

Anteating Chat

Swartpiek

Myrmecocichla formicivora

The Anteating Chat is a southern African endemic which is widespread in the central parts of the atlas region, but was not reported from Zimbabwe during the atlas period, although a few earlier records do exist (Irwin 1981). Its distribution extends to the coast in the western and southeastern Cape Province, but it is largely absent from the southern and eastern seaboard, the Namib Desert and the most arid areas of southern Namibia. It is also generally absent from the woodlands of northern Namibia, northern and northeastern Botswana, the northern and eastern Transvaal, and eastern Swaziland, although there are extensions of its range into the northwestern Transvaal which are probably the result of the clearing of woodlands for agriculture. It occurs only in the extreme western lowlands of Lesotho (Osborne & Tigar 1990) and is patchily distributed in parts of the western Karoo. The reporting rate patterns indicate a patchiness of population density suggestive of sensitivity to local conditions.

Three subspecies are recognized (Clancey 1980b); there are no obvious breaks in the range that coincide with their respective distributions.

It is common and conspicuous with distinctive white primaries visible in flight, hence the atlas data are reliable.

Habitat: It occurs in open habitats, usually with at least some grass and some scrub. The vegetation analysis shows a bias towards the grassier habitats in the east, and the Southern and Central Kalahari which are also grassy. Being a tunnel-nesting species, the nature of the substrate is no doubt also a factor in its choice of habitat and very rocky areas are avoided.

Movements: It is sedentary (Keith *et al.* 1992) and the models do not suggest any movement. However, a large turnover of individuals was observed in a study area in the Free State (Earlé & Herholdt 1988).

Breeding: It has a long spring/summer breeding season with an October–December peak. Some of the models have long ‘tails’ into the late summer. This may be at least partially due to records of fledglings which, although no longer fed by adults, may have been thought to be ‘dependent’ because of the cohesive groups which this species maintains, and the

3–4-month period with juvenile plumage. Multiple broods per season are attempted, with juveniles from the first brood acting as helpers at the nest (Earlé & Herholdt 1988).

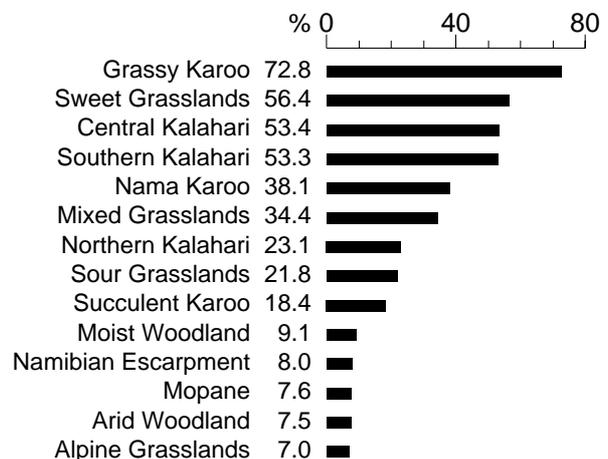
Interspecific relationships: In addition to earthen banks, it favours the burrows of the Aardvark *Orycteropus afer*, Porcupine *Hystrix africaeaustralis*, Springhaas *Pedetes capensis*, Ground Squirrel *Xerus inauris* and Yellow Mongoose *Cynictis penicillata*, inside whose openings it excavates its own nest burrow. It also uses open ventilation shafts to enter termite mounds and has been observed to use the nests of the Greater Striped Swallow *Hirundo cucullata*, sometimes even as a nest parasite (Skead 1974; Earlé & Herholdt 1988). Brood parasitism by the Greater Honeyguide *Indicator indicator* has been observed (Earlé & Herholdt 1987). Although predominantly an eater of ants and termites, it does take a range of other insects as well (Keith *et al.* 1992).

Historical distribution and conservation: Farming is often inimical to the mammals whose holes are used as nest sites, and also to termitaria. It may therefore have suffered a negative impact in several parts of its range, but it appears to be quite adaptable in its choice of nest site. Its presence in significant numbers in the Alexandria district and other Border areas of the eastern Cape Province, together with a marked absence from the Ciskei, Transkei and Lesotho, suggests local extinctions resulting from high stock densities which appear to eliminate many ground-nesting birds. Small mammals also come under intense human predation in those areas and this may have resulted in a dearth of suitable holes. On the other hand, it appears to be able to capitalize on the clearance of bush; Broekhuysen (1966) reported a range extension southward towards Cape Town (3318CD) which was probably aided by the clearance of dense scrub for agriculture. A similar explanation may pertain to the irregular range extensions into the northwestern Transvaal and the eastern hardveld of Botswana. Its occurrence in western Swaziland may represent a recent expansion not associated with bush clearance (V. Parker pers comm.). The curious ‘hole’ in the distribution in the southwestern Transvaal merits investigation. Generally speaking, the Anteating Chat is not threatened.

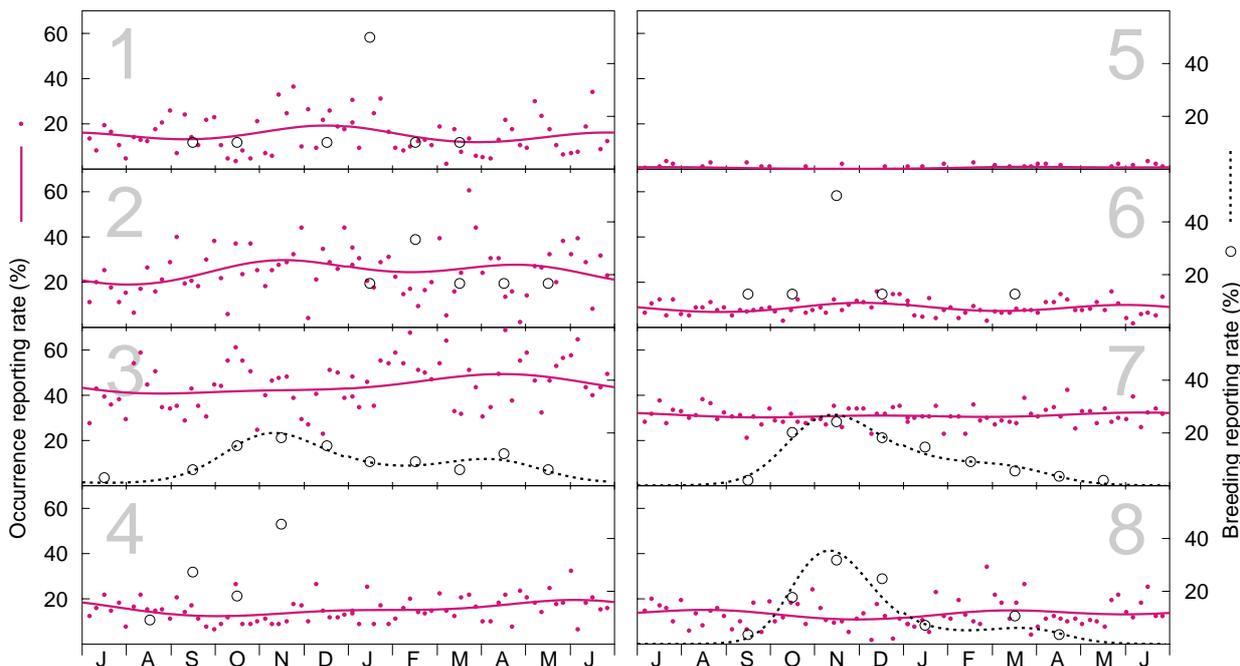
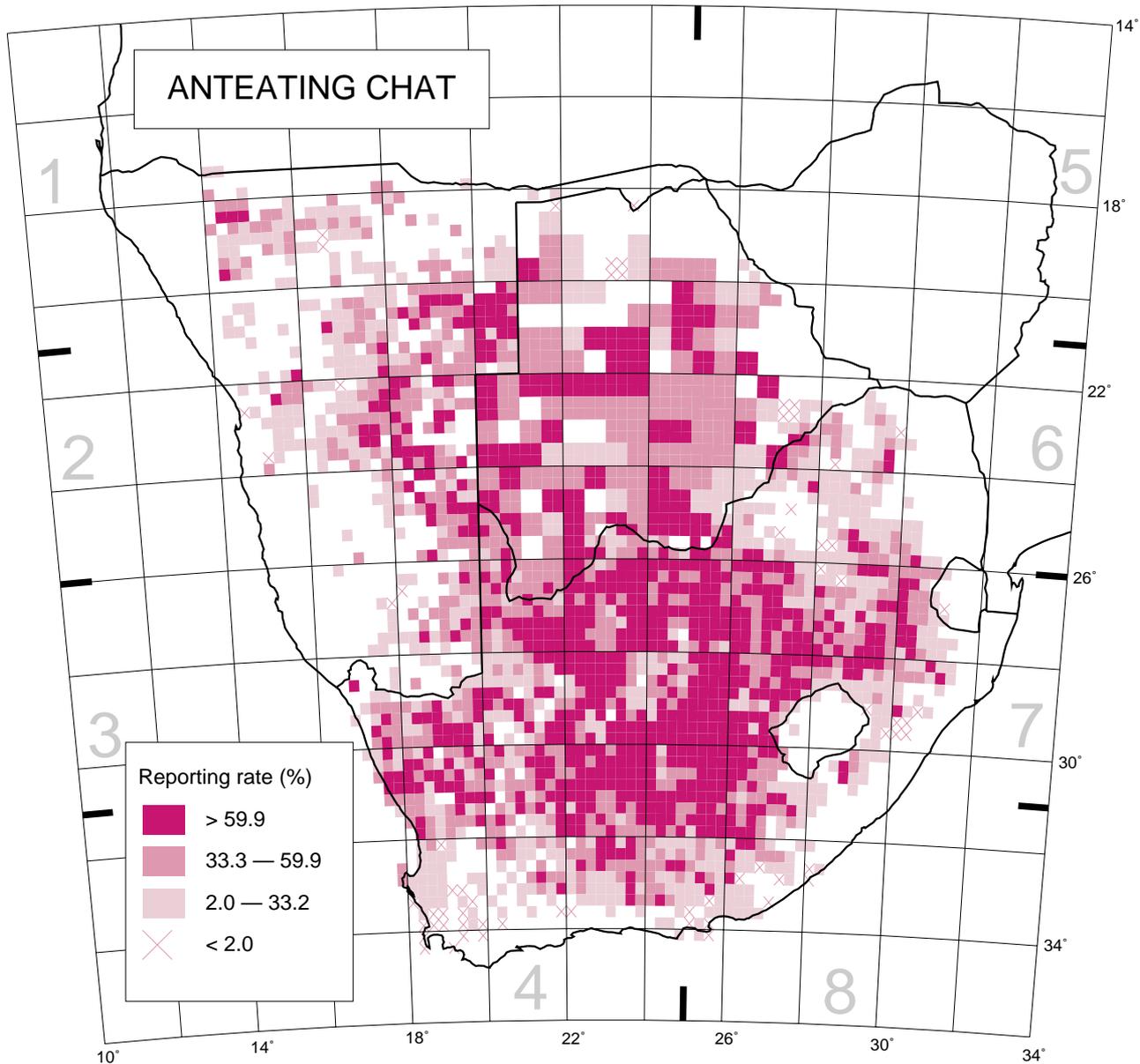
J.A. Harrison

Recorded in 2453 grid cells, 54.1%
Total number of records: 25 611
Mean reporting rate for range: 28.7%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



Also marginally in Valley Bushveld, Okavango, Fynbos and Namib.



Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 485, 893, 2461, 1358, 51, 990, 6072, 734; Breeding: 10, 6, 33, 11, 0, 8, 54, 28.