Widespread in Africa south of the Sahara, this species occurs mainly in the Okavango Delta in Botswana and on rivers and large protected areas in Zimbabwe and north-eastern South Africa (Anderson 1997b). In Namibia it is rare and occurs on the northern rivers, including (in decreasing order of abundance) the Chobe, Okavango, Kunene and Kwando rivers. Congregations of up to 91 birds occur in summer at Lake Oponono (W Versfeld in Jarvis et al. 2001). A total of 64 adult birds were recorded at the Impalila-Kasane rapids on the Chobe River in September 2011 (Brown 2012a) and small numbers are recorded from shallow inland dams such as the Omatako and those around Windhoek (Namibia Bird Club in Jarvis et al. 2001). Some birds occur as far south as the Fish River and Orange River mouth, reflecting the somewhat nomadic movements of this otherwise resident species (Hancock et al. 1992). Reporting rate averaged 2% to 15% (Anderson 1997b). Forty eight active nests were recorded at the Impalila-Kasane rapids in September 2011, with 118 young birds ranging from downy nestlings to recently fledged young (Brown 2012a). Based on only three breeding records for Namibia, the average colony size is 43 nests (38 to 48), and eggs were laid in August and September (Brown et al. 2015). World populations are estimated at 75,000 to 100,000 birds (Nagy et al. 2012). It is not globally threatened, but was classified as Near Threatened in South Africa and Swaziland (Barnes 2000a, Monadjem et al. 2003), based on an inferred decline of 10%. A recent assessment in South Africa has elevated its threat status to Endangered (Taylor et al. in press). There is no evidence of a decline in Namibia or globally (Wetlands International 2002, Nagy et al. 2002).

Neer Threatened to Least Concern in South Africa (Taylor et al. in press), where it breeds only sporadically.