

Stark's Lark

Woestynlewerik

Eremalauda starki

Stark's Lark is near-endemic to southern Africa. It is a nomadic species, distributed in the northwestern Cape Province and western Namibia. Outside southern Africa, its range extends along the northern Namib Desert to Benguela, Angola. The distribution suggests that two populations may be involved, one in northwestern Namibia and the other in the northwestern Cape Province and southern Namibia, but this requires further investigation. However, the lack of records from southern Namibia may be due to poor coverage of the area since there is apparently abundant suitable habitat in the region.

It is often common when encountered in the Karoo and Namib, and can be abundant in certain areas after rain. It is usually seen in pairs when breeding, otherwise in small to large groups, sometimes numbering several hundred birds (Willoughby 1971; Keith *et al.* 1992; Maclean 1993b). It is a small pale lark, with a heavy, dark-tipped pale bill and streaked crown with a crest, differing from both Pinkbilled Lark *Spizocorys conirostris* and Sclater's Lark *S. sclateri* by its mostly white underparts, general paleness, pale bill colour and lack of face pattern. A useful field character in Stark's Lark is the pale ring around the eye. The display is distinctive; the male sings on the ground, facing the female, or while rising from the ground to 20–200 m, hovering against the wind or circling slowly and singing continuously for several minutes. The male ends the display by closing its wings and dropping vertically to the ground (Keith *et al.* 1992; Maclean 1993b). Males sometimes flutter along with legs dangling while singing. Display starts at dawn (Maclean 1993b).

Habitat: Stark's Lark is typically a species of arid and semi-arid open plains, with sparse perennial grasses on sands, particularly where there are patches of calcrete. It also occurs in open arid Southern Kalahari savanna on sands and on the edge of the Namib Desert where it nests on sparsely vegetated gravel plains. Reporting rates were highest from the Namib and Namibian Escarpment.

Movements: This is an opportunistic, nomadic species, moving to patches where there has been recent rain (Maclean 1970c; Willoughby 1971). The models show an increase in reporting rates during the winter, but this may be due to increased activity and breeding displays at this time. Willoughby (1971) noted that movements by Stark's Larks in the Namib Desert may be very local and the flocks continually wander from one grass patch to another.

Breeding: Atlas breeding records were from March, April, May and August. Maclean (1993b) noted that this species breeds opportunistically after rain and has an extended breeding season; August–November in the Kalahari and April–May in the Namib Desert.

Interspecific relationships: Stark's Lark overlaps in habitat with other larks and finchlarks. It sometimes nests in the same area as Greybacked *Eremopterix verticalis* and Blackeared *E. australis* Finchlarks and Larklike Buntings *Emberiza impetuani* (pers. obs) in what might be mutualistic associations.

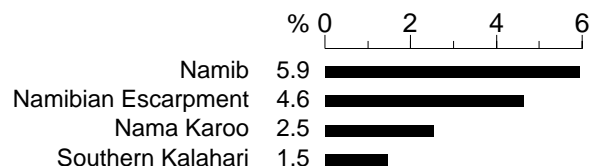
Historical distribution and conservation: There is no evidence that the distribution of this lark has recently changed. However, the atlas data do suggest that the distribution is not as extensive as previously thought, e.g. Maclean (1993b) showed its distribution as more extensive in Namibia, Botswana and parts of South Africa. Massive bush encroachment as a result of overgrazing has much reduced the open grassy plains of the Kalahari in Botswana, particularly during the last few decades (Campbell & Child 1971), which may account for the present status of Stark's Lark as a great rarity in Botswana, while Smithers (1964) mentioned eight records.

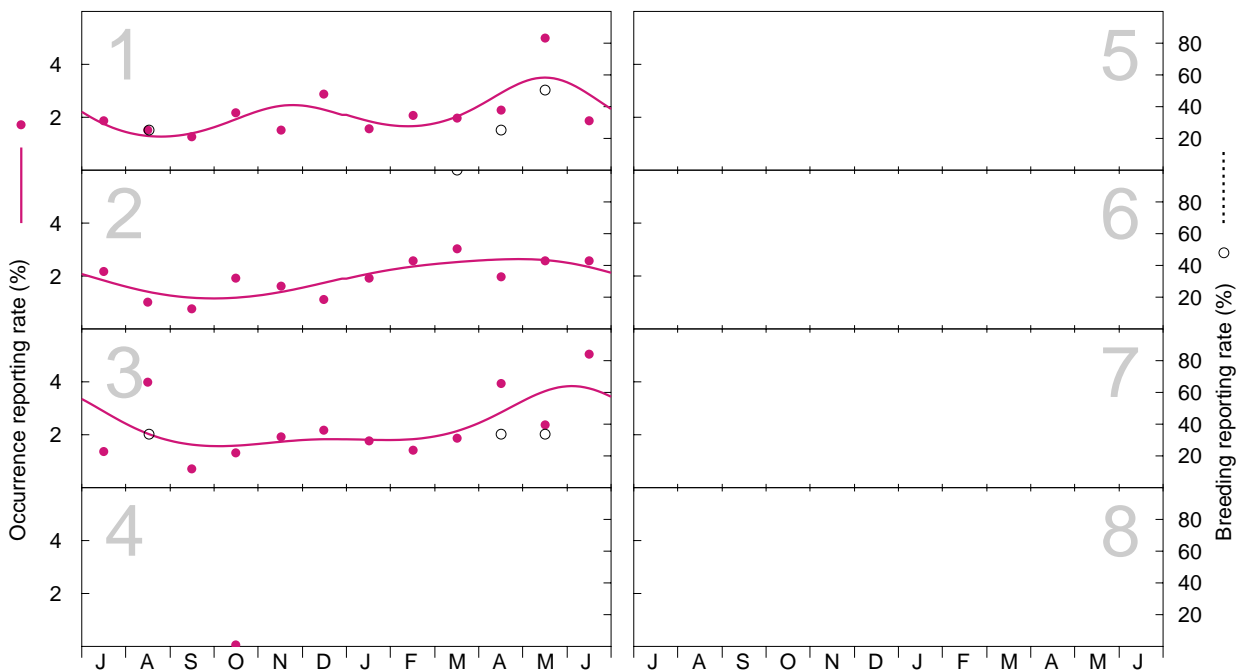
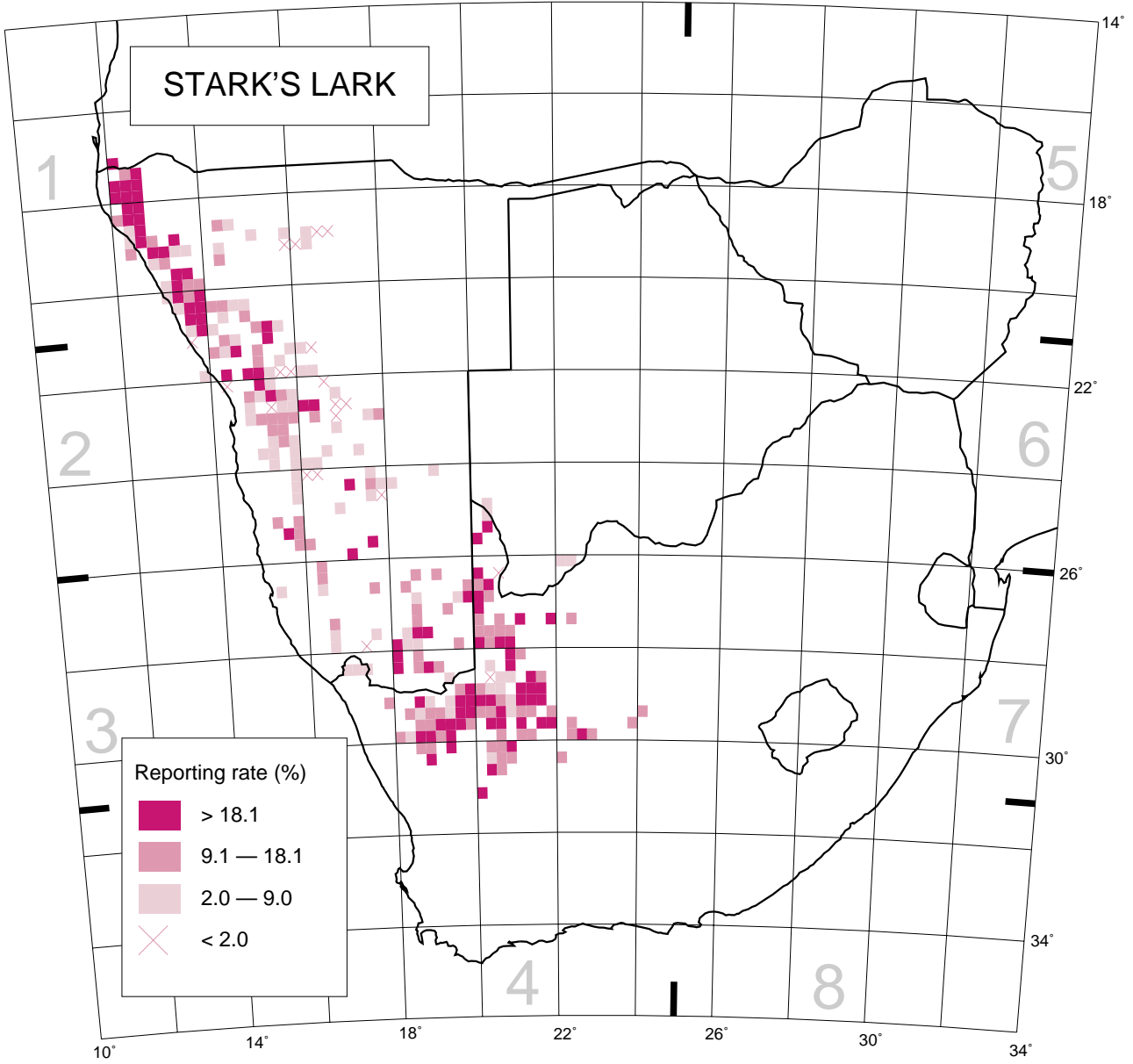
Although Stark's Lark was not considered to be a Red Data species in South Africa (Brooke 1984b), it is not well protected because there are few conserved areas within the southern parts of its range (Hilton-Taylor & Le Roux 1989) and the conservation status of this species in South Africa should be reviewed. In Namibia it is well protected by the Namib-Naukluft and Skeleton Coast parks.

W.R.J. Dean

Recorded in 299 grid cells, 6.6%
Total number of records: 646
Mean reporting rate for range: 7.6%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 198, 212, 231, 1, 0, 0, 0, 0; Breeding: 4, 1, 3, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0.