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STATUS OF CICONIIFORMES IN SIERRA LEONE

by G. D. Field

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Macdonald (1977) provided information on the status of the Ciconiiformes in the Cape Coast area of Ghana and gave a comparison with some other West African territories from Ivory Coast to Mid-West Nigeria. As there seems to be considerable variation between the stations, and the pattern of occurrence is clearly not yet fully understood in West Africa as a whole, it may be helpful to add the situation in Sierra Leone which lies between 280 and 520 kms west of the western border of Ivory Coast (between 06°55' and 10° N and between 10°16' and 13°18'W). Though straddling the forest/savanna boundary Sierra Leone is sufficiently compact to be treated as a unit and, although problems remain (particularly the status of some species during the rains) residence in the country over 14 years has enabled me to give a reasonably comprehensive picture of the position.

For the purposes of this paper the wet season can be taken as May to October and the dry season November to April. 'Breeding' refers to the laying of the egg, so that 'breeding Aug-Oct' (for instance) means that laying dates are known, or can be calculated from nestlings, for each of the three months, August, September, October.

LITTLE BITTERN Ixobrychus minutus A rains breeding migrant, common between May and November with a few records in December and April and none in January-March. Breeding Aug-Oct in seasonal wetlands, particularly in grass tussocks rising above the water.

AFRICAN DWARF BITTERN I. sturmii A local migrant, probably present in Sierra Leone all year, but during the dry season largely confined to shady streams and rivers and only flushed by chance. Between May and October it becomes conspicuous in seasonal swamps which contain thickets of trees; particularly in June birds fly about openly, standing exposed on the tops of trees and indulging in courtship flights. Breeding is probably mainly in July (well-grown juveniles in September).

TIGER BITTERN Tigriornis leucolopha A scarce forest resident, known from Freetown, the Liberian border and a captive bird in the extreme north. Breeding September (one record).

NIGHT HERON Nycticorax nycticorax Probably resident but no breeding is known. Birds occur in thickets in mid-swamp in small numbers (maximum 20 plus). With one September exception records are between December and June, but this is (largely?, wholly?) because the thickets cannot be approached during the rains and birds are hardly seen unless flushed at any time of year. The great majority of birds seen have been immatures.

WHITE-BACKED NIGHT HERON N. leuconotus Known from two sites only, a single bird flushed with Night Herons from the thickly 'bushed' banks of a small dam in the North-east (April, May) and another in the midst of a densely packed Squacco heronry on a river islet in the west (December). Probably a scarce resident.

SQUACCO HERON Ardeola ralloides A breeding resident. One site is known containing possibly 100 nests, an islet on one of the big rivers. Breeding Aug-Oct. Between July and October birds are absent from the swamps but common there for the rest of the year, possibly augmented by Palaearctic birds but there is no noticeable diminution in numbers between April and June when Palaearctic birds should be leaving.

CATTLE EGRET A. ibis A dry season migrant across the whole country, reaching Freetown in early November (occasionally late October) and leaving in mid June (latest date 26 June) with no obvious build up of numbers prior to departure. Presumably the arrival and departure dates one month later than over the other territories cited by Macdonald are to be correlated with the later onset and cessation of the rains here, and migration would seem to be a simple north-south movement.

GREEN-BACKED HERON Butorides striatus Resident and usually sedentary. Most common among the mangroves but found along the rivers and at lakes and pools right to the north. Uncommon on the more open swamps. Some breed solitarily in the mangroves or at isolated pools but most prefer to join a colony of other species like A. ralloides or E. gularis, tending to choose the higher and shadier positions within such colonies. Breeding: May, July-Oct.

BLACK HERON Egretta ardesiaca Status unknown but probably a non-breeding migrant. Recorded frequently between December and June (with odd single birds in November), usually in small parties except occasionally at drying swamp pools where up to 80 have occurred together. Much more commonly seen along the coast and lower river reaches than far inland.

REEF HERON E. gularis Resident. One breeding site is known, an islet off the Peninsula coast holding upwards of 50 pairs (July, Aug), and presumably other coastal stations exist. In the dry season common along muddy shores and estuaries, in smaller numbers along sandy or rocky shores and up the rivers, and comparatively uncommon on inland swamps except for occasional congregations at drying pools. Of the breeding birds about 8% are pure white. Out of the breeding season these are not normally distinguishable from E. garzetta.

LITTLE EGRET E. garzetta A dry season migrant over the whole country with some birds present on the coast through the rains. (These are non-breeding

birds and not to be confused with white E. gularis. All E. gularis leave Freetown itself during the rains, whereas these birds remain there). It avoids rocky shores but usually outnumbers E. gularis on the mud (by three or four to one at Freetown), and inland is less a river species but far commoner on the swamps in company with the other white Egretta species.

YELLOW-BILLED EGRET E. intermedia A dry season migrant (November to July) to inland swamps, absent from the coast. Birds scatter singly, mixing particularly with A. ibis and E. alba, usually rather more abundant than the latter (old records do not differentiate between the two species).

GREAT WHITE HERON E. alba A dry season migrant to the coast between mid December and mid June, and to inland swamps between November and July with a few remaining through the rains and attaining the black beak of the breeding dress. (There is an old record of a large white heron breeding beside a newly formed dam in the north-east, but which species this refers to is unknown).

GREY HERON Ardea cinerea A dry season migrant throughout the country with a few birds remaining on the coast through the rains. The influx begins in October, mainly of young birds. Most common on the coast (maximum 45 together) but three or four will be seen on any large inland swamp and solitary birds on ricefields or at pools.

BLACK-HEADED HERON A. melanocephala Records are few but it probably occurs annually. Single birds have been seen in November, December, January (twice), February, April, and July, with two on one swamp at least from November to March. All records have been from inland swamps or dry grassland except for the November one when a bird remained for two weeks at Freetown feeding on coastal mud with A. cinerea. Unlikely ever to breed.

GOLIATH HERON A. goliath Status uncertain. Recorded rarely between November and May mainly on tidal rivers but once far inland in the north-east.

PURPLE HERON A. purpurea A solitary species of inland swamps (including ricefields and thickly vegetated Raphia swamps); also on lakesides and occasionally coastal mud. Recorded in all months between September and May, with no suggestion of a breeding population.

HAMMERKOP Scopus umbretta A rather uncommon resident both along the tidal rivers and inland in swampy grassland and along river valleys. Breeding (one record) March.

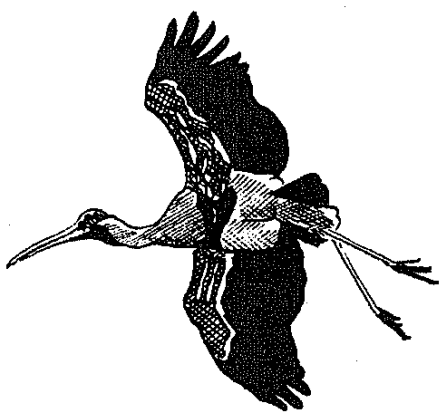
ABDIM'S STORK Ciconia abdimii An occasional passage migrant in May and June, known from Freetown and a river in the north-west.

WOOLLY-NECKED STORK C. episcopus Resident, the most widespread stork, breeding (Dec-Feb) in silk-cotton trees towering over savanna 'bush' or forest. Most common in saline swamps along the lower reaches of the rivers and in the central lowlands which are seasonally flooded, frequenting small water holes and ricefields rather than the large swamps where Anastomus occurs.

OPEN-BILL Anastomus lamelligerus Resident, breeding in the south, presumably during the rains but the breeding grounds are unknown to me. From December to April, occasionally as late as June, flocks of up to 100 are common on such large swamps as remain.

MARABOU Leptoptilus crumeniferus A dry season casual, recorded in January, February/March, March, April and June, single birds except for three in Feb/March, from widely separate localities right across the country including the forest zone.

WOOD IBIS Ibis ibis Resident, with one breeding colony known of some 40 nests in tall trees beside a village in the south (Jan, Feb). Otherwise it is not a very common species of the coastal belt, unrecorded between June and early November so that possibly it withdraws north for the rains.



SACRED IBIS Threskiornis aethiopica Status unknown but probably not breeding. Records are all between November and May, along estuaries and muddy coasts, far more plentiful in the north than the south but never in large numbers.

HADADA Bostrychia hagedash Presumably resident but no breeding is known. Recorded in all months except August and September (when ornithological activity is at its lowest) mainly from inland swamps and rivers in twos and threes, only reaching the coast and overlapping with Threskiornis in the extreme north-west.

OLIVE IBIS B. olivacea Very rare but probably resident in the south. However, practically nothing is known of it.

GLOSSY IBIS Plegadis falcinellus Apart from an unannotated mention by Bannerman the only record is of two at a swamp in the north-west in January.

AFRICAN SPOONBILL Platalea alba At least partially resident. Breeds on an offshore islet (Sept) but unfortunately the young are increasingly cropped for food by local fishermen. Confined to coastal areas and the system of lakes and rivers in the south. Massed flocks (up to 1000 birds) gather at one drying lake in April, far more than are likely to breed in Sierra Leone.

We thus have as certain rains breeders: Ixobrychus minutus, I. sturmii, Tigriornis leucolopha, Ardeola ralloides, Butorides striatus, Egretta gularis and Platalea alba; and as probables: Anastomus lamelligerus and Bostrychia hagedash. As dry season breeders: Ciconia episcopus, Ibis ibis, and provisionally Scopus umbretta (though here the nesting season may be prolonged). As dry season non-breeding visitors on present evidence: Ardeola ibis, Egretta ardesiaca, E. intermedia, E. alba, Ardea cinerea, A. purpurea, and Threskiornis aethiopica. As casuals of greater or lesser frequency: Ardea melanocephala, Ciconia abdimii, Leptoptilus crumeniferus, and Plegadis falcinellus; and with status unknown (though I suspect all are rare residents Nycticorax nycticorax, N. leuconotus, Ardea goliath, and Bostrychia olivacea.

The situation thus seems to be more orderly than in Ghana, with for most species a regular and simple migration system between wet and dry seasons The dangers of jumping to conclusions can be seen with e.g. Ardeola ralloides. If the breeding islet were not known one would judge it to be a dry season migrant, as the swamps on which it occurs for the rest of the year are wholly deserted although in some cases only a few miles from the breeding station. Similarly, E. gularis abandons Freetown during the rains to move thirty miles down the coast. It is still possible that such local movements may be found to occur among other heron species.

An interesting question is, where does I. minutus go in the dry season? Apart from Ivory Coast where it is said to be resident, all territories cited by Macdonald seem to have a wet season influx, although Elgood, Fry and Dowsett (1973) had no evidence of migration in Nigeria as a whole. As a bird of open, grassy swamps it cannot, like I. sturmii, simply become invisible in the dry season. Here it is a bird so obvious and easily flushed that it must genuinely migrate beyond the borders of Sierra Leone.

The Ciconia abdimii records are unexpected. Most western breeding birds migrate directly east-west across West Africa well north of latitude 10^0 and the birds seen here must either be totally misplaced, or an indication that some birds migrate over the forest zone, following the coast north to their breeding grounds.

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Reference

Macdonald, M. A. (1977) Notes on Ciconiiformes at Cape Coast, Ghana. Bull. Nigerian Orn. Soc. 13 (44): 139-144

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