

African Spoonbill

Lepelaar

Platalea alba

The African Spoonbill is endemic to sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar (Brown *et al.* 1982). It occurs throughout South Africa, except the northwestern Cape Province, with the core of its distribution in the Free State, southern Transvaal and northwestern KwaZulu-Natal, and a smaller area of high reporting rates in the southwestern Cape Province. It is fairly common in northern and eastern Botswana (Penry 1994); in Zimbabwe and central Namibia it has a widespread but patchy distribution. It is conspicuously scarce or absent in the arid parts of the Kalahari, most of Lesotho and the Transkei, and from the escarpment areas of the eastern Transvaal and Swaziland.

It is often solitary, or occurs in small flocks. It is an unmistakable and conspicuous species; the atlas data are therefore accurate and comprehensive.

Habitat: It is an obligate forager in shallow aquatic habitats. It occurs mainly in freshwater wetlands such as marshes, pans, temporary flooded grassland, floodplains, rivers, sewage ponds and dams, both large and small. It is less frequent in saltwater environments such as estuaries and coastal lagoons (Hancock *et al.* 1992). Prime habitat lies in the central high-lying areas of South Africa where permanent water exists (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The vegetation analysis shows that it occurs primarily in the Grassy Karoo, Mixed and Sweet Grasslands and Fynbos vegetation types of the southern and central areas of South Africa. It breeds colonially in reedbeds, partly submerged trees in dams, and on islands.

Movements: Although it has been stated that the African Spoonbill is more common in winter than summer in parts of

southern Africa (Brown *et al.* 1982), the atlas data reveal no evidence for migration, although it does wander in response to local rainfall and the condition of wetlands (Hancock *et al.* 1992). This is supported by a few ringing recoveries (McLachlan & Liversidge 1970; Tree 1978b): there have been 27 recoveries of southern African ringed birds, 12 of which were recorded more than 100 km from the ringing site (SAFRING). Two recoveries were more than 1000 km from the ringing site: a bird which moved from Benoni (2628AB) to Zambia, and a nestling ringed on the Berg River (3218C) near Hopefield and recovered at Hartbeesfontein (2626CD) in the western Transvaal. A nestling ringed at the Nata Delta (2026A) in northern Botswana was recovered 690 km away in the Free State (Tree 1978b).

Breeding: There appear to be geographical differences in the timing of breeding. Birds in the winter-rainfall region of the southwestern Cape Province breed in spring and summer, while in the summer-rainfall areas, peak breeding activity is in winter (Brown *et al.* 1982; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Interspecific relationships: It often breeds in heronries in association with other waterbirds such as herons and cormorants.

Historical distribution and conservation: At the beginning of the 20th century the African Spoonbill was described as uncommon and 'hardly known in the Cape Colony' (Stark & Sclater 1906). It has extended its breeding range southwestward in the Cape Province since the first breeding record on the lower Berg River (3318AB) in 1957 (Wilson 1957; Blaker 1967), possibly because of the increase in artificial wetlands in the area (Hancock *et al.* 1982). In Zimbabwe, Irwin (1981) described it as being 'of casual occurrence'; the atlas data show that it has become more common there and it breeds regularly. Its present status appears secure because of its range expansion and adaptation to artificial wetlands.

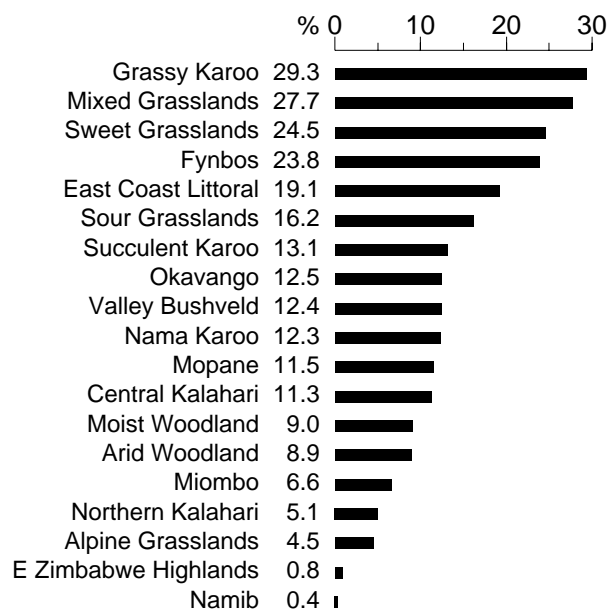
M.D. Anderson

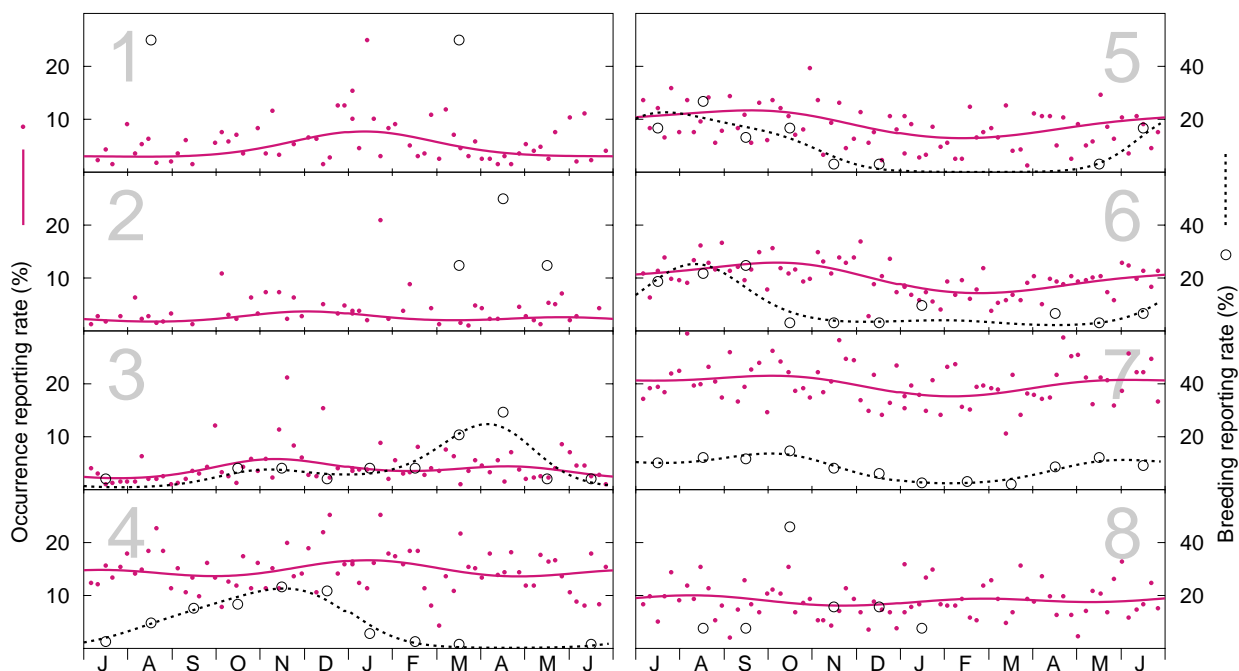
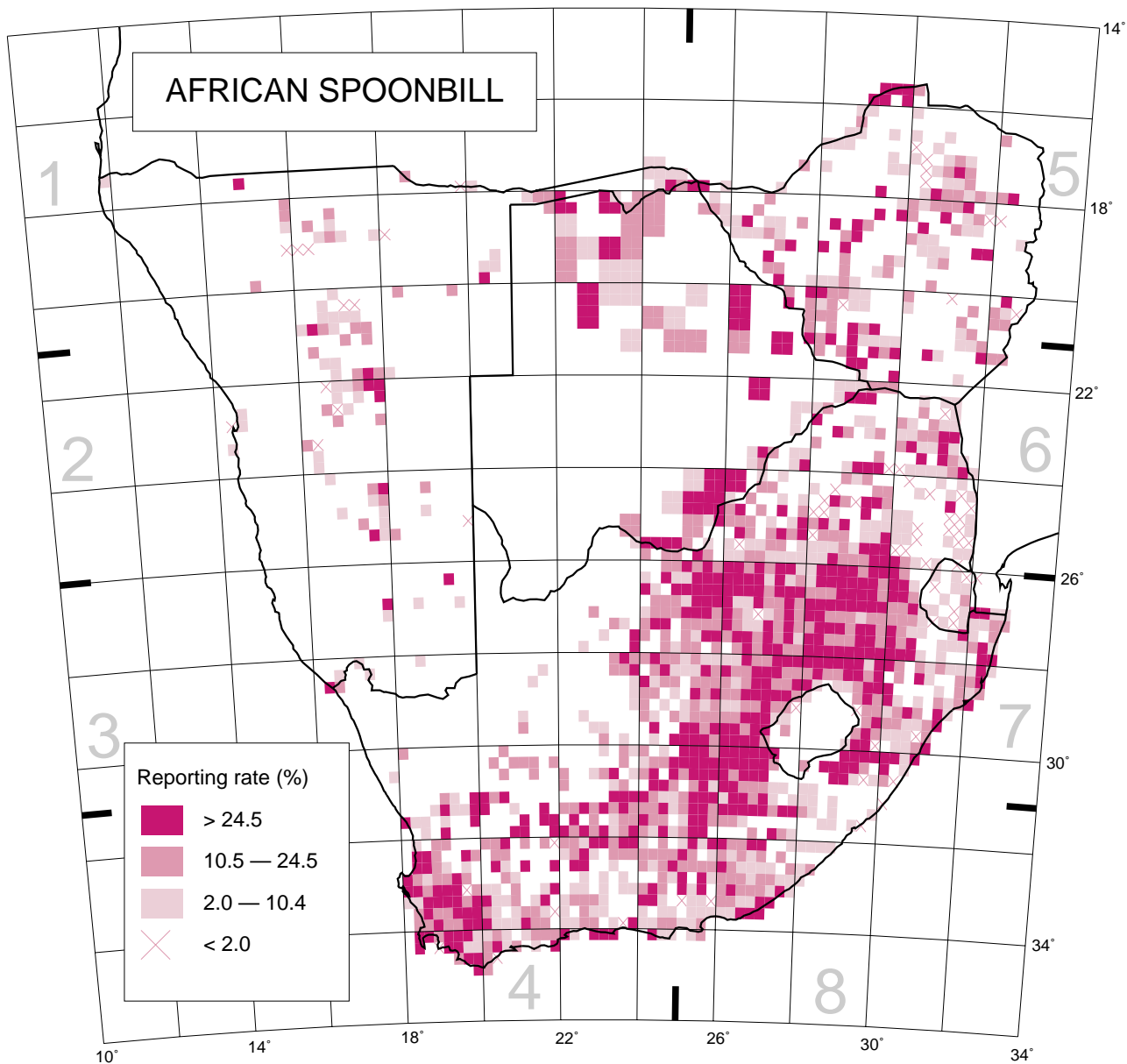
Recorded in 1616 grid cells, 35.6%

Total number of records: 22 504

Mean reporting rate for range: 19.3%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 138, 87, 208, 1277, 814, 1141, 3896, 496; Breeding: 2, 4, 24, 73, 30, 32, 268, 13.