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## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON BLACK-CROWNED AND WHITE-BACKED NIGHT HERONS

by P. Blasdale

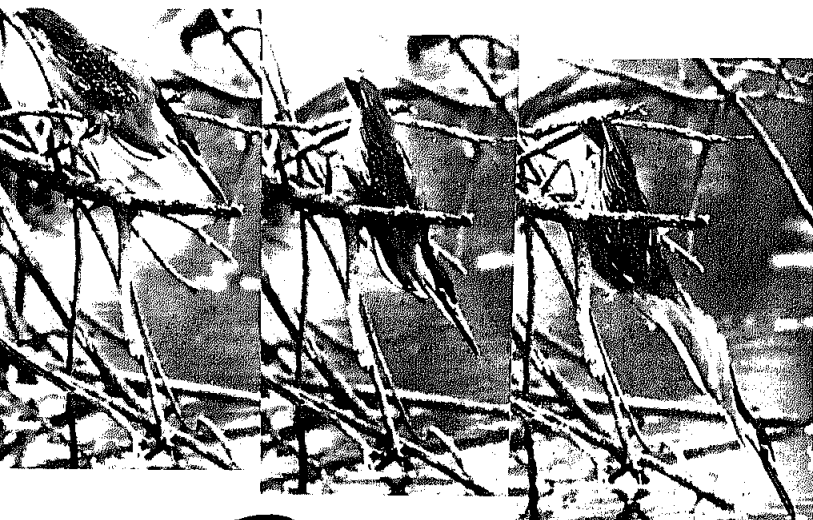
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The 18 species of herons in West Africa all fish by day excepting two: the Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* (Fig. 1), fairly common though unobtrusive, and the White-backed Night Heron *Gorsachius leuconotus*, scarce and seldom observed. Both, together with 11 diurnal species, occur in northern Nigeria on a stretch of the river Komaduğu Gana (Dingaiya or Misau river), north-west of Potiskum. The river runs through a flood plain up to 16 km wide and has a narrow strip of fringing forest along its banks. Here Black-crowned Night Herons roosts in groups of 12 or more in dense low trees, especially *Syzygium guineense*, overhanging the water. White-backed Night Herons are much less often seen; indeed only an observer working full-time in this habitat is likely to detect their presence at all.

A road running west from Potiskum passes about 9 km from the river at the village of Tarajim; at this point the flood plain opens out to a large grassy 'fadama' swamp known as Maburtata, with a band of close-set *Mitragyna inermis* trees about 0.5 km long and 50 m wide at the western side. The water level fluctuates seasonally, but at the time of these observations the general depth over the fadama was about 1-1.5 m, choked with long grass so that many birds even Goliath Herons *Ardea goliath*, could stand easily on it; within the tree belt there was about 30 cm of open weedless dark-coloured water over a mud bottom. The trees stand only a few metres apart, forming a closed canopy, with some exposed roots giving a mangrove-like appearance in places.

On 14 March 1959 I set up a photographic hide of 'zana' grass matting here, in a part of the tree belt occupied by an unusually large roost of Black-crowned Night Herons. On 23 March I installed myself at 0550 hrs, before sunrise and with the sky beginning to lighten, and made the following observations until vacating the hide at 1600 h, (recorded times are approximated to the nearest 5 mins).

- 0555 h Numerous night herons flying about, near to and among trees; "kwark" call.
- 0615 h Birds all settled; sun clear above horizon.
- 0630 h One bird went down to a horizontal branch a little over a foot from water surface, stayed gazing down.
- 0645 h Caught 8 cm fish (*Tilapia* sp.?) by reaching down from perch in manner of a Green-backed Heron *Butorides striatus* (Fig. 1). In this action, bird moved down and back again quite slowly, maintaining impossible-looking attitude by grip on perch.
- Until 1 to "many" birds fishing. Three more fish caught: (1) *Synodontis* sp. about 8 cm long, caught by reaching down, as previous one; bird rubbed it against branch, repeatedly dipped it in water, finally swallowed it. (2) *Hydrocyon* sp. about 25 cm long (Fig. 2); caught by plunging into water; bird moved about restlessly, shifting it in beak; moved out of view. (3) Smaller fish of same appearance as (2), caught by darting about at shallow edge, in manner of Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*; wings used for balance.



Above: Figure 1 Green-backed Heron *Butorides striatus*.

Left: Figure 2 Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* with large fish *Hydrocyon* sp.

Below: Figure 3 Black-crowned Night Heron bathing.



- 0845 h No bird showing any interest in water; many sleeping.
- 0930 h One down to drink; reached down from high perch, apparently got very little water.
- 0935 h Two down together; each caught c. 5 cm fish by reaching down; one of them, after swallowing fish, did not wipe beak on branch but passed point of shining black tongue several times from tip of beak to corner of gape; others seen doing this at other times.
- 1050 h One drinking.
- 1200 h 20 birds visible within 15 m of hide; most more or less awake, and panting with vibrating throat.
- 1445 h Three birds drinking together.
- 1500 h An adult bathing.
- 1505 h Two juveniles jumped into shallow part and waded about pecking at surface; after few minutes began bathing. An adult bathed further away.
- 1520 h Bathers came out, except first adult which moved into deeper water and swam out of sight. Bathing actions: (a) body held horizontally in water (Fig. 3); (b) sudden dip, with flapping wings, lasting only a few seconds; (c) sitting down, erect, with forepart of body above surface; remaining motionless for many minutes (Fig. 4). First adult repeated this series of actions twice; both juveniles performed only (a) and (c); second adult only (c), climbing out once and returning. Farlier, another bird plunged in, perhaps after a fish, and remained swimming easily about for almost a minute in water 33 cm deep (Fig. 5).
- 1600 h No great activity. Birds sometimes moving restlessly, occasionally squabbling. Drinking was seen at least every half hour during day, but not all birds drank and some did so several times. Apparently none stayed in one place all day, and some moved extensively. Almost constant conversation in a variety of notes: most commonly a loud 'wok-keuwok-keuwok' and a soft 'uwark-uwark-uwark'; also a soft 'warkwarkwarkwark' continuously for long periods; 'wook-woke-wauk-wark-waak-waak-waak'; a soft, rising 'how...how...how...'; a staccato 'heh-heh-heh-heh-...' of protest by loser of squabble; 'kwark' loud and ringing, slightly hoarse - flight call; and various snarling notes during squabbles.
- The birds seemed to dislike the attention of flies, and snapped irritably at them. They paid no attention to a Green Monkey *Cercopithecus aethiops*, and very little to a Chanting Goshawk *Melierax metabates*. A Goliath Heron roaring outside on the fadama seemed to cause some disturbance among the night herons nearest to it. On a subsequent visit to Maburtata on 19 April 1959 I noted, further, that at
- 1828 h (twilight) Black-crowned Night Herons were very noisy and 30 circled high; and at
- 1835 h they settled on the fadama near trees; then to
- 1850 h increasing numbers - about 130 - flew out to the fadama (and three to the river). After that it was too dark to continue observation.

This activity may be contrasted with that observed during a similar period when I watched a White-backed Night Heron from a 35-day-old hide on 5 May 1958: it arrived in full daylight at 0605 h settled itself in dense foliage (Fig. 6), and never moved more than about a metre until I left at 1630 h. All five of the roosts of this species that I have known were in dense *Syzygium* and young *Diospyros mespiliformis* over dry land some metres from the river bank; each was occupied by a single bird except once when there were two together. None ever made any sound, even when disturbed.

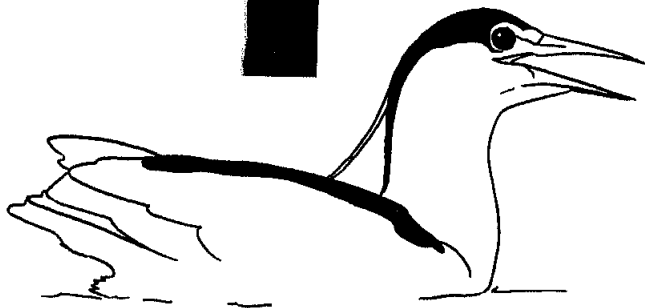
Evidently Black-crowned Night Herons are less completely nocturnal than White-backed; the size of their eyes is noticeably different, and the huge eyes of the latter species are shown in Figs. 7 and 8. No observations were made on the Black-crowned Night Heron groups in their more usual type of roost in the riverside *Syzygium*, and it is possible that the activity seen at Maburtata was not typical. That small area of still water received the droppings of at least 128 Night Herons by day, at least 163 assorted white Herons by night, and a large nesting colony of several species of water birds up to early January. It must have been heavily polluted, and if fish straying in from the fadama became distressed - all the captures that I saw seemed easy, though I never saw any moribund fish - their presence might have had a disruptive influence on the birds' sleeping habits.

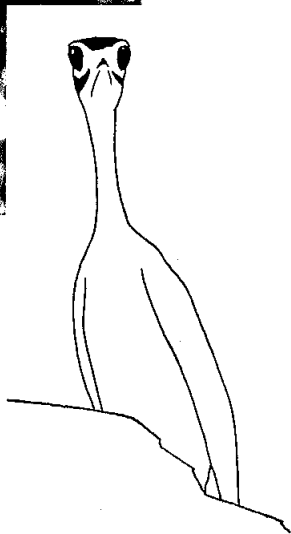
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Left: Figure 4 Black-crowned Night Heron. See text.

Below: Figure 5 Black-crowned Night Heron swimming.





Figures 6 - 8 White-backed  
Night Heron *Gorsachias*  
*leuconotus*. See text.