

The ICBP/IWRB Herons Specialists Group: Origin, Present, and Future

HEINZ HAFNER¹, PATRICK DUGAN², AND JAMES A. KUSHLAN³

¹Co-chair Herons Specialists Group ICBP/IWRB, Station Biologique de Tour du Valet, Le Sambuc, F-13200 Arles, France.

²Wetlands Programme, International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, Gland, Switzerland; and

³Co-chair Herons Specialists Group ICBP/IWRB, Department of Biological Sciences, East Texas State University, Commerce, Texas 75428 USA

Abstract.—The Heron Specialists Group, sponsored by the International Council for Bird Preservation and the International Waterfowl Research Bureau, was established in 1982. Its efforts to date have focused on documentation of the status and distribution of herons in Europe and in their African wintering grounds. A major effort is now underway to expand the Group's activities into the western hemisphere. It is anticipated that New World priorities for heron conservation and research will emphasize wetland protection and management and determination of their wintering ranges.

Key words.—Hérons, conservation, management, wetlands, ICBP, IWRB.

Colonial Waterbirds 9: 126-127, 1986

For many years Western Europe has played a leading role in the study of many species of water birds. In particular the diverse populations of shore-birds, ducks, and geese, which breed and winter in the region, are among the best documented and researched in the world. In contrast, however, the Ardeidae, both colonial and solitary nesting species, have historically received little attention.

Over the past ten years this situation has begun to change as researchers in many countries of the region have initiated major programmes of study. This is especially so in the countries of the Mediterranean where species diversity and the size of heron populations are both greater than in the cooler North. Yet as this research has expanded and understanding of the populations and species concerned increased, the extent of the need for much further work and more efficient communication of existing knowledge, especially on questions of management and conservation have become apparent.

In response to this need, autumn 1982 saw the establishment of a heron specialist group under the auspices of the International Council for Bird Preservation (I.C.B.P.) and the International Waterfowl Research Bureau (I.W.R.B.).

Focusing primarily upon Europe and the African wintering quarters of migratory herons from this region, the basic goal of the group was to develop and expand contact between biologists studying the Ar-

deidae. Three primary objectives were identified: (1) To improve communication of research achievement and experience in order to further more rapid and efficient progress in research and in application of results in the field of wetland conservation. (2) To initiate cooperative projects, in particular study of colonially breeding species in Europe. (3) To focus attention on the importance of conservation of wintering areas to the long term security of breeding populations and to promote ecological studies of herons in their wintering quarters in order that future management proposals for these areas can be made from a factual base.

Some three years after the establishment of the group considerable progress has been made on all three fronts. Membership now totals 48, and a series of joint projects of special importance have been initiated including: (1) Compilation of a status report on heron populations in the countries of the Mediterranean. (2) Cataloguing of known colonies of tree-nesting species with the aim of investigating the effect of habitat quality and area on colony size and composition. (3) Documentation of the continuing spread of the Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) and monitoring of both the effect of this on sympatric populations of other ardeids and the potential threat to commercial fish culture.

As the group has grown, however, the need to enlarge the geographical sphere

of interest has become increasingly more apparent. Thus while there has historically been an Old World bias in the focus of the group, a major effort is now being made to develop a role in the New World.

A wealth of information is available on the biology of North American herons, but data from Central and South America are far more limited. Several rare and unusual herons occur in the American tropics, about which nearly nothing is known. A substantial gap in understanding also

exists with respect to dispersal patterns and wintering areas of temperate herons. The conservation of herons must involve the protection and management of wetland, estuarine, and marine habitats on which they depend.

It is hoped that biologists and conservationists interested in herons will choose to become involved with the Heron Specialists Group and help to set its priorities for the future.