

Brown Robin

Bruinwipstert

Erythropgia signata

A southern African endemic, the Brown Robin is one of four Afrotropical species that are more similar to each other than to the rest of the scrubrobins. It has a rather disjunct distribution pattern which is not adequately illustrated by the atlas map, in part because of the quarter-degree grid scale, but also because of difficulties in identification. Records from Ndumu (2632C) and the Pafuri (2231A, C) are possibly erroneous.

Populations of the nominate race extend from the eastern Cape Province to the northeastern Transvaal. These have been subdivided into three racial groups by Clancey (1956a, 1966b), who described *E. s. reclusa* and *oatleyi*. An alternative opinion suggests that these populations represent the ends of a cline from southwest to northeast and do not warrant subspecific grouping (Keith *et al.* 1992). There is, however, a discrete population named *tongensis*, the Tonga Brown Robin, which is confined to the littoral from St Lucia (2832CB) to near Inhambane in Mozambique; it is paler in colour, distinctly shorter-billed, and geographically isolated from the long-billed nominate populations. In forests inland from the coast, especially in the sand forests of the coastal plain, *tongensis* is replaced by the closely related Bearded Robin *E. quadvirgata* which, because of its general resemblance in plumage pattern, is the species most likely to have been misidentified as the Brown Robin. Like the related Coll's Ground Robin *E. leucosticta* in Zaire, which Chapin (1953) considered the most elusive of all Congo forest birds, the Brown Robin is not an easy species to observe and was probably under-recorded.

Habitat: In the eastern Cape Province, where it is more common than in other parts of its range, it inhabits dense thickets in valley bushveld, the understorey of coastal forest, and mistbelt forest at higher altitudes. In KwaZulu-Natal it occurs in coastal forest but is absent from mistbelt forests, such as at Karkloof (2930AD), south of the Tugela River; it is common in forests at Nkhandla (2831CA), Ngoya (2831DB) and Ngome (2731CD). In northeastern Transvaal it occurs in escarpment forests like Woodbush (2329DD) where it is particularly associated with areas of dense, leafy undergrowth. Along the coast of northern KwaZulu-Natal, *tongensis* fre-

quents the dense understorey of evergreen forest at St Lucia Estuary and the western shores of southern Lake St Lucia, but its primary habitat is the high dune forest extending along the coastline from Cape Vidal (2832BA) north to Kosi Bay (2632DD) and beyond. The vegetation analysis correctly identifies the three major vegetation types in which it occurs.

Movements: It is sedentary and not known to undertake any regular seasonal movements.

Breeding: There are only a few records of breeding activity in the atlas data; they range October–February. Data from other sources indicate that egg-laying peaks in November (Dean 1971; Keith *et al.* 1992).

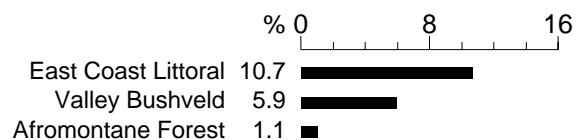
Interspecific relationships: A hybrid, exhibiting plumage characters intermediate between *tongensis* and the Bearded Robin, was collected on the western Ndlozi peninsula between Lake St Lucia and False Bay (2832AB) in 1959 (Keith *et al.* 1992). There are very few areas where these two robins overlap as they are normally mutually exclusive.

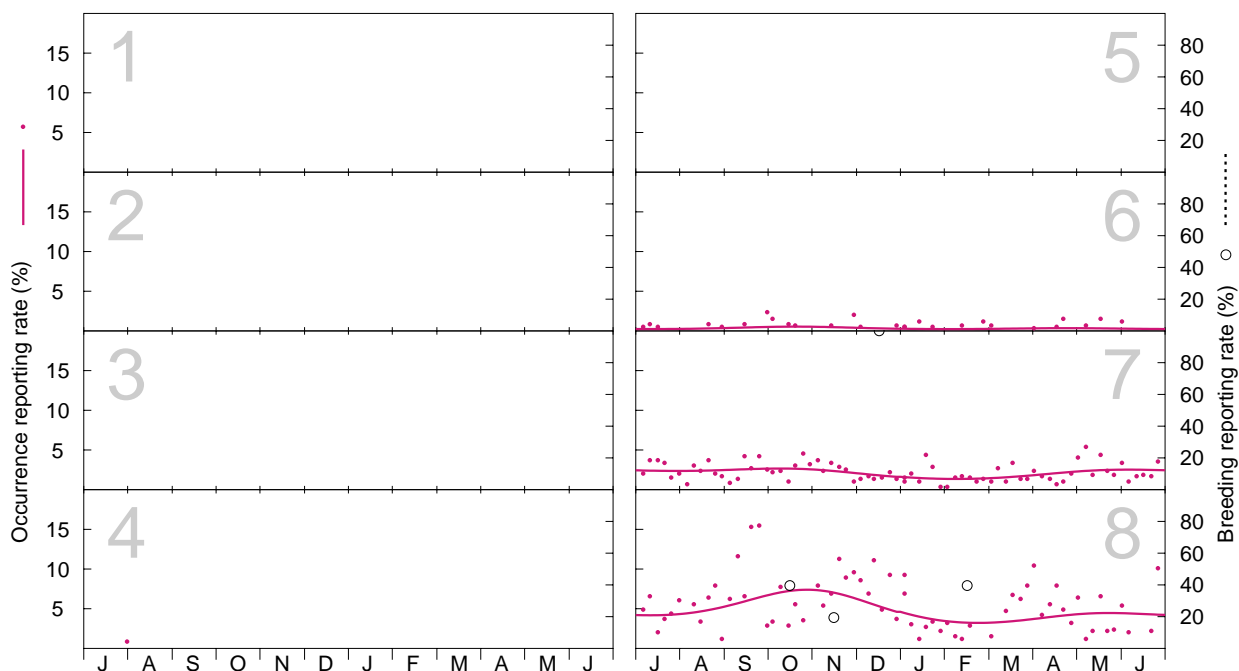
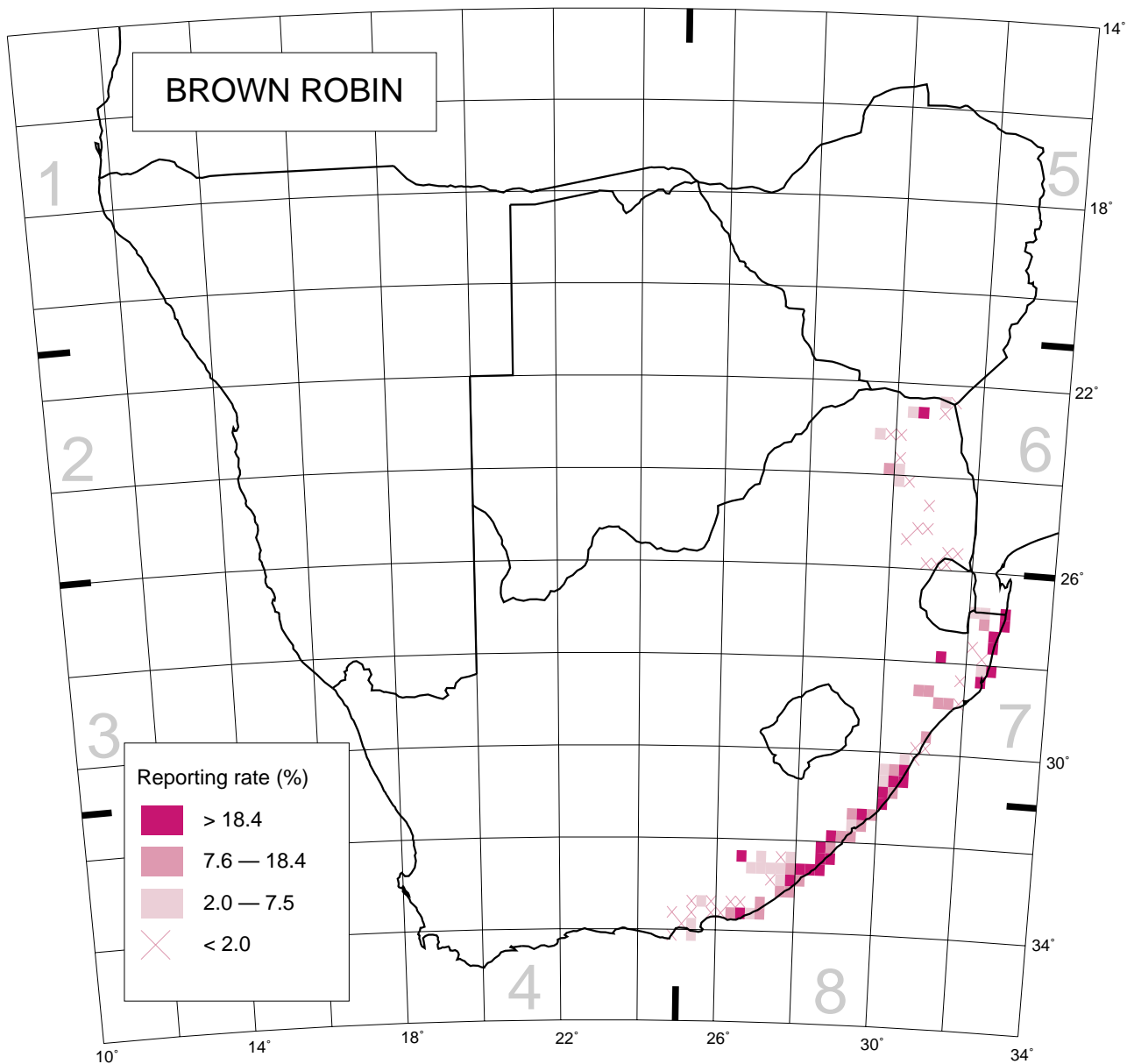
Historical distribution and conservation: Calder (1963) commented on loss of populations in the greater Durban (2931CC) area as urban development brought about diminution of forest areas between 1947 and 1963. Its occurrence in the Transvaal was discovered only in 1955 (Oatley 1956). Although not listed by Brooke (1984b) in the South African Red Data book, Brown Robin populations in the central and northern parts of the range are dependent on large stands of dune or mist forest, and are vulnerable to habitat disturbance, especially the widespread practice of clearing forest understorey for the cultivation of Dagga *Cannabis sativa*.

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Recorded in 102 grid cells, 2.2%
Total number of records: 1484
Mean reporting rate for range: 9.1%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 0, 0, 0, 1, 0, 38, 416, 268; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 2, 5.