

African Marsh Warbler

Kleinrietsanger

Acrocephalus baeticatus

The status of the African Marsh Warbler in southern Africa cannot be generalized as it appears to be predominantly resident in the north and largely migratory in the south. Migrant birds spend the austral winter in central Africa and migrate to southern Africa to breed in summer (Macleane 1993b).

It can be found almost anywhere within the atlas region and its distribution displays a combination of characteristics: it has the wide scatter typical of migrants and it has the areas of concentration typical of most waterbirds. For example, it occurs widely in the Karoo where it exploits minor dams and watercourses, but it also has a clear linear distribution corresponding to the Orange and Vaal rivers. Peak reporting rates, however, were higher in the south, particularly in Zones 3, 4 and 7, suggesting that the southwestern Cape Province and the highveld of southern Transvaal, Free State, Lesotho and the midlands of KwaZulu-Natal are prime areas. It is largely absent from Kalahari sands which seldom have standing water, but may pass over these areas on migration. It is, however, common at suitable sites along the coast in the Namib. The ranges of the three subspecies in the region (Clancey 1980b) do not appear to be disjunct on the present map.

All patterns of distribution and seasonality should be interpreted with caution because of the difficulty in distinguishing three closely related *Acrocephalus* warblers in the region. The African Marsh and the European Reed *A. scirpaceus* Warblers are virtually impossible to distinguish in the field – even their calls are similar – and it is possible that they belong, in fact, to a single species (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1987b; Komen 1988a). The European Reed Warbler is probably rare in southern Africa, however, and may not have confused the issue as much as the European Marsh Warbler *A. palustris*, another nonbreeding Palearctic migrant, which is relatively common but also difficult to distinguish from the African Marsh Warbler, although their songs differ (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1987a). The European Marsh Warbler does not normally frequent reedbeds, however, although it may occur alongside African Marsh Warbler in nearby thickets. It is likely that the data for these three species contain records for the other two; in addition, they are relatively inconspicuous species and poorly known, and therefore under-recorded.

Habitat: It is most typically found in reedbeds and other dense vegetation associated with wetlands, but it appears to be able to use small patches of such vegetation – such as those found at small farm dams. It also occurs in dense, lush scrub or tall grass away from water (Winterbottom 1968a; Irwin 1981; Hockey *et al.* 1989; Osborne & Tigar 1990), e.g. in gardens, more particularly so on

migration and during winter. In Swaziland it is found in sugar-cane fields (Parker 1994).

Movements: The models indicate summer increases in abundance in all Zones, but with proportionately greater amounts of overwintering in the north; e.g. in Swaziland it appears to be resident (Parker 1994). Atlas data indicate arrival August–September and a protracted period of departure after breeding. Peak reporting rates in summer may also have been influenced by increased vocalizations during the breeding season. Irwin (1981) reported a pronounced winter exodus from Zimbabwe, but with some birds present all year. Six of eight active migrants grounded in Botswana in March and early April carried substantial fat reserves typical of long-distance migrants (Herremans 1992e). The great majority of mist-net captures are made in summer, even as far north as Malawi, with a few winter records from all latitudes; no recoveries of ringed birds from central Africa have yet been recorded. Retraps indicate a high degree of site fidelity (SAFRING).

Breeding: Egg-laying has been recorded November–March in Zimbabwe, October–March in Botswana, October–February in Namibia, October–February in the Transvaal, November–January in KwaZulu-Natal and August–December in the southwestern Cape Province (Winterbottom 1968a; Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Skinner 1995a; Brown & Clinning in press). Atlas data conform to this pattern of summer breeding, somewhat later in the north than in the south.

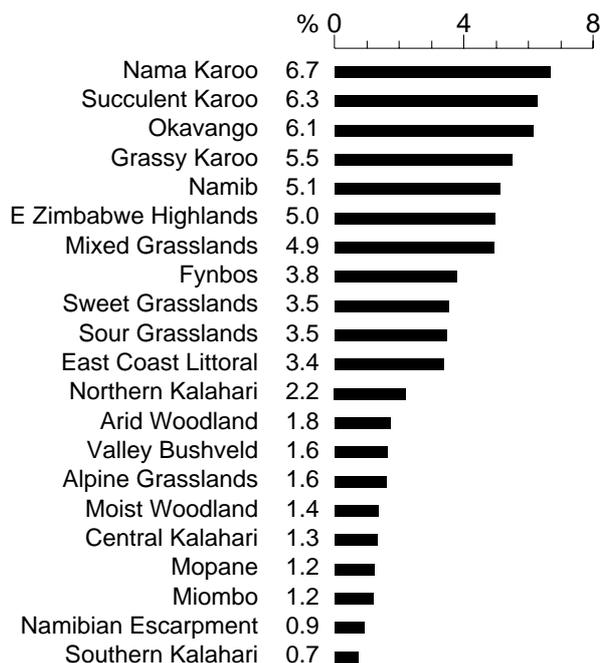
Interspecific relationships: The African Marsh Warbler shares its preferred habitat with a number of other *Acrocephalus* warblers, and it can be assumed that some degree of territorial competition exists between them.

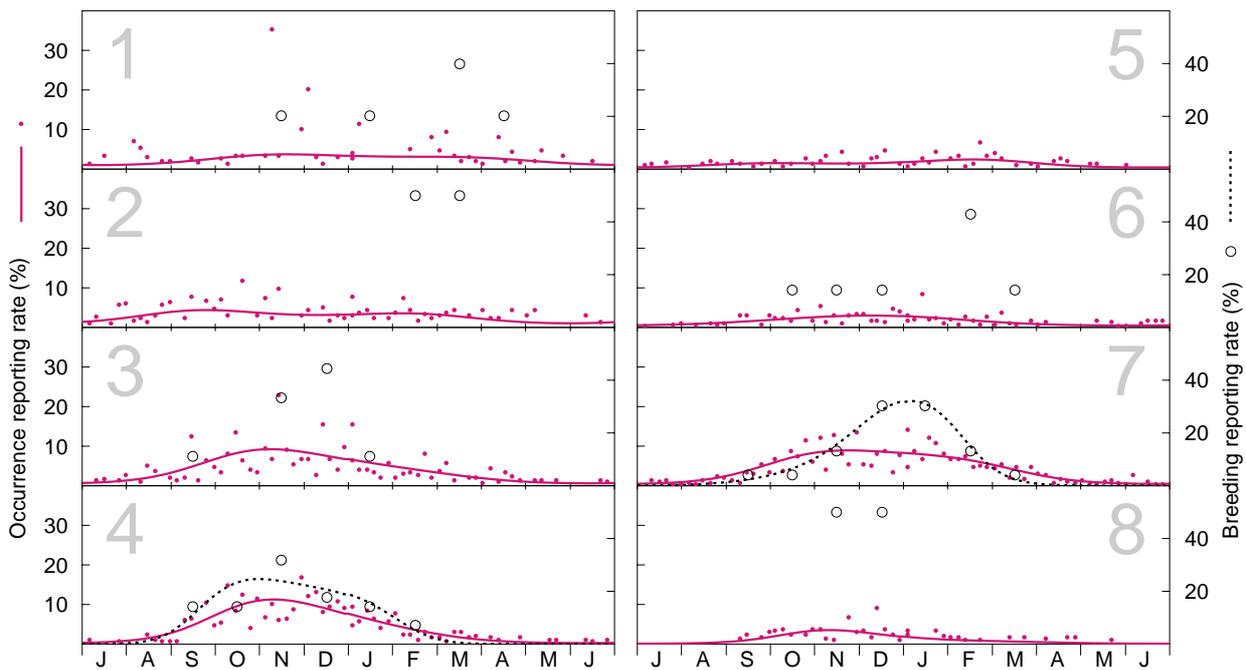
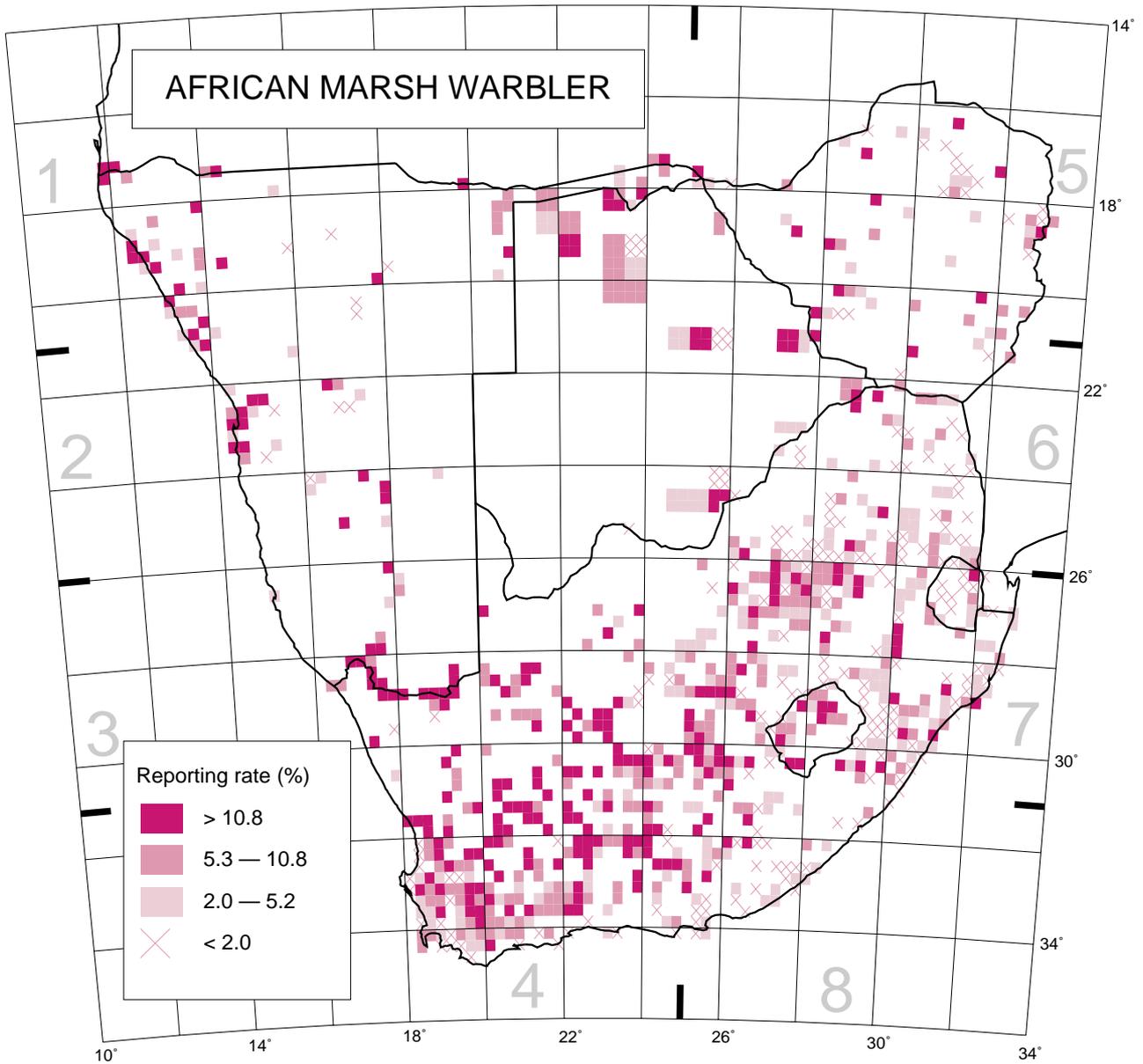
Historical distribution and conservation: It may have extended its range into relatively arid areas such as the Karoo with the increase in habitat brought about by man-made dams. The African Marsh Warbler is common and widespread and not considered to be threatened.

J.A. Harrison

Recorded in 946 grid cells, 20.9%
Total number of records: 4940
Mean reporting rate for range: 5.5%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 78, 94, 196, 346, 115, 174, 858, 65; Breeding: 5, 2, 9, 28, 0, 7, 23, 4.