

# African Jacana



African Jacana © Elis Simpson

## Fact File

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English name; **African Jacana**

Scientific Name; ***Actophilornis africanus***

### Authority:

Gmelin, Johann Friedrich (1748–1804) German naturalist and Professor of Medicine.

Protonym; '*Parra africana*' 1839

***Actophilornis*** Oberholser 1925

- Greek - *akte* riverbank, coastal strand;
- *philos* loving (phileo to love);
- *ornis* bird.

***africanus*** '*africana*' Gmelin 1839

- African.



African Jacana © Elis Simpson

### Alternative Names;

**English;** African Lily-trotter, Lilly-trotter.

**Afrikaans;** Grootlangtoon (Great Long-toe).

**Chewa / Nyanja (ChiChewa / ChiNyanja):** kateula

**French;** Jacana à poitrine dorée,

**German;** Blaustirn-Blatthühnchen

**Herero (Otjiherero):** onimwe mire

**Khoekhoegowab:** gāxū|khunus

**Khonde:** ndendele

**Kwangali (Rukwangali):** nkongoro

**Lomwe:** chikazombwe

**Lozi (Silozi):** nalumbe

**Northern Ndebele (isiNdebele):** utolo

**Northern Sotho (Sepedi, Sesotho sa Lebowa):** mogatšakwena

**Portuguese;** Jaçanã-africana

**Rumanyo:** kavarambidira / nkongoro

**Shona (chiShona):** katewetewe

**Southern Sotho (Sesotho):** (South Africa) mohatsakwena: **(Lesotho):** mohatsakoena

**Spanish;** Jacana Africana.

**Swahili (Kiswahili):** kibilinzi

**Thimbukushu:** kavarambidhira

**Timbuka (Chitumbuka):** muduwa

**Tswana (Setswana):** mogatsakwêna, mo.gatsê-Kwêna, kgaitsadia-kwêna, kgaitsadiê-kwêna

**Yao (chiYao):** namwanje

**Zulu (isiZulu):** unondwayizo, iThandaluzibo



African Jacana eggs © The Trustees of the Natural History Museum

**Conservation Status:**

**Least Concern** - Common to abundant throughout most of extensive range.

**Population size;** No overall population estimate and few regional estimates, but 25,000–50,000 individuals in Mali.

**Trend;** - Unknown overall may be affected by habitat loss in some locations but taking advantage of new habitat created by watering holes dams and small reservoirs.

**Taxonomy:**

**Type specimen;** Ethiopia

**Protonym;** *Parra africana*.

**Synonyms;** *Parra africana*, *Phyllospezus africana*, *Phyllopezus Africana*, *Actophilus africana*.

**Subspecies;** None – Monotypic.

**Systematics:**

*Parra* invalid as it referred to birds of differing genera, and even families, including *Jacana*, *Vanellus* and *Chauna*. Replaced by *Phyllospezus* Sharpe 1896.

*Phyllopezus* replaced by *Actophilus* (former preoccupied in Reptilia) Oberholser 1899.

*Actophilus* replaced by *Actophilornis* (former occupied in Coleoptera - Beetles) Oberholser 1925.

**Range & Habitat:**

- **Range;** Africa - widespread south of the Sahara desert away from forests and arid zones.
- **Status;** Generally common or even abundant in suitable habitat, often nomadic.
- **Movements;** Mainly resident, but nomadic and dispersals occur, especially where water bodies are ephemeral.
- **Habitat;** A fresh water species, mainly on water bodies containing emergent or floating vegetation such as water lilies. Can be found in small ponds and also occasionally along stream and river banks.

**Natural History:**

**Identification;** The only Jacana with which it overlaps is the diminutive Lesser Jacana *Microparra capensis*, which resembles the juveniles of African Jacana. The African Jacana is much larger and as an adult has a striking black and white head and neck pattern with a chestnut upper and lower body. Of the two only the African Jacana has a frontal shield. The two species are curiously not closely related. The African Jacana shares a genus with the Madagascar Jacana *Actophilornis albinucha*, the head and neck colouration of which is reversed with black at the front and white behind. The Lesser Jacana is more closely related to the Comb-crested Jacana *Ireidiparra gallinacea* of Australia.

**Feeding;** The elongated toes and claws spread the weight of the bird allowing it to walk on floating and flimsy vegetation, but it can also be found on dry land walking along the water's edge.

Prey consists mostly of aquatic insects, larvae, other invertebrates, small fish, crustaceans, molluscs and seeds may also be taken. Has been observed pecking at wounds on Hippopotamuses *Hippopotamus aquaticus* and eating ectoparasites. Will catch flies in flight and also forage under leaves by turning them over.

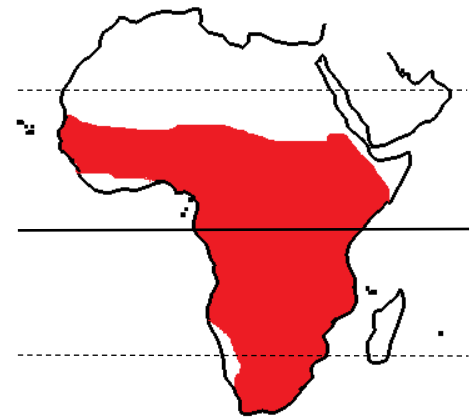


Fig 1. Approximate distribution of African Jacana



Juvenile African Jacana resembling Lesser Jacana *Microparra capensis* © Michael S Haworth

## Reproduction;

- **Season;** Oct – Nov Sierra Leone; Jun-Sep Ghana; Apr-Jan Nigeria; Jun-Sep Ethiopia; Nov-Jun Zambia; all months Zambia and Zimbabwe; Nov-Jul South Africa.
- **Pairing;** Polyandrous (occasionally monogamous or rarely polygynous). Males celibate during incubation and for 2-3 months following that unless clutch or chicks lost when he will become sexually active again. Males compete for the attention of the females, dominant males usually receiving the first clutch. In bad years when success rate is low, this can lead to pairs being monogamous. While a dominant male is celibate, the less dominant males compete to mate with the female.



African Jacana © [Michael S Haworth](#)

- **Display;** Males defend a territory, which is usually contained within a larger territory of a female, with multiple male territories within (usually 1-3 but up to 7). To attract a female they will stand on the nest site (there may be more than one), and call. If this alone is not successful they may jump in the air or scratch at the nest site often adding items to the nest. They will face the female and with head lowered but pointing up. If a female is receptive she will attend the nest adopting the same posture. At the nest the male will circle the female, pecking at her with his bill, especially in the region of the cloaca and mounts the female to copulate with her.



African Jacana nest with 3 eggs © [Michael S Haworth](#)

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- **Nest;** Plant materials formed to create a crude and simple, flimsy structure either on floating vegetation at the waterside just above water level. Nest size varies from 100 -300mm in diameter. Usually contains stems and added to continuously. As copulation occurs on the potential nest site, it must be capable of supporting both adults at the same time. If not it is abandoned. Usually built over around 1m of water.

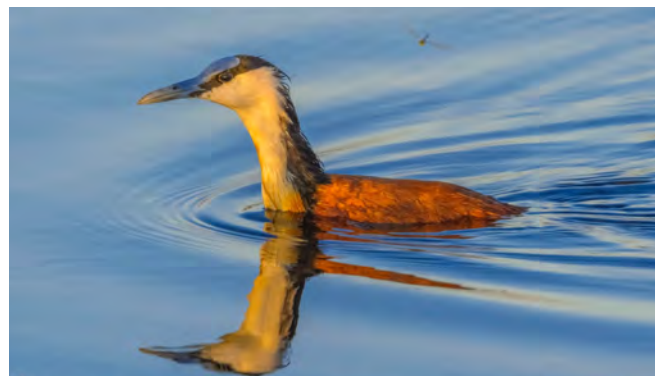


- **Eggs;** Four usual, occasionally three or five. Eggs are only around 15% of

the female's body weight (compared with around 66% in other waders), this represents the smallest ratio among waders. This enable the eggs to be replaced quickly if lost (4-5 days) and allows multiple clutches to be laid taking advantage of the polyandrous system. Unusual swirl patterning as with all jacana eggs (except Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*). As with all jacana eggs they possess 'plugged pores', which ensure the eggs do not 'drown' when subjected to water by a wet nest or when the adults need to move the eggs, which they do by either carrying them under their wing or floating them to a new location. Eggs can be vulnerable to monitor lizards, gallinules, otters and mongooses.

African Jacana egg, approximately full size  
© The Trustees of the Natural History Museum London.

- **Incubation;** Around 21-27 averaging 24 days. Only by male. By day eggs are kept warm by ambient temperature mainly, although brooding occurs on cooler days, the male spending about half of its time during the day at the nest. At night the time spent on the nest increases, especially on cold nights., but close proximity to water means they may be cooled. The males will then lift the eggs under their wings to warm them. They will also shade the eggs from



African Jacanas are good swimmers © [Michael S Haworth](#)

the sun to stop them overheating. Hatching is synchronised, incubation starts when the third egg is laid. After hatching the eggs' shells are removed by the male.

- **Chicks;** Precocial and nidifugous. Chicks hatch synchronously and leave the nest soon after. Male does not feed the young directly but may indicate food to them which they take themselves. Males can carry small chicks in the same manner as eggs. Chicks can swim and if threatened they will dive under water with just the bill and nostrils above the surface, or they may travel under water and emerge some distance away. Fledging 40-50 days. Maintain immature plumage for up to 20 months. The plumage of the chicks is striped indicating an affiliation with Painted-Osnipes and differing from most wader chicks. 50-75% survival rate.
- **Breeding age;** Uncertain but plumage development would indicate at least 2 years.
- **Longevity;** Not found



African Jacanas chick © [Michael S Haworth](#)

#### Vital statistics;

Length; 23-32cm

Wing span; 42-53cm

Tarsus; 51-73mm

Egg; Av. 32.0 x 23.0mm

Wing; 88-132mm

Bill; 31-39mm

Weight; 56-251g

Egg weight; (Est.) 8.6g

#### Curiosities;

- Feet have a span of over 16cm.
- Occurs with Lesser Jacana in some places, where they show an intolerance to the smaller bird often chasing them.
- African Jacanas have an unusual moult of their primary feathers. Most waders moult one or two at a time. African Jacanas moult them all simultaneously, rendering them flightless.

**Postage stamps:** The widespread range of this species is reflected in the appearances on national postage stamps across Africa; Botswana, Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zimbabwe.



African Jacana carrying its young © [Michael S Haworth](#)

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**Online resources;**

Avibase - The World Bird Database (bsc-eoc.org) <https://avibas.bsc-eoc.org>

Internet Bird Collection - [ibc.lynxeds.com](http://ibc.lynxeds.com)

Oiseaux.net - [www.oiseaux.net](http://www.oiseaux.net)

Wader Quest – [www.waderquest.net](http://www.waderquest.net)

Wikipedia - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacana>

Birds of the World on Postage Stamps - compiled by Chris Gibbins - [www.bird-stamps.org](http://www.bird-stamps.org)



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