

Lesser Jacana



Lesser Jacana © Elis Simpson

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English name; **Lesser Jacana**

Scientific Name; *Microparra capensis*

Authority 1839:

Sir Andrew Smith (1797-1872)

British army surgeon and
zoologist.

Microparra Cabanis 1877

- Greek *mikros* small;
- *Parra* was genus name for American jacanas given by Linnaeus.

capensis – Cape of Good Hope,
South Africa.

Alternative Names;

English; Lesser African Jacana, Lesser Lily-trotter, Pygmy Jacana, Smaller Jacana, Smaller Lilly-trotter.

Afrikaans; Dwerglangtoon (Dwarf Long-toe).

French; Jacana nain, Petit Jacana.

Kwangaali; Nkongoro Gwakambatu.

Portuguese; Jaçanã-pequena.

Spanish; Jacana chica.

Swahili; Sile-maua Mdogo.

Conservation Status

Least Concern - mainly due to the enormous range. Probable threats include chemical pollution, reclamation and drainage.

Considered Vulnerable in South Africa due to range contraction.

Population size; unknown.

Trend; - unknown overall but range contracted in South Africa over last 150 years.

Taxonomy;

Type specimen; Collected by Smith near Algoa Bay Eastern Cape 1839 (outside current range).

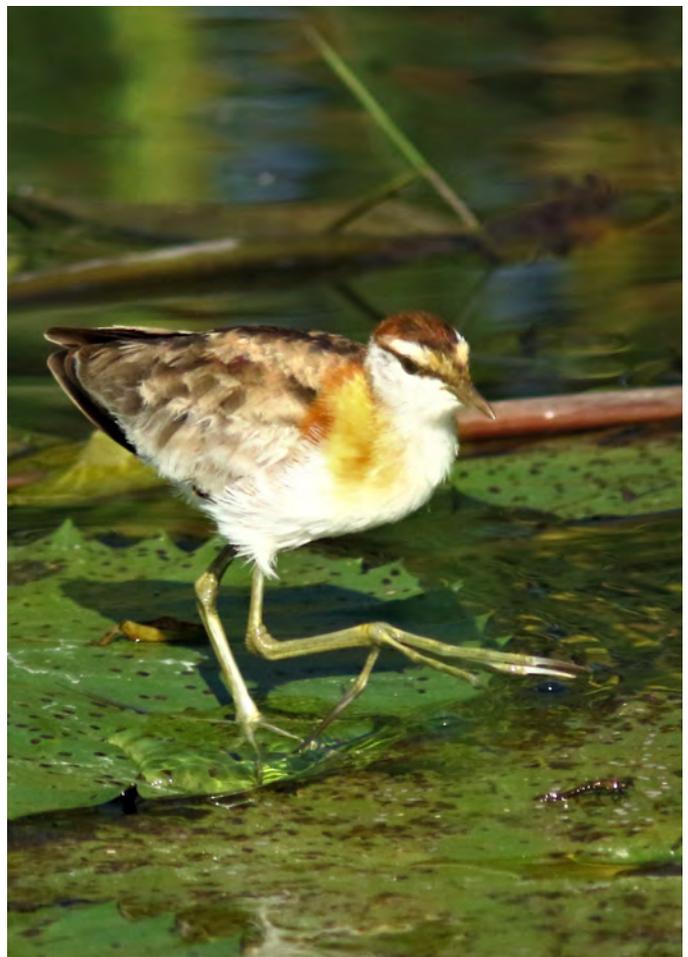
Protonym; *Parra capensis*.

Synonyms; *Parra capensis*.

Subspecies; None – Monotypic



Illustration in Smith's account of the collection of this species © G. H. Ford



Lesser Jacana © Sue Oertli

Range & Habitat

- **Range;** mainly within the tropics - sparsely from Senegal and Guinea Bissau, through Southern Mali, Burkina Faso, Southern Niger, Nigeria Northern Cameroon, and from Sudan and Ethiopia south, through Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Eswatini, Mozambique and eastern South Africa as far as around Port Edward extending into Namibia and Angola.
- **Status;** stronghold in Okavango Delta in Botswana, elsewhere can be erratic depending on flooding, uncommon and localised.
- **Movements;** sedentary, will occasionally desert receding waters, will often colonise new water bodies before African Jacana, some evidence of coastal wandering in Kenya. Vagrants do occur a long way from normal range.
- **Habitat;** frequents a variety of wetlands including the swampy edges of lakes, rivers, dams, coastal lagoons along with small ponds with emergent vegetation.

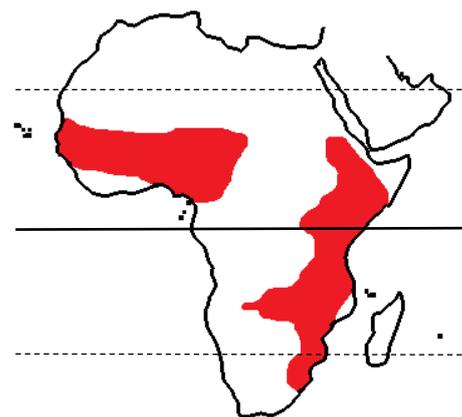


Fig 1. Approximate distribution of Lesser Jacana

Natural History

Identification; only real confusion species is African Jacana *Actophilornis africanus*, which is much larger, has a frontal shield and is boldly patterned in adult plumage. Lesser may be confused with juvenile African Jacana, which they greatly resemble, however size is very different, they have a shorter bill and no frontal shield. Lesser has a white trailing edge to the wing that is absent in African at all ages. In flight may resemble a small heron due to its trailing legs.



Lesser Jacana © Sue Oertli

Feeding; forages by walking across floating vegetation such as water lilies, sometimes swims and takes food items from the surface of the water.

Prey consists mainly of aquatic insects and their larvae although spiders, crustaceans, molluscs and seeds may also be taken.

Prey size is reported to be between 2 and 25mm.

Reproduction;

- **Season;** The species breeds in territorial solitary pairs, the timing of breeding varying geographically in response to wet seasons and the availability of suitable habitat; May in Kenya; mainly Feb-Mar in Zambia; Jun, Sep, Oct in Malawi; mainly Mar-May in Zimbabwe; Nov in South Africa.
- **Pairing;** differs from other Jacanas in being monogamous.
- **Display;** distraction display - approaches threat and sinks to belly in water flapping its wings.
- **Nest;** simple clump of floating vegetation, both parents share in construction, this collaboration continues throughout the incubation period.
- **Eggs;** three to four usual, relatively small. Unusual swirl patterning as with all jacana eggs (except Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*). Also in common with all jacana species the eggs possess 'plugged pores'. This ensures the eggs do not 'drown' when subjected to water due to 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.
- **Incubation;** carried out by both parents, lasts 21-24 days.
- **Chicks;** precocial, tended by both parents, similar to African Jacana, remain with adults until at least half grown. Fledging around 40-50 days.
- **Breeding age;** not found
- **Longevity;** not found



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

Vital statistics;

Length; 14-17cm

Wing span; 25-29cm

Tarsus; 31-37mm

Egg; Av. 24.8 x 18.0mm

Wing; 81-100mm

Bill; 14-18mm

Weight; 41.3g

Egg weight; (Est.) 4.5g

Curiosities

- Lesser Jacana is unique among waders in that it has soft and silky plumage with downy feathers on the neck and that it is neotenic. This means that it does not have an adult plumage that is greatly different from the juvenile plumage making them difficult to separate in the field. Adults have a rufous rump while juveniles have a black rump and are generally duller than the adult with rufous edged scapulars and the crown less rufous. The Lesser Jacana looks somewhat similar to the juveniles of African Jacana *Actophilornis africanus*. The adults of that species however are very different, being mainly chestnut brown with black-and-white head and neck, with a bright blue frontal shield on the forehead.



Lesser Jacana © [Michael S Haworth](#)

We have only met with one individual of this species, and that we strongly suspect to be in immature plumage: the whole of the interscapulars, back and upper tail coverts are probably brilliant metallic purple in adult birds. It was killed, while seeking for its food, upon some water-plants which coated the surface of a small river near to Algoa Bay.

From Smith's original account of his collection of the Lesser Jacana that is now the type specimen.

- In addition Lesser Jacanas do not possess the expanded radius bone of the African Jacana, which develops with age in that species, and the lack of this feature may be a function of the neoteny of the species, although other Jacanas also do not possess this feature.
- Lesser Jacanas are the least sexually dimorphic jacana species with the females being only slightly larger (4%) than the males and males and females being identical.
- World's smallest jacana being only 15-16 cm in length and only 41.3 g in weight. However this is only one weight for the species on record and that is for a female, so presumably the males will be approximately 4% lighter still?
- Unlike African Jacana it has no frontal shield on the forehead.
- Often chased by African Jacana so sometimes found on vegetation where the heavier species cannot go.
- Lesser Jacanas have an unusual moult in their primary feathers. Most waders moult one or two at a time from the innermost towards the outermost primaries (descendent from 10 to 1). Lesser Jacana does it the opposite way, from the outer to the inner (ascendant 1 to 10).
- Lesser Jacanas' closest relative is not, as you'd expect, the African Jacana, but the Comb-crested Jacana *Irediparra gallinacea* of Australia.



Lesser Jacana eggs showing a variety of swirl patterns © The Trustees of the Natural History Museum London.



Lesser Jacana in flight; note white trailing edge to wing © Elis Simpson

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Wader Quest – www.waderquest.net

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



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