Cardinal Woodpecker

Kardinaalspeg

Dendropicos fuscescens

Endemic to the Afrotropical region, the Cardinal Woodpecker is the most widespread woodpecker in southern Africa. It extends from South Africa northwards throughout the savanna belt to East and West Africa, and in much of this range it is described as the commonest woodpecker. In southern Africa it is absent only from the treeless areas of the grassland, Karoo and desert biomes; it is tolerant of virtually the entire cross-section of the subcontinent's climates and altitudes. The distribution map shows the ribbon-like extension of its range along the Orange and Vaal rivers. Reporting rates were noticeably lower in the southwestern Cape Province than in most of the remainder of the range.

The species consists of a polymorphic assemblage of forms in which as many as 20 races have been recognized (Peters 1948), although currently only nine are accepted (Short 1982). Several of these forms have ranked as species in earlier assessments of the taxon, and even in southern Africa two species were once recognized (Roberts 1924). Because of the presence of intermediates between these forms, however, this latter species-split is unlikely to be resurrected in the future.

A density of 1 pair/50 ha was recorded in mature broad-leaved woodland in the northern Transvaal (Tarboton 1980) and a conservative extrapolation of this density indicates a subcontinental population in excess of 100 000 birds. It is usually encountered singly, in pairs or, for a short period after breeding, in family groups. It is a common member of mixed bird parties (Vernon 1980).

Being the smallest southern African woodpecker, it is difficult to confuse with other species, although less common woodpeckers were probably sometimes misidentified as Cardinals. The data presented are considered to be reliable. Like most woodpecker species, it was probably under-recorded on account of its relative inconspicuousness.

Habitat: It frequents a wide variety of woodland and savanna habitats, from the edges of deserts to the fringes of forests. In desert areas it is restricted to riparian tree galleries or introduced trees around settlements. It enters villages and suburban environments (e.g. Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Hockey *et al.* 1989) in the grasslands, fynbos and Karoo where introduced trees provide habitat, but it is not found in commercial monocultures of alien trees. It avoids Afromontane and lowland forest, except where fragmented or regenerating. The vegetation analysis illustrates the wide variety of biomes inhabited by this species; the highest reporting rates were from the various woodland types.

Movements: It is resident and sedentary. The rises in some of the models in early summer may reflect increased vocal activity at the onset of the breeding season.

Breeding: Atlas records were mainly from August–February, peaking later in summer (November–February) in the northwest (Zone 2) than elsewhere (September–January). There was a tendency for breeding to peak later from north to south in the eastern half of its range (Zones 5–8).

Interspecific relationships: It shares large parts of its southern African range with the Bearded *Thripias namaquus*, Bennett's *Campethera bennettii* and Goldentailed *C. abingoni* Woodpeckers. It is smaller than each of these and the least dependent of the four on large trees for nest sites. It is generally more abundant than they are, and it extends into many areas where they are absent. In Swaziland it is absent from an area where the Goldentailed Woodpecker occurs, as revealed by the finer geographical resolution used by Parker (1994).

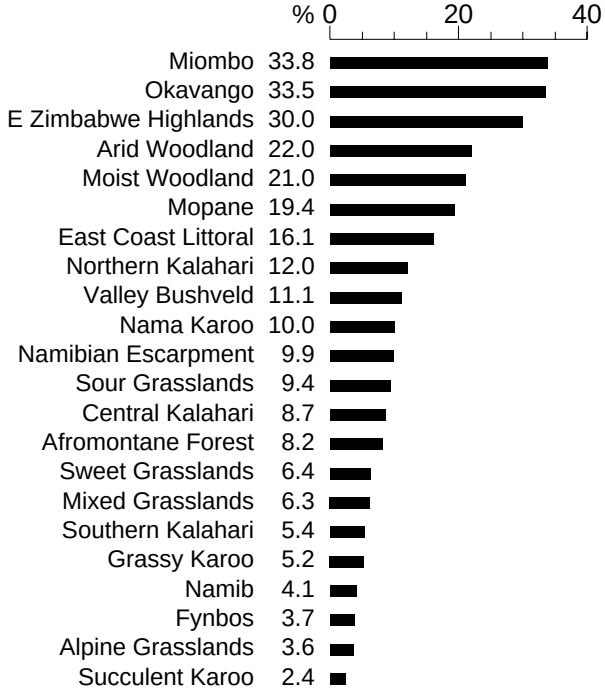
Historical distribution and conservation: Its range has undoubtedly contracted in those areas where woodland has been cleared for agriculture and expanded where alien trees have been introduced into areas where previously it did not occur.

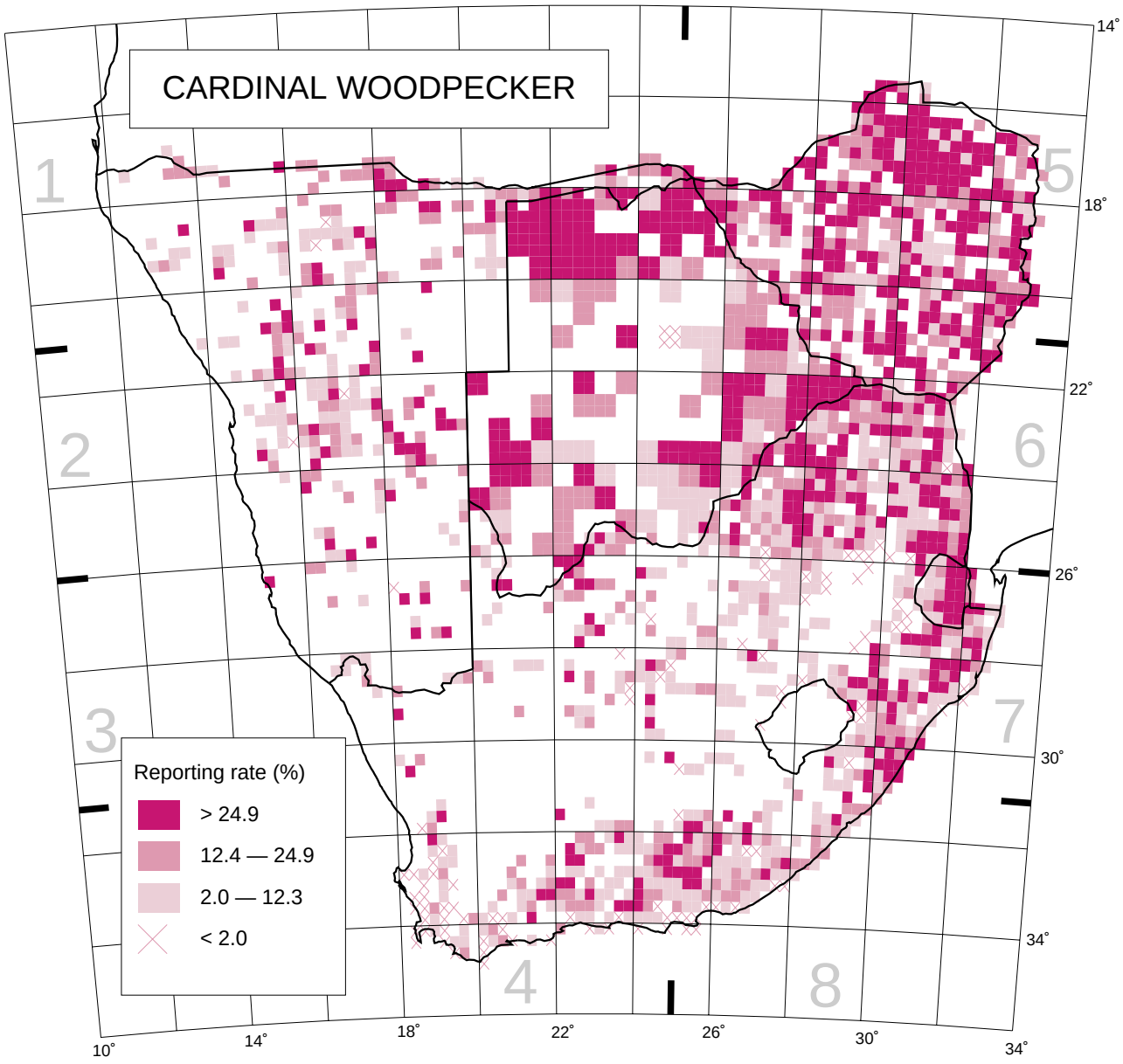
The Cardinal Woodpecker is not considered to be at risk. It has probably increased its southern African range as a result of anthropogenic environmental changes.

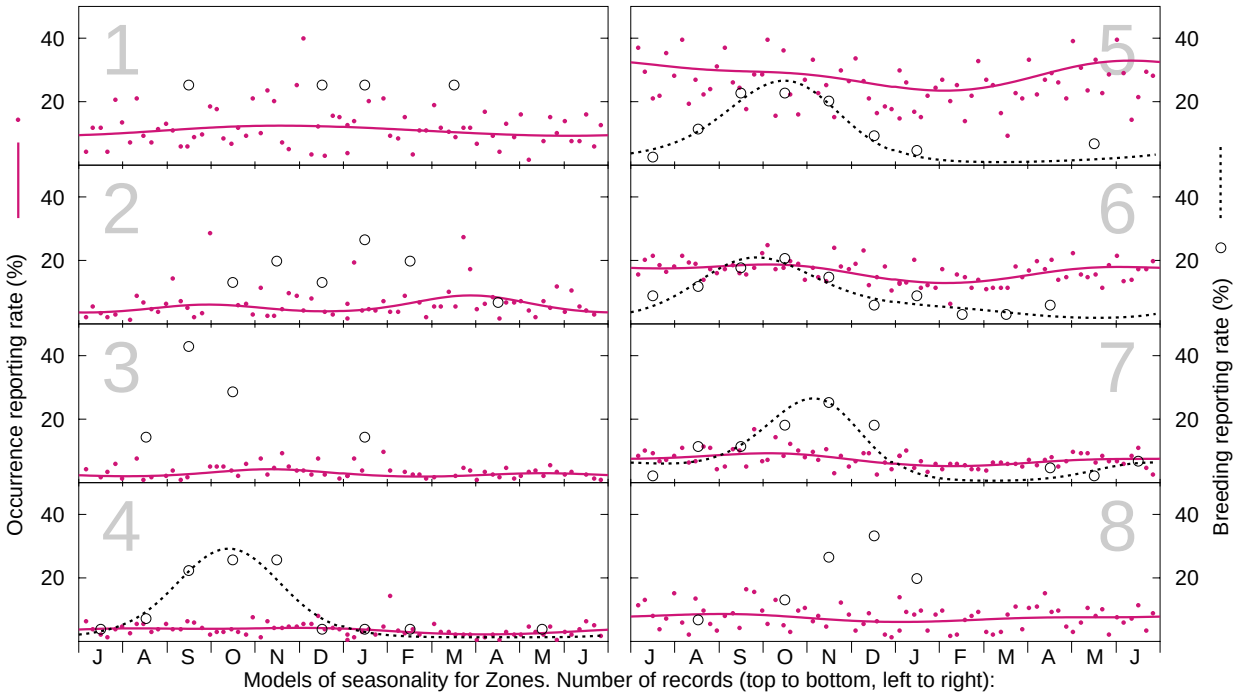
W.R. Tarboton

Recorded in 2086 grid cells, 46.0%
Total number of records: 18 221
Mean reporting rate for range: 16.1%

Reporting rates for vegetation types







Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 352, 208, 149, 300, 2497, 1872, 1412, 408; Breeding: 4, 15, 7, 27, 44, 34, 44, 15.