

Food of the Blackheaded Heron at a breeding colony

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Little is known about the diet of the Black-headed Heron *Ardea melanocephala* in the Cape Province. Its diet has been reported by Brown *et al.* (1982, *The Birds of Africa* Vol. 1, London: Academic Press), North (1963, *J. E. Afr. Nat. Hist. Soc.* 24: 33–63), Taylor (1948, *Ostrich* 19: 203–210) and Tomlinson (1975, *Ostrich* 46: 157–165) in other regions of Africa. All authors found that the content of the regurgitated pellets examined contained a wide range of prey remains,

indicating a catholic diet. In the present study regurgitated pellets of undigested material were collected from below nests in a small breeding colony. The colony, at Port Alfred, Eastern Cape (33 36S; 26 53E) was situated in a residential area. Several Cattle Egrets *Bubulcus ibis* shared the colony, but the pellets of the two species were easily distinguished.

Two samples were collected, one in October/November (111 pellets) and one in December/January (57 pellets). Pellets were preserved separately, macerated, washed and the identifiable fragments separated. Hair and teeth were identified microscopically. The occurrence and percentage occurrence of food items in this sample are presented in Table 1; and the order of importance

TABLE 1
THE OCCURRENCE AND PERCENTAGE OCCURRENCE OF FOOD ITEMS IN *ARDEA MELANOCEPHALA* PELLETS COLLECTED AT A BREEDING COLONY IN PORT ALFRED, EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE.

Prey items	Sample 1 (n = 111) October/November		Sample 2 (n = 57) December/January		% of Total (Sample 1 + Sample 2)
	Occurrence (No. of samples)	% Frequency	Occurrence (No. of samples)	% Frequency	
MAMMAL					
<i>Otomys irroratus</i>	64	57,7	33	57,9	57,7
Unidentified rodent	43	38,7	15	26,3	34,5
Chrysochloridae	7	6,3	4	7,0	6,5
Unidentified hair	0	0	6	10,5	3,6
<i>Rhodomys pumilio</i>	2	1,8	0	0	1,2
<i>Cryptomys hottentotus</i>	1	0,9	0	0	0,6
BIRD	11	9,9	22	38,5	19,6
REPTILIA					
Sauria	5	4,5	0	0	3,0
Serpentes	4	3,6	0	0	2,4
PISCES	2	1,8	0	0	1,2
AMPHIBIA	2	1,8	0	0	1,2
INSECTA					
Orthoptera	61	54,9	24	42,1	50,6
Coleoptera	32	28,8	21	36,8	31,5
Unidentified insects	6	5,4	12	21,1	10,7
Lepidopteran larvae	1	0,9	0	0	0,6
Isoptera	0	0	2	3,5	1,2
ARACHNIDA					
Scorpion	9	8,1	8	14,0	10,1
Spider	1	0,9	0	0	0,6
MOLLUSCA					
Terrestrial snail	1	0,9	0	0	0,6

TABLE 2
ORDER OF IMPORTANCE OF THE PREY ITEMS FOUND IN
ARDEA MELANOCEPHALA PELLETS (TOTAL 168)

Prey items	Number of occurrences in pellets	% of total number of occurrence
Mammalia	175	43,9
Insecta	159	39,8
Aves	33	8,3
Other invertebrates	19	4,8
Reptilia	9	2,2
Pisces	2	0,5
Amphibians	2	0,5
Totals	399	100,0 %

of the prey items found in the pellets is given in Table 2. Mammal remains were the most frequently occurring food items (43,9%), the Vlei Rat *Otomys irroratus* being the most important species involved. The relatively high incidence (6,5%) of golden moles (*Chrysochloridae*) is of interest. We presume that the moles were captured while moving along their surface tunnels. There was little difference in the incidence of mammals between the two samples. Birds featured much more prominently in the December/January sample (38,5%) than in the October/November

sample (9,9%). In a mixed pellet sample (Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* and *A. melanocephala*) collected near Worcester in the southwestern Cape (Stuart pers. obs.) the incidence of bird remains was 27,6% (232 pellets). In the current study no attempt was made to identify bird prey to species level but all fell within the size range, 10–200 g, as ascertained by comparing feather size with a reference collection.

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