



Water Dikkop

Waterdikkop

Burhinus vermiculatus

The Water Dikkop is confined to the wetlands and rivers of the northern, eastern and coastal parts of southern Africa. It is almost totally absent from semi-desert, desert and Kalahari sandveld, despite the fact that surface water is often available at dams. Elsewhere in Africa it is distributed northward to Liberia in the west and southern Ethiopia in the east (Urban *et al.* 1986). Throughout its range it is mainly a lowland species, being almost completely absent from the inland plateau of South Africa.

It is fairly common in the southwestern Cape Province, mainly on coastal wetlands (Hockey *et al.* 1989). It is hardly ever recorded in the Free State (Earlé & Grobler 1987) and in the Transvaal is confined largely to the eastern lowveld where it is fairly common. Its distribution in KwaZulu-Natal is almost entirely along the coastal littoral and up the Pongolo River (Cyrus & Robson 1980). It is common along several rivers in Swaziland (Parker 1994) and is the common dikkop of southern Mozambique (Clancey 1971a). It is common along the bigger river valleys of Zimbabwe, extending on to the central watershed, but not the eastern highlands (Irwin 1981). In Botswana it is found mainly in the Okavango system and along the Limpopo drainage, where it is common, and in Namibia most records come from the Kunene River, Etosha Pan and the wetlands of the Caprivi.

The Water Dikkop is easily told apart from the Spotted Dikkop *B. capensis* by its streaked (not spotted) plumage and conspicuous white and grey bars on the folded wing; the white patches in the remiges are larger and more conspicuous than those of the Spotted Dikkop. It is more vocal than the Spotted Dikkop, especially during the day, and has a distinctly different call (Maclean 1993b). It tends to be more gregarious at all times, groups of up to 30 birds occurring outside of the breeding season.

Habitat: It is mainly a bird of sandbanks, rocks and shorelines of rivers, dams, lakes and estuaries, and occasionally occurs on open beaches. It may forage up to about 1 km from water at night (Urban *et al.* 1986).

Movements: Apart from having to move away from sandbanks, rocks and shorelines at times of high water, the Water Dikkop is not known to have any regular or long-distance movements. This is confirmed by Hayman *et al.* (1986) who stated that it 'can always be found in traditional sites'.

The pattern of seasonal occurrence is clearly different between the Okavango (Zone 1), where peak floods occur in the dry season (April–August), and Zone 5 where high water results from local rain (November–March). Both Zones have lower reporting rates at peak floods, probably resulting from birds being more dispersed along expanded shorelines combined with the fact that pairs are considerably less conspicuous than flocks in this cryptic species.

Breeding: Egglaying has been recorded in September–December in the southwestern Cape Province (Winterbottom 1968a) and in the Transvaal (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), and in Zimbabwe from August–January with a September–October peak (Irwin 1981). Atlas data confirm the peak period; late records were probably mainly of chicks and juveniles.

Historical distribution and conservation: Described by Stark & Sclater (1906) as 'nowhere very common' and as 'a somewhat rare bird', it seems as if it has increased in abundance since the start of the 20th century, though its range has probably not increased. It is noteworthy that the establishment of dams has apparently not been able to lure this species into the otherwise dry interior to any significant extent. Conversely, within its range the Water Dikkop is able to inhabit even quite small man-made dams, which has no doubt contributed to its increasing numbers. In places it adapts well to the presence of humans, even nesting at the edges of habitations, but the intensive use of estuaries for recreation may be having a negative impact on coastal populations (A.J. Tree pers. comm.).

G.L. Maclean

Recorded in 707 grid cells, 15.6%

Total number of records: 9169

Mean reporting rate for range: 16.3%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



