



Grass Owl

Grasuil

Tyto capensis

The two main and separated populations of Grass Owl in southern Africa are clearly shown by the atlas data: the northern population in Zimbabwe and a southern one extending from the Transvaal southwards to the eastern Cape Province. An isolated and localized population occurs along the southern coast in the George–Knysna area (3422, 3423). It has also been found recently in De Hoop Nature Reserve (3420BC) (N.G. Palmer pers. comm.). The only records for Botswana were from before the atlas period, both from near Gaborone (2425D) (Hunter 1989a; White 1989). Some historical records are equivocal; for example, a subspecies was described from Namibia, but its occurrence there has been ruled out (Irwin 1982a). Outside of the atlas region, it is found in Mozambique and in a series of several isolated populations in West and Central Africa (Fry *et al.* 1988; Short *et al.* 1990). Many of these populations are restricted to small areas of suitable habitat quite distant from other populations. In view of the preferred habitat it is remarkable that it has not been confirmed from the Okavango and the Northern Plains in northern Botswana.

It is considered uncommon in southern Africa and this is at least partly due to inconspicuousness. It hunts nocturnally, usually emerging from roosts long after dusk and thus is seldom seen. Roosting birds are likewise difficult to see unless special efforts are made to traverse their preferred habitats. On the Springbok Flats (2429C), it was not uncommon: an area of 69 km² held an estimated 22 birds, giving an average home range of 1 owl/314 ha (Mendelsohn 1989a). This density was only slightly lower than that of Blackshouldered Kites *Elanus caeruleus*, a common and conspicuous species in the same area.

Habitat: Throughout its range, rank grass and marshes are the preferred habitat, usually in open habitat at fairly high altitudes, although it is absent from the highlands of Lesotho. However, in the central Transvaal, it occurs in sparse *Acacia* woodland where patches of dense grass cover are present. Roost and nest sites are chosen such that covered tunnels under a canopy of grass can be created. Although thought to hunt only at night, Grass Owls consumed many rodents that are mainly active during the day on the Springbok Flats (Mendelsohn 1989a). Perhaps some prey are caught on foot during the day in their tunnels.

Movements: While it is not known to undertake regular movements, the atlas record in the northern Cape Province at Molopo Nature Reserve (2522DD), a collected specimen (Anderson, P.C. 1994), suggests that the species is capable of wandering long distances on occasion. It specializes in rodent prey, and some local and nomadic movements in response to fluctuating food supplies can be expected. The models show no consistent seasonal variation in reporting rates.

Breeding: Most clutches are started March–May in Kwa-Zulu-Natal, Zimbabwe and the Transvaal (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), although breeding has been recorded November–June. Atlas records spanned March–July, except for the single January record from the southern Cape Province.

Interspecific relationships: Grass Owls often coexist with Marsh Owls *Asio capensis* and African Marsh Harriers *Circus ranivorus*. There is one record of an African Marsh Harrier preying upon a young Grass Owl (Barnard 1986b).

Historical distribution and conservation: The range and abundance of Grass Owls in South Africa and Lesotho has apparently diminished in recent times (Brooke 1984b). The type specimen comes from near Cape Town (3318CD) and there was at least one further record of breeding in that area which is now well outside the range (Brooke 1984b). During the 20th century it has apparently declined from being common to a very rare peripheral visitor in Lesotho (Osborne & Tigar 1990). The statement in Fry *et al.* (1988) to the effect that it is no longer found south of Lesotho, however, is incorrect.

The Grass Owl was included in the South African Red Data book (Brooke 1984b) as 'indeterminate'. Its scarce and specialized habitats have been diminished by wetland degradation; preservation of marshes and other rank grass habitats is required for its conservation.

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Recorded in 251 grid cells, 5.5%
Total number of records: 925
Mean reporting rate for range: 2.5%



