

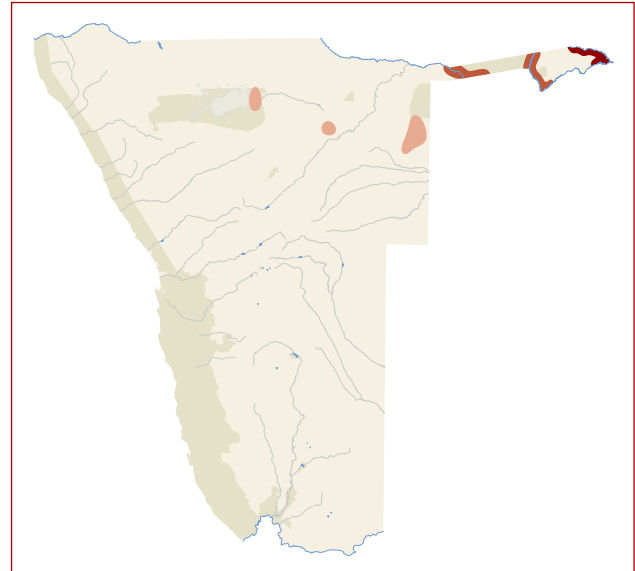
SLATY EGRET | *Egretta vinaceigula*

RE Simmons | Reviewed by: M Herremans; H Kolberg; N Thomson; S Tyler

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Conservation Status:	Endangered
Southern African Range:	Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, Zimbabwe
Area of Occupancy:	12,600 km ²
Population Estimate:	Fewer than 300 birds
Population Trend:	Declining
Habitat:	Reed beds, permanent swamps, ephemeral wetlands
Threats:	Reed cutting, burning, low breeding success, flood disruption, climate change



rare and vagrant, appearing only when exceptional rains and floods occur on the Kunene River, the Olushandja Dam near Onesi, the north-central regions, in Etosha National Park, Grootfontein, Daan Viljoen Game Park and on Otjivero Dam (Herremans 1997a, C Hines, H Kolberg, P Lane unpubl. data, N Thomson pers. comm.).

The global population is estimated at 3,000 to 5,000 birds (Dodman 2002), although this is thought to be too high (M Herremans *in litt.*). The Namibian population is unlikely to exceed 300 birds for a number of reasons. In his estimate of Namibian populations during flood years in the Pannetjies Veld, east and south-east of Etosha Pan, Hines (1992) noted 269 sightings between 1984 and 1989, while birds were recorded regularly in the Mahango area of the Bwabwata National Park on the Okavango River from 1991 to 2000 (M Paxton unpubl. data) with a maximum of 20 birds in 1991. On the Chobe River, counts undertaken on both sides indicated similar figures. In extensive surveys over 277 km of river, M Herremans (unpubl. data) noted 45 birds in the mid-1990s. In 23 km of Chobe River in the Salambala Conservancy, RE Simmons (unpubl. data) noted nine birds, giving a density estimate of 3.9 birds per 10 km. Given that the Chobe River in Namibia is about 100 km long, the total number of birds is estimated at 40, similar to that on the Botswana side. Population numbers undoubtedly fluctuate with high rainfall and birds probably disperse to the Okavango Delta or the Linyanti Swamps.

In August 2004, 19 birds were seen along the Chobe River, including 13 at three drying lagoons in the Satau grasslands



DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

This species is endemic to the swamps of south-central Africa, particularly the Okavango Swamps in Botswana and the Bangweulu Swamps and Kafue Flats of Zambia (Benson *et al.* 1971, Herremans 1997a). Atlas maps show that its distribution in southern Africa is tightly centred on the Okavango Swamps, with a few birds recorded in the associated rivers, such as the Okavango, Chobe and Zambezi rivers in Namibia. Few birds are found outside this area in southern Africa, although there are records from Nylsvlei in South Africa and from the central Mashonaland Plateau and Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe. Four specimens from the Cunene Province in Angola have recently been found in the Lubango Museum (M Mills pers. comm.). In Namibia, it is known mainly from the Tsumkwe District; two areas where colonies of Slaty Egrets have been recorded are the 'Pannetjies Veld' wetlands, 25 km east of Tsumkwe, and at Nyae Nyae Pan, the largest of the Tsumkwe Pans (Hines 1993). Elsewhere in Namibia, it is

on the Botswana side (Tyler 2005). With the extent of suitable lagoon habitat on these grasslands, the population on either side of the Chobe River could seasonally be as high as 300 to 400 birds (S Tyler *in litt.*).



ECOLOGY

This species prefers dense reed beds in the Okavango River or temporarily flooded grass pans where overhanging fig and *Acacia* trees provide adequate breeding sites (Hines 1992, 1993, Randall & Herremans 1994). During the dry months Slaty Egrets disperse out of the Okavango Swamps to find suitable flooded areas elsewhere where they may breed (M Herremans *in litt.*). Breeding occurs in small and often mixed heronries, when peak flooding occurs in small pans and large reed beds, with eggs laid in February (eight records) and March (four) (Hines 1992, Randall & Herremans 1994, Tarboton 1996). A colony of 26 pairs in low *Acacia* trees was found in the Pannetjies Veld near Tsumkwe (Hines 1992) and a small colony of six to eight pairs occurred in reeds near Kasane (S Tyler *in litt.*). A large colony of an unknown number of nests was also observed on the Zambezi River east of Schuckmannsburg in April (S Braine & C Hines *in litt.*). Breeding success is generally low. At most, an annual average of 8% of nests fledged any young in the only monitored Namibian colony (Hines 1992), while success in a large colony of 50 to 60 pairs on the Boro River, Okavango Delta, (Randall & Herremans 1994) ranged from 0% to 30% (all eggs were predated in one year), with an average of 10% nest success over a six-year period (Randall & Herremans 1994). Monitored clutch and brood size was two to three in Namibia, with clutches of three (n=11) being more common than clutches of two (n=3) (Hines 1992, Jarvis *et al.* 2001). Brood size was three (n=4) (Jarvis *et al.* 2001).

The Slaty Egret feeds mainly on fish, but does not use the umbrella-shading foraging technique of the Black Heron *E. ardesiaca*, and is found in different habitats. It prefers the small, shallow, ephemeral and well-vegetated pans (Hines 1993) to the larger, deeper pans favoured by Black Herons. The Tsumkwe pans hold no fish; so there it feeds on tadpoles, dragonfly larvae and other aquatic insects (Hines 1993).



THREATS

The Slaty Egret suffers from habitat degradation, particularly caused by the constant use of fire by indigenous people in northern Namibia to promote vegetation growth for livestock (Mendelsohn & Roberts 1997). Nest sites are also disturbed and degraded by reed cutting in Botswana (Randall & Herremans 1994). On a broader scale, any developments that impact on wetland integrity and/or flow patterns, such as weirs, dams, diversions, hydro schemes, channelisation and restriction of flow of water to floodplains, are likely to have a direct negative impact on the Slaty Egret population in Namibia.

Since breeding attempts of this species are sporadic, it is likely to be nomadic, searching for recently flooded areas in which to nest. Its reliance on flooding of such habitat (Hines 1992, Randall & Herremans 1994), in an era when global climate change is likely to decrease the amount of rainfall in southern Africa (IPCC 2001, Simmons *et al.* 2004), means that breeding events of this species are likely to become less frequent.



CONSERVATION STATUS

This species is classified as *Endangered* because of the small population size in Namibia and its sporadic breeding attempts, with low success. There is no evidence of a local population decline, but this species has a small, fragmented range, and must wait for flooding to occur and for re-growth of reed habitat after fires in some areas before it can attempt to breed. Globally it is classified as *Vulnerable* (IUCN 2012a), based on a small and declining population. Its rarity, despite the apparent availability of large tracts of suitable habitat throughout its range, is inexplicable, according to Stattersfield & Capper (2000). It is listed in Annex 2 of the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA).

In South Africa, it was not classified because at the time of evaluation it was unknown to occur there (Barnes 2000a). However, it has since been found breeding in the Nyl Floodplain in 1996 (Tarboton 1996) and has been recorded in South Africa with growing frequency since then (Herremans 2005b). The heronry in the Pannetjies Veld near Tsumkwe falls within the Important Bird Area NA006 and the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, while the one located on the Zambezi River floodplain east of Schuckmannsburg lies within the Important Bird Area NA002. However, this does not offer much protection to individual heronries such as these (Simmons *et al.* 2001b). Revised or new Namibian Parks and Wildlife legislation should afford it *Specialty Protected* status.



ACTIONS

Research is needed to find and monitor further colonies (near Tsumkwe and the Zambezi River floodplain) to understand if there are areas that are used over several years, albeit only at times of flooding. These sites should then be conserved, even if they fall within conservancies or Important Bird Areas. Ecological research should determine if the rarity of the species is due to feeding specialisation on breeding fish or breeding amphibians, and should compare the ecology of this species with that of the Black Heron. Conservation planning should include cross-border negotiations with Botswana and Zambia, given that Namibia holds but a small proportion of the world's population.