

First records of Black-headed Heron

Ardea melanocephala in Saudi Arabia

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On 12 July 2010, Mike Jennings found a Black-headed Heron *Ardea melanocephala* flying quite high over Wadi Dhamat, Shuqayri, Jizan. This represented the first record for Saudi Arabia. Then, in January 2011, a team of volunteers were sent to the Red sea coast of Saudi Arabia to search for Slender-billed Curlews *Numenius tenuirostris*. The team comprised of Ross Ahmed, Ammar Almomen, Jaber Haressi, Jim Scott and Mohammed Shobrak. Funding and support was provided by the RSPB and the Saudi Wildlife Commission. As part of this search, we visited Malaki dam lake, Jizan (17° 01' N, 42° 59' E) on 13 January. Malaki dam is an IBA (Evans 1994) used for flood control and irrigation. The lake is bordered by basaltic lava plains, several rocky hills, *Tamarix* woodland, *Sorghum* plantations and livestock grazing (Evans 1994). Whilst scanning the lake, RA found two Black-headed Herons stood on a small island of flooded trees/shrubs towards the centre of the lake (Plate 1). However, as we were unaware of the species' status in Saudi Arabia at the time of the sighting, little attention was paid to the birds other than to take photographs. The identification was straightforward as the species is easily distinguished from all other species of herons. Rarely, adult Grey Herons *Ardea cinerea* can show a black cap (Hillcoat *et al* 2001), but this species would also show *eg* paler grey neck sides. On our return, and following correspondence with Mike Jennings, we became aware of the species' status in Saudi Arabia.

Black-headed Heron is a monotypic species found across much of the African continent south of the Sahara, and Urban (1982) described it as "normally the commonest large heron in most of Africa". However Hancock & Elliot (1978) stated that it can be absent from suitable habitats, and its distribution is patchy within its range. Black-headed Heron is considered to be a very common and widespread breeding resident in Ethiopia and Eritrea by Ash & Atkins (2009). In West Africa, the species migrates north into the Sahel during rains there June–October (most probably to breed), returning in the dry season October–May (*eg* Urban 1982). Similar northward movements occur elsewhere in Africa, as demonstrated by a ringing recovery (*eg* Hancock & Elliot 1978), but birds in the equatorial zone are sedentary (Hillcoat *et al* 2001).

The first Arabian records, thought to be African overshoots, were two birds, an adult and immature, at separate locations near Aden, Yemen, in September 1962. Thereafter,



Plate 1. Two Black-headed Herons *Ardea melanocephala* Malaki dam lake, Jizan, Saudi Arabia, 13 January 2011. © Ross Ahmed

individuals or groups of up to 4 were reported in Yemen and Dhofar, Oman, on at least 5 occasions up to the late 1980s, with the first on Socotra in December 1998. Further reports from Dhofar between 1999 and 2001 included up to five present July 1999–April 2000 (Ash 1988, Gustad 2002, Jennings 2010).

On the Red sea coast, the species has been regular at Hodeidah wetlands, Yemen, since 2002, with a peak of 33 birds, and it almost certainly breeds there (Jennings 2010). The most northerly record in Yemen was inland near al-Kidan in November 2007. The populations in Aden and Hodeidah, perhaps c15 pairs, are thought to be the founders of a more widespread range expansion into Arabia (Jennings 2010). Morake (1994), though, based on a study in Botswana, found that the species had a low breeding success compared to other heron species, and Urban (1982) concluded ‘low breeding success common’ for the Black-headed Heron.

Away from the Arabian peninsula, there are four extralimital records in the Western Palearctic (as defined by Cramp & Simmons 1977). There are two records in France, a bird collected (specimen location unknown) at the end of the 19th century at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, Bouches-du-Rhône, and an adult at the Camargue, Bouches-du-Rhône, on 29 November 1971 (Dubois *et al* 2008). An older record from Var, France, in 1845, has not been accepted by the national records committee because its origin was considered doubtful (Commission de l’Avifaune Française 2006). An immature was in Eilat, Israel, 19 October–15 December 1987 (Shirihai 1996, 1999) with the same bird at Aqaba, Jordan, during the same period (Andrews *et al* 1999). Finally, on the Cape Verde islands, the first occurred on Santiago March–April 2009 (Hazevoet 2010); possibly the same bird was reported as still being present April 2011 (Kris de Rouck *in litt*).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Keith Betton and the Scottish Ornithologists’ Club helped locate literature. Marcel Haas provided the Black-headed Heron species account from his forthcoming book *Extremely rare birds in the Western Palearctic*. Mike Jennings shared information on his record.

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