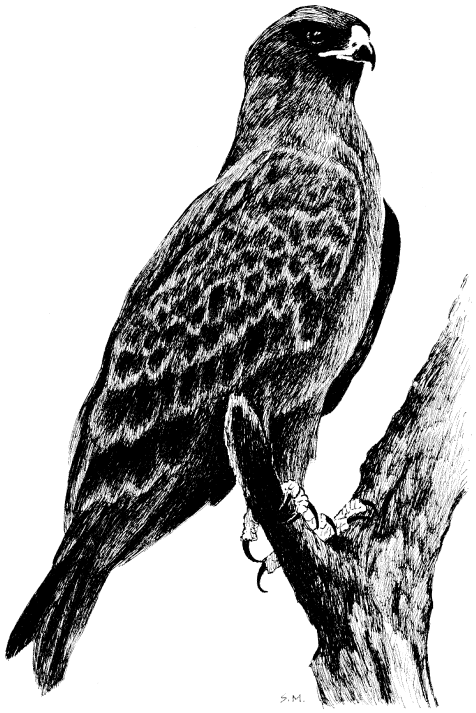


Wahlberg's Eagle

Wahlbergse Arend

Aquila wahlbergi

This small brown intra-African migrant is probably Africa's commonest eagle. It occurs in KwaZulu-Natal, Swaziland, the northern and eastern parts of both the Transvaal and Botswana, central and northeastern Namibia, and throughout Zimbabwe.

The isolated record from the southern Cape Province is interesting. The species was recorded as 'rare' around Oudtshoorn (3322CA) in the 1950s (Pocock & Winterbottom 1958) but these records were later queried (Winterbottom 1968a). A well-substantiated record of a bird which also indulged in apparent breeding display flights came from the nearby town of Calitzdorp (3321DA) in September 1989, and a differently coloured individual was recorded by different observers at the same locality in October 1991 (Hockey 1992; Neatherway & Neatherway 1992; Malan in press).

The total Transvaal population has been estimated at about 9000 pairs (Tarboton & Allan 1984), with perhaps 50 000 pairs in southern Africa (Ginn *et al.* 1989). Breeding densities can exceed 20 pairs/100 km^2 in the Transvaal (Simmons 1992), suggesting that it may be commoner than even these high estimates suggest.

As a plain brown bird of prey, it can be confused with other similarly plumaged raptors, but it has a diagnostic jizz, familiar to most observers; the atlas data are therefore reliable.

Habitat: It occurs throughout most woodland types in southern Africa, but it avoids forest and is largely absent from the semi-arid Kalahari, except in the wetter north of that biome. It is most frequently encountered in higher-rainfall areas (>500 mm). It is especially abundant along riverlines and floodplains with riparian woodlands (Tarboton 1977a; Steyn 1982b). Breeding occurs in tall riparian trees in a mosaic of grassland and woodland. It prefers flat, rather than mountainous, terrain. Unsuccessful breeding pairs tend to return to their territories, suggesting that vacant territories in suitable habitat are limited (Simmons 1993a).

Movements: This is a migratory eagle, with adults arriving from their winter quarters August–September, initiating breeding within weeks of their arrival and departing March–April. The models show a trend towards shorter periods of residency with increasing latitude. Large movements are apparent through Zambia and various rift valley areas (Auburn 1991; Simmons 1991). There are ring recoveries from southbound migrants in Zaire (Tree 1984, 1987f). There is only one ring recovery from its presumed main nonbreeding range in northern Sudan (Oatley 1994; Simmons 1995). A bird fitted with a satellite transmitter was tracked between breeding grounds in Namibia and a nonbreeding range in the border region Nigeria–Cameroon–Chad (Meyburg *et al.* 1995). A few birds may overwinter in southern Africa (e.g. Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Rainfall patterns may largely explain the timing of its migrations, since it is present throughout the peak of the local wet season at both the northern and southern ends of its 4000–5000-km journey, and can thus exploit seasonally abundant resources. Such a migratory strategy probably accounts for the species' relatively high breeding densities.

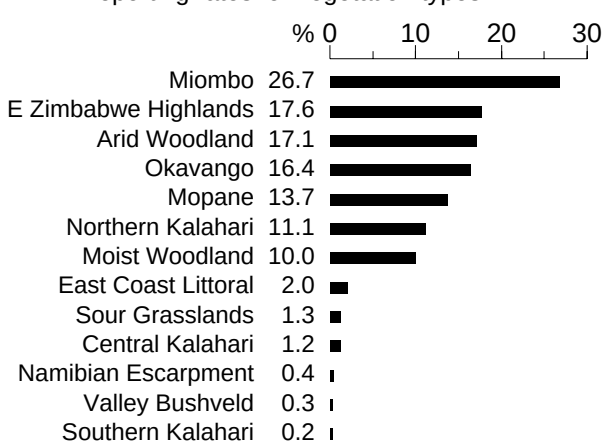
Breeding: Most atlas data spanned September–January. The egglaying period is short, probably owing to its migratory habits, in both Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981) and the Transvaal (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), with the majority of records coming from September–October.

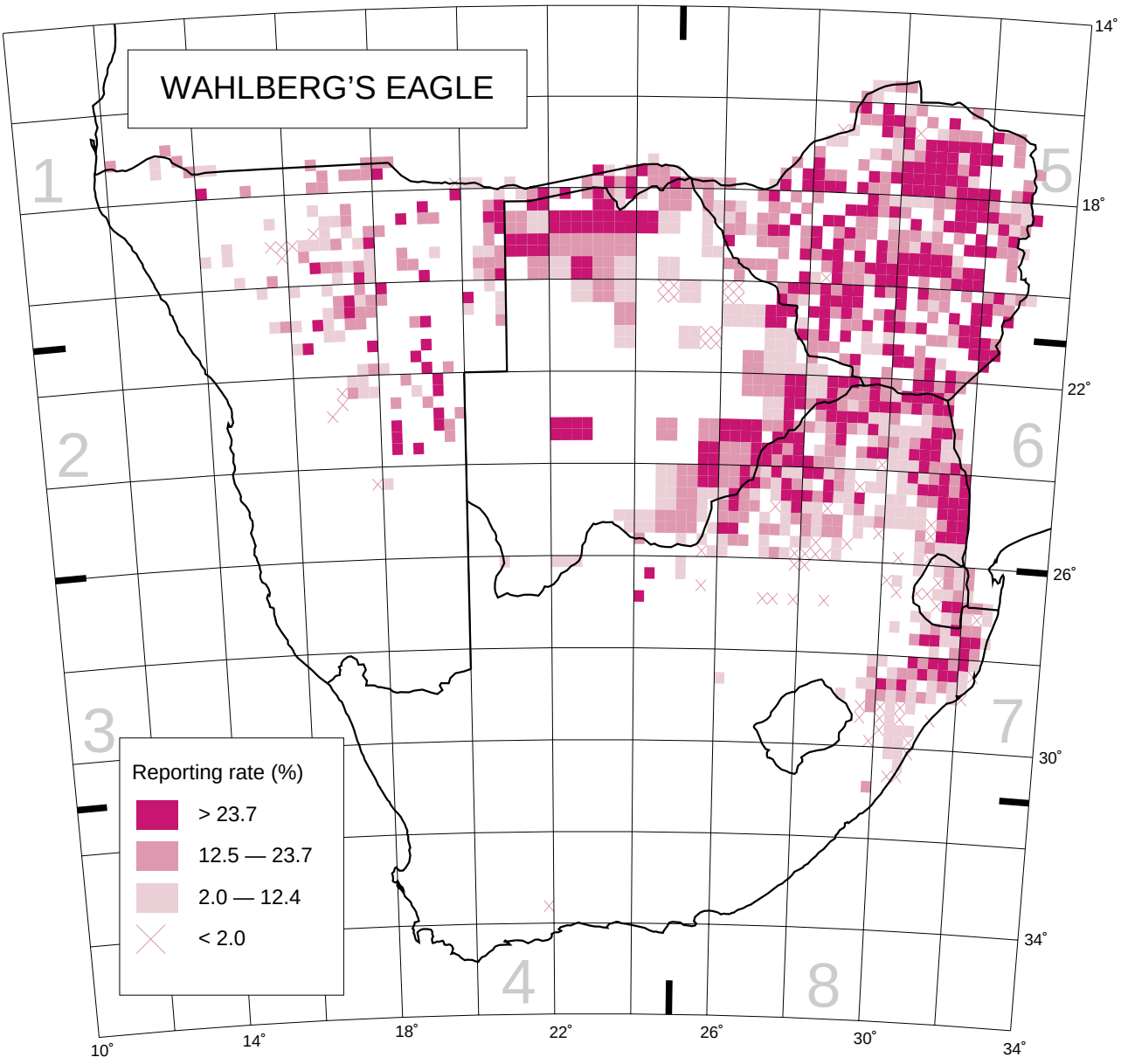
Historical distribution and conservation: There is no reason to suspect that the present distribution is any different from its historical distribution. Wahlberg's Eagle is not seen as a conservation problem at present (e.g. Tarboton & Allan 1984) but anthropogenic factors, such as poisoning and hunting, have reduced some populations (Tree 1984, 1987f; Tarboton 1987a). A marked decline has been noted in the Transvaal and Zimbabwe (Tree 1994e). In one Transvaal population, most adults died while away from their breeding grounds (Simmons 1992). This suggests that factors such as desertification in their presumed Sahelian nonbreeding quarters, and the rigours of migration, limit survival. This study, however, was made in a protected area, away from the negative anthropogenic activities that many other southern African populations are subjected to.

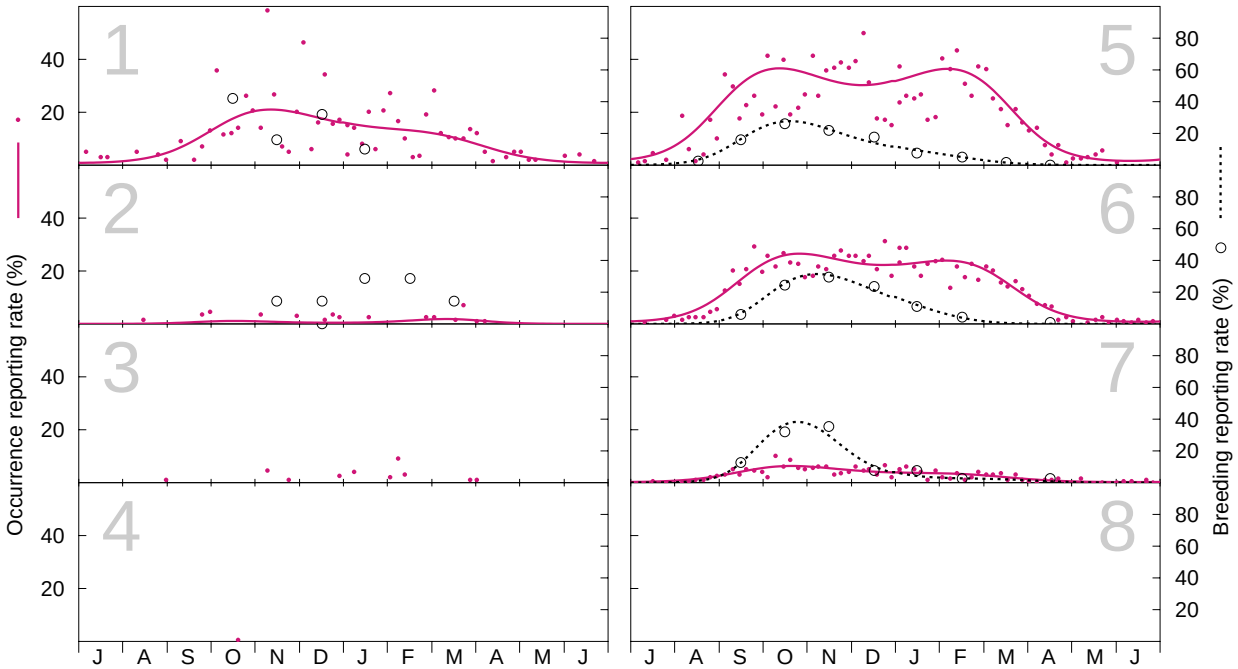
R.E. Simmons

Recorded in 1223 grid cells, 27.0%
Total number of records: 7948
Mean reporting rate for range: 13.6%

Reporting rates for vegetation types







Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 273, 23, 14, 1, 1851, 1584, 528, 0; Breeding: 19, 7, 1, 0, 225, 210, 40, 0.