Purple Herons reach high densities in West African floodplains, where well-scattered individuals stand on the floating vegetation (locally known as *bourgou*) along edges and in small open spaces. A casual observer may not see more than a handful of Purple Herons at any one time. Scanning *bourgou* fields for slender necks or pointed bills protruding from this buoyant dense vegetation may be more rewarding. When foraging Eurasian Marsh Harriers weave their meandering flights across *bourgou* fields, the real number of Purple Herons becomes especially apparent, as they take flight to evade the raptors. One particular floodplain, the Inner Niger Delta in Mali, holds tens of thousands of Purple Herons during the non-breeding season. This Sahelian wetland functions as the single most important wintering ground in West Africa (see below), and Purple Herons are therefore highly susceptible to changes in this floodplain, whether natural or human-induced.
Breeding range

In the western Palearctic, the Purple Heron breeding distribution is disjunct and largely confined to freshwater marshes and reedbelt-fringed lakes south of 53°N, but it is rather more continuous from central Europe eastwards, from the Danube towards south Ukraine and south Russia (del Hoyo et al. 1992, Bankovics 1997). The European population is estimated at 29 000-42 000 pairs, of which some 20 000 breed in Russia and Ukraine (BirdLife International 2004a). The entire population is migratory and winters mainly in western tropical Africa and East Africa from Sudan southwards (see below). The populations breeding in India and SE Asia and in East Africa are well separated from the western Palearctic population (McClure 1974).

Breeding in West Africa is restricted to very small numbers in Senegal (80 nests in 1974, Djoudj; Dupuy 1975) and Mali (Lac Aougoundou; Lamarche 1980). Breeding here is erratic, though, as exemplified by the Inner Niger Delta, where nesting was not recorded for many years until, in 1994, a high flood (the first high one since 1972) triggered 2-10 pairs into breeding (Chapter 6); in the following years breeding ceased again. The number of 1475 in Niger, in Kushlan & Hancock (2005) and based on Brouwer & Mullié (2001), refers to dry season counts of local and migratory non-breeding birds, not to pairs.

Migration

The distribution pattern of birds ringed in The Netherlands was significantly different from that of birds ringed elsewhere in Europe (Fig. 127). Birds recorded in Senegal, The Gambia and Mauritania originated exclusively from The Netherlands and France. On the other hand, Mali is a melting pot of all European populations of Purple Herons, but as shown by Voisin (1996), Purple Herons from eastern Europe have not yet been recorded from Senegambia. We consider this to indicate on average a slightly more easterly distribution of eastern European Purple Herons within West Africa. Many Purple Herons from Russia move through Greece and Turkey, through Egypt and Eritrea, to winter in eastern Africa, particularly from Sudan southwards (Kushlan & Hancock 2005). However, Russian birds have been recovered as far west as Nigeria (Elgood et al. 1994) and Benin (Cheke & Walsh 1996), and it is likely that a substantial portion of Russian birds winter in West Africa.

Distribution in Africa

At least 91 Purple Herons ringed in Europe have been shot, captured or found dead in West Africa, south from 17°N to the coastal regions at 4°N; the majority of these records have been extracted from the EURING database (Fig. 127). The recoveries are distributed across the Sahelian, Sudano-Sahelian and Sudanian vegetation zones (Chapter 4), i.e. covering grassland, cropland, savanna, woody savanna, forest, and inland and coastal wetlands. 22 birds were recovered from a single area, the Inner Niger Delta in Mali, and 11 from the coastal wetlands (including wet rice areas) from South Senegal through Sierra Leone. Only 4 recoveries came from another floodplain area, the Senegal Delta. The recovery distribution pattern shows that, within the Sahelian zone, most Purple Herons were found in the floodplains, the remainder being more or less evenly distributed across other wet habitats in the Sudanian vegetation zone.

The fact that most recoveries came from south of 10°N might lead to the idea that Purple Herons mostly winter in the Sudan zone, rather than in the Sahel. We believe this to be an artefact of distribution and density of the human population (and hence shooting): 45% of the sub-Saharan recoveries shown on the map refer to birds being shot. This proportion differs, however, per country, being particularly high in Liberia (86%, n=7) and Sierra Leone (75%, n=8). In other countries along the Guinean Gulf, 50% of the reported birds were shot (n=18). In the sparsely populated Sahelian countries of Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, 6 birds were shot, compared with 13 reported as being found dead (including trapped by accident). Hence, we may conclude that Purple Herons

Fig. 127 European origins of 102 Purple Herons recovered in Africa between 4° and 30°N and from Egypt (EURING), 23 from Voisin (1996), 1 from Grimes (1987] and 4 from Mullié et al. (1989).