact that Lake Rudolf was formerly a part of the Nile system.

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