

Hammerhead

SMALL, CHOCOLATE BROWN, AND RELATIVELY short-legged, the hammerhead – also called the hamerkop or Hammerhead stork – gets its name from the combination of a relatively large bill and a conspicuous, rear-pointing crest. It is distantly related to herons, storks, and flamingos, and is probably the sole extant representative of a lineage derived from a common ancestral group.

The hammerhead is locally common to abundant through its African range, and even relatively common in Madagascar, where many other aquatic birds have decreased. It is protected to some degree by local custom, and has benefited from irrigation schemes.

Small and Sedentary

FORM AND FUNCTION

The hammerhead is a sedentary bird, occupying a well-defined territory, although some pairs will move to normally dry areas when seasonal rains fill dry holes and ditches. It is found in a variety of natural and human-made habitats, including savanna, open woodlots, forests, small ponds, estuaries, riverbanks, and many types of irrigated situations. Wherever water is artificially impounded within its range, in the form of dams or canals, the hammerhead will quickly arrive.

Hammerheads feed alone or in pairs by wading in shallow water, standing or walking slowly while visually searching for prey. They may rake their feet against the substrate or flash their wings to startle prey. They also sometimes take prey, especially tadpoles, from the water while flying. Although hammerheads eat a variety of small fish, shrimps, and insects, their principal food is frogs and tadpoles of the genus *Xenopus*, which also form a major part of the nestlings' diet.

The large, flat bill is slightly hooked and is unlike that of any other species in the Ciconiiformes. The neck and legs are relatively short for a wading bird, and the toes are partly webbed, for reasons that are not clear. The bird feeds diurnally, often roosting at midday. It has a short tail and relatively huge, broad, rounded wings that enable it to glide and soar easily. When soaring, the head is stretched out, but when flapping it is tucked back. The bird will usually fly only a short distance when disturbed.

▶ **Right** Although active during the day, hammerheads become more active at dusk and are semi-nocturnal in their habits. Despite their distant relationship to herons, flamingos, and storks, the hammerhead's behavior is more similar to that of the latter two species.



► **Right** Despite local myths of other bird species helping the hammerhead bring up nesting materials, each nest is the work of a single pair. They are decorated on the outside with brightly-colored objects such as crockery, bones, cloth, and other unusual materials. The huge nest attracts many other animals. Smaller mammals such as genets sometimes take up residence, and small birds such as weaver birds, mynas and pigeons will attach their nests to the main nest.

▼ **Below** During the false mounting display either sex may assume the top position and they may often swap roles a number of times. This behavior is not only confined to mated pairs, and may take place on a tree, on the ground or even on top of a nest.



Busy Builders

BREEDING BIOLOGY

The hammerhead breeds nearly year-round over much of its range. The nest is built typically in the fork of a tree over water, but if trees are not available, it may build on a wall, bank, or cliff, or sometimes even on the ground. The birds nest solitarily, although more than one nest may be built in an area. The nest can take six weeks to construct, and may exceed 1.5m (5ft) in diameter. It is a domed structure, with a hollow chamber connecting to the outside by a small opening at the bottom, which leads to a tunnel up to 60cm (2ft) long. The opening is plastered with mud.

Nests are typically abandoned after a few months, when the bird builds a new one within its territory. Needless to say, the abandoned nests are often used by other birds and by reptiles.

Hammerheads are sometimes to be seen, usually near a nest, participating in group ceremonies that can involve as many as ten birds calling loudly while running round each other in circles. Crests are raised, wings fluttered, and a chorus of cries continues for several minutes. A very distinctive ceremony, called "false mounting," involves one bird mounting another without actually copulating with it.

True mating usually occurs at a completed nest

site, often on top of the nest, using displays similar to those seen during the larger gatherings of birds. When the eggs have been laid, both birds incubate them. The young are hatched covered in gray down, but they quickly develop feathers, with the head and crest complete within 17 days and the body plumage within a month. Both adults feed the young, but, unusually for wading birds, may leave them unattended for long periods, presumably because the thick nest walls protect them from predators. When the young are fully fledged, they remain near the nest for another month, roosting in it at night.

JAK/JH



FACTS

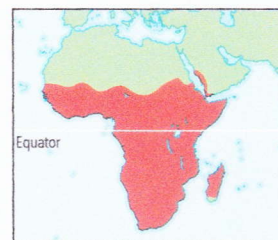
HAMMERHEAD

Scopus umbretta

Order: Ciconiiformes

Family: Scopidae

DISTRIBUTION Sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar



HABITAT Wetlands

SIZE Length: 50cm (20in); weight: 470g (17oz).

PLUMAGE Entirely dark brown, with a purple sheen on the back.

VOICE Quiet when alone; in groups, a wide range of vocalizations consisting of crackles and a shrill flight call.

NEST: An enormous dome of sticks, weeds, and grass.

EGGS 3–7; white, but soon stained. Incubation 28–30 days; nestling period 44–50 days.

DIET Amphibians (especially frogs), but also small insects and invertebrates.

CONSERVATION STATUS Not threatened.