

White Helmetshrike

Withelmlaksman

Prionops plumatus

The White Helmetshrike is largely a species of tropical Africa (Hall & Moreau 1970) and its range in the region extends into northern Namibia, northern and eastern Botswana, Zimbabwe, the Transvaal, Swaziland and northern KwaZulu-Natal. The two subspecies in the region (Clancey 1980b) have continuous ranges.

This is the commonest of the helmetshrikes in southern Africa. In some areas the density of groups may be as high as 1 group/10 ha (Vernon 1977). It is a communal breeding species which lives in groups of 3–10 birds. The groups maintain a territory during the breeding season. It is conspicuous and distinctive in appearance and the atlas data are reliable.

Habitat: It prefers deciduous broadleaved woodland during the breeding season and disperses into a wider range of habitats in the nonbreeding season, including *Acacia* savanna and suburban gardens, but not forest (Harris & Arnott 1988).

Movements: It is a resident which has local movements during winter. In some years these movements may be extensive, with irruptions of groups in places where they

are not usually found (Vernon 1977). For example, such irruptions have been documented for the years 1953, 1970 and 1979 (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

The reporting rates in Zones 5 and 6 peaked in winter and declined in summer, fluctuating dramatically for a bird not usually considered to be a migrant. These variations may have been partly because winter movements render it more conspicuous and take it into habitats with a greater density of observers in the east; Harris & Arnott (1988) stated that it moves into urban habitats during winter. Alternatively, the winter increase in reporting rates could represent a large-scale movement into the region from further north in Africa. The seasonal variation in reporting rates was less marked in Zone 1; the arid conditions of the Kalahari woodlands may limit the extent of their winter dispersion.

Breeding: In Zimbabwe, egg-laying has been recorded August–April, peaking September–October, and in the Transvaal September–January, peaking October–November (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The atlas data for Zones 5 and 6 show it breeding July–May and appear to confirm earlier breeding in the north. Late atlas records were probably of fledglings.

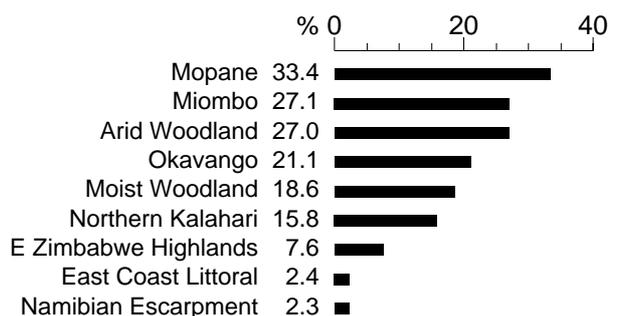
Interspecific relationships: The ranges of the White and Redbilled *P. retzii* Helmetshrikes overlap to a large extent and they are sometimes observed side by side, although the Redbilled Helmetshrike tends to prefer more densely wooded environments. Generally, the reporting rate of the White was twice that of the Redbilled Helmetshrike, but this may be due in part to the latter being less conspicuous. In the Okavango the White Helmetshrike was recorded marginally more frequently than the Redbilled Helmetshrike, and in Arid Woodland the White Helmetshrike was reported five times more frequently.

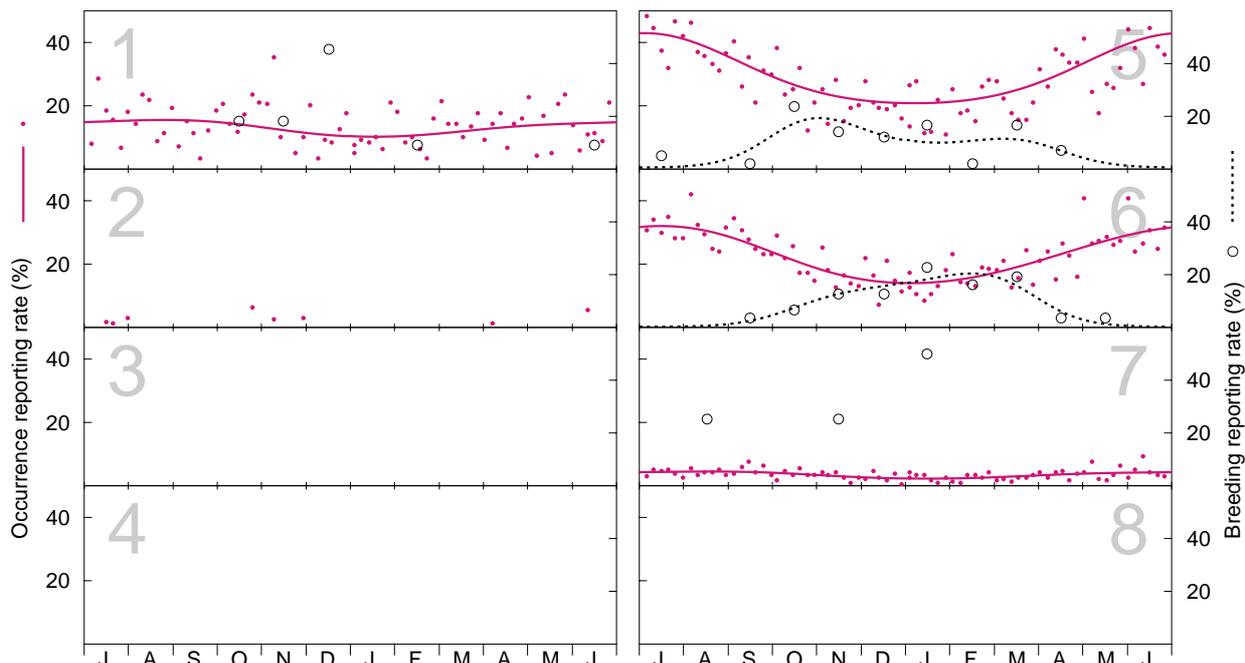
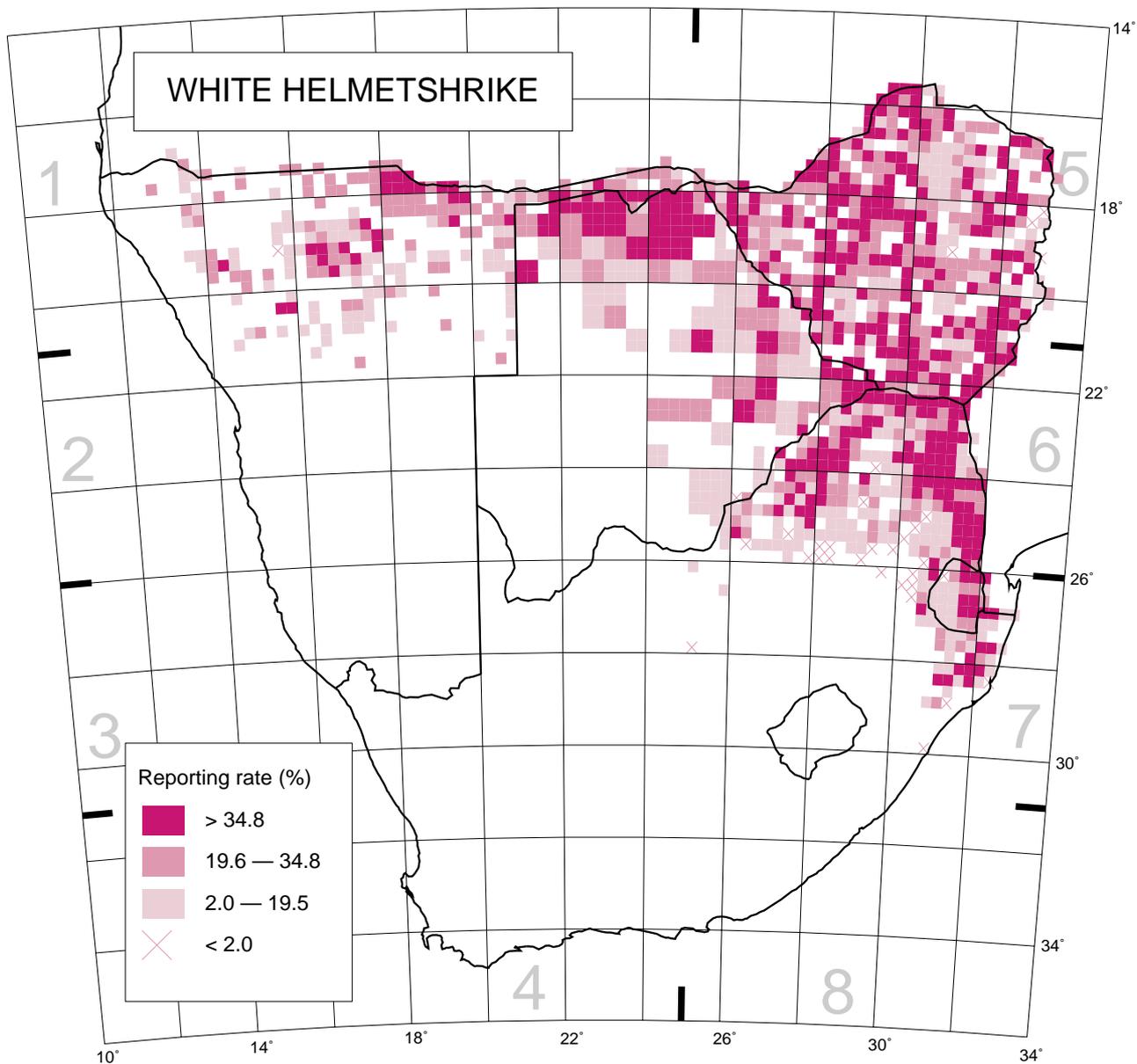
Historical distribution and conservation: There is no evidence to suggest that the range and status of the White Helmetshrike has changed significantly. It appears to have benefited somewhat from plantations and urban parks and gardens which are used as refuges during periods of drought.

C.J. Vernon and V. Parker

Recorded in 1304 grid cells, 28.7%
Total number of records: 12 228
Mean reporting rate for range: 24.2%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 447, 9, 0, 0, 2648, 2575, 681, 0; Breeding: 11, 0, 0, 0, 42, 31, 4, 0.