

Sacred Ibis

Skoorsteenveër

Threskiornis aethiopicus

The Sacred Ibis is widespread and common in Africa south of the Sahara. Outside Africa it breeds in Madagascar, on Aldabra Island and in Iraq (Hancock *et al.* 1992). It forms a superspecies with the Blackheaded Ibis *T. melanocephalus* of the Indian subcontinent, and the Australian White Ibis *T. molucca* (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). In southern Africa it occurs in higher-rainfall areas in the east and south, and is absent from, or rare in, the arid parts of the Kalahari, large parts of the Karoo and in Namibia. It is recorded widely in the Transvaal, being most common on the highveld, in KwaZulu-Natal, and the southwestern Cape Province. It is an uncommon resident in Swaziland (Parker 1994). In Botswana it is resident, particularly in the Okavango (Penry 1994). There are scattered records across Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981).

It is gregarious, in groups of 2–20 individuals, sometimes in larger flocks, and rarely solitarily (Brown *et al.* 1982). It is an unmistakable species and the atlas data can be considered reliable and comprehensive.

Habitat: The vegetation analysis shows a strong association with grassland habitats; the high reporting rate in Fynbos is due to agricultural transformation to pastures and irrigated lands in this biome. Throughout its range it is usually associated with freshwater habitats, especially marshes, but it also forages in dryland situations in grasslands and in intertidal saltmarshes at estuaries. It has adapted to a wide variety of artificial habitats, including farm dams, sewage works and cultivated fields, and it has become a scavenger at dung heaps and refuse tips (Clark & Clark 1979). It roosts gregariously on islands in rivers and offshore, on trees near water, and sometimes in villages (Hancock *et al.* 1992). It breeds in colonies in many different types of sites, in trees and bushes, on the ground and among rocks on islands (Hancock *et al.* 1992).

Movements: The atlas data show no seasonal variation in reporting rates, but there is evidence to suggest that at least part of the population is nomadic or migratory within southern Africa. There is a winter exodus of birds from the Witwatersrand; the population in summer 1973–74 decreased from 4900 birds to 2500 in winter (Tarboton 1977b; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Large numbers of nestlings have been ringed at breeding sites on the Witwatersrand (and other localities in South Africa) and there have been many long-distance recoveries, mostly to eastern Zambia, with fewer to Botswana and

Namibia (Clark & Clark 1979; SAFRING). Most Zambian recoveries were during the winter months, which coincides with the decline in numbers on the Witwatersrand, indicative of a seasonal movement between these two regions (Dowsett 1969; Clark & Clark 1979; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The movement of birds within southern Africa is probably related to seasonal rainfall patterns, with individuals migrating north to perennial wetlands during the dry winter months.

Breeding: Breeding has been reported from mainly the eastern and southern areas of South Africa and is usually associated with wet-season inundation; consequently there is geographical variation. Peak breeding is in spring in the winter-rainfall region of the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4) and in midsummer in the summer-rainfall region, particularly Zones 6 and 7.

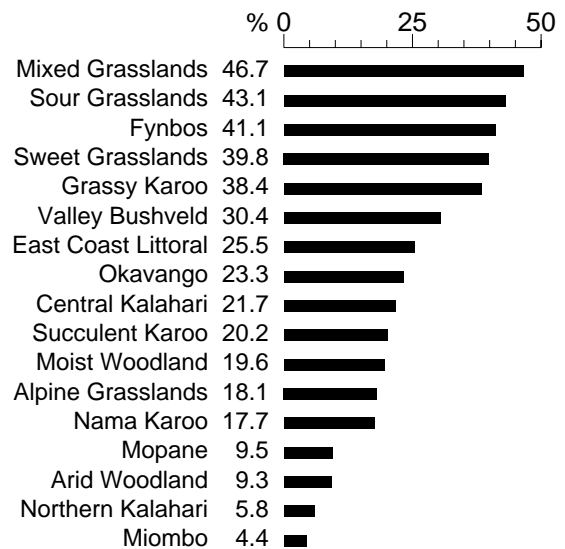
Interspecific relationships: Although it does sometimes breed in single-species colonies, it frequently breeds in mixed colonies with storks, herons, egrets, spoonbills and cormorants. On the offshore islands, it takes eggs and chicks of seabirds, such as the Jackass Penguin *Spheniscus demersus*, cormorants, Hartlaub's Gull *Larus hartlaubii* and Swift Tern *Sterna bergii* (Stark & Sclater 1906; Williams 1977; Hockey *et al.* 1989).

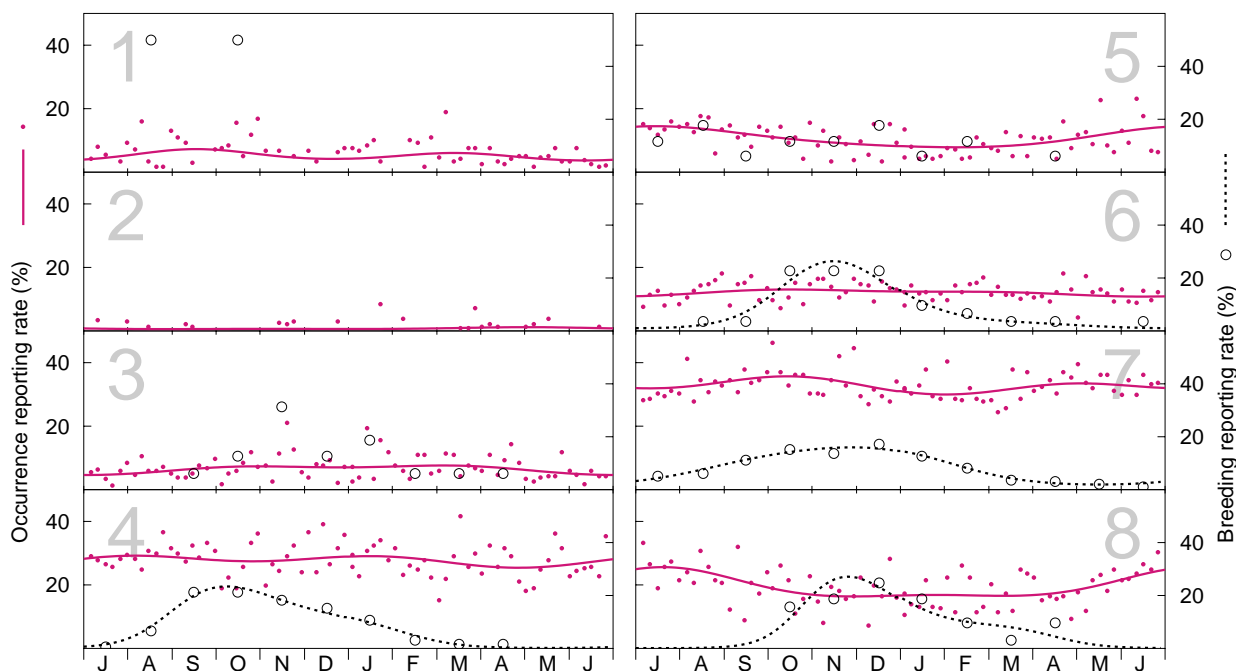
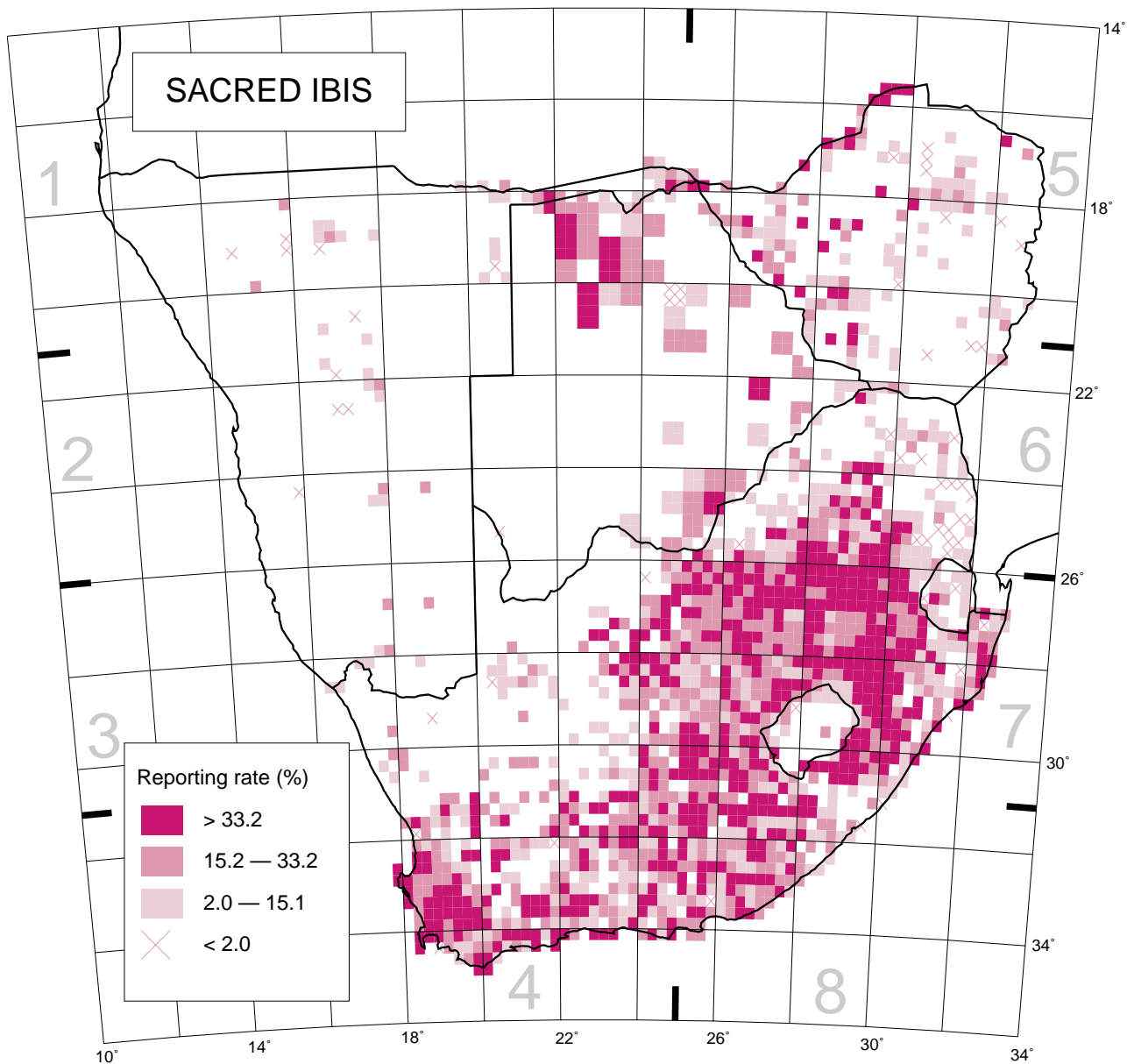
Historical distribution and conservation: At the start of the 20th century, breeding in southern Africa had been recorded only on offshore islands, and it was regarded as a winter visitor to the interior (Stark & Sclater 1906). The Sacred Ibis has benefited from human activities (e.g. Tarboton *et al.* 1987b for the Transvaal; Hockey *et al.* 1989 for the southwestern Cape Province). It bred colonially for the first time in Zimbabwe in 1978 at Aisleby (2028BA) (Irwin 1981). However, despite its adaptability, it is dependent on safe nesting sites and these may be subject to disturbance, drainage and predation by humans (Hancock *et al.* 1992).

M.D. Anderson

Recorded in 1615 grid cells, 35.6%
Total number of records: 39 231
Mean reporting rate for range: 34.1%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 175, 29, 352, 2411, 939, 1376, 6405, 1059; Breeding: 2, 0, 16, 132, 17, 31, 298, 32.