

Pied Starling

Witgatspreeu

Spreo bicolor

The only starling endemic to southern Africa south of the tropics, the Pied Starling is absent from the northern and eastern Transvaal (cf. Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), the eastern lowlands of KwaZulu-Natal, where it occurs primarily above 1200 m (Cyrus & Robson 1980), and the coastal belt of the Transkei (Quickelberge 1989). In the arid northern and northwestern Cape Province it is localized.

It is common to abundant, often forming large flocks and breeding in colonies; the reporting rates are amongst the highest for any species. It is familiar and distinctive and presents no identification problems.

Habitat: This is primarily a species of open Karoo and grassland habitats, also common on the open fields and pastures of agricultural areas, which probably accounts for its frequent occurrence in the Fynbos vegetation type. It is not found in wooded areas, nor in the most arid parts of the interior. Patterns of relative abundance are well defined but not easily explained. Topography would appear to play a role, with high reporting rates correlated with areas of broken ground and low reporting rates with featureless plains. The reporting rates along the Vaal and Orange rivers were also higher than those in surrounding areas. The availability of reedbeds and earth banks for roosting and nesting is likely to be a limiting factor on population densities. In the Drakensberg it is commonly found up to 2500 m (Bonde 1993).

Movements: As most populations appear to be sedentary, the small seasonal fluctuations in reporting rate are pre-

sumed to be an artefact of greater conspicuousness in agricultural areas during late winter and spring. The dip in reporting rates after breeding could relate to less conspicuous behaviour during moult.

Breeding: In the winter-rainfall area (mainly Zone 4), there is a pronounced spring peak, whereas in summer-rainfall regions more breeding occurs later in summer. This pattern is in accordance with nest record cards and other previous data (Craig 1983, 1987). Winterbottom (1968a) reported August–November egg-laying in the winter-rainfall region and November–March in the Karoo. In the Transvaal, egg-laying is throughout the year but mainly September–November (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

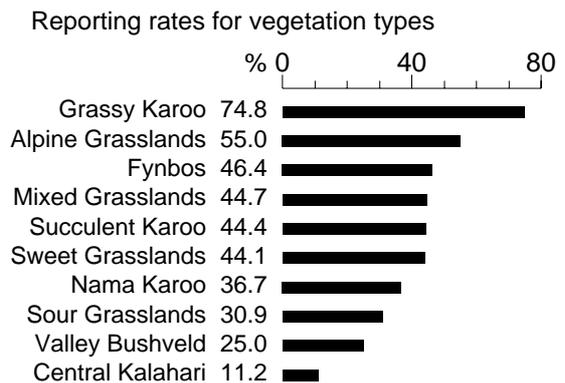
Interspecific relationships: Pied Starlings are often seen with Wattled Starlings *Creatophora cinerea*, particularly where small numbers of the latter are found in larger flocks of the former. Both feed primarily on the ground where they may be associated with European Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris*, Glossy Starlings *Lamprolornis nitens* and occasionally Redwinged Starlings *Onychognathus morio*. No aggressive interactions have been noted. Pied Starlings commonly roost in large flocks (>100 birds) in reedbeds, where they may join Wattled Starlings and *Ploceus* weavers. The Great Spotted Cuckoo *Clamator glandarius* is a brood parasite of the Pied Starling.

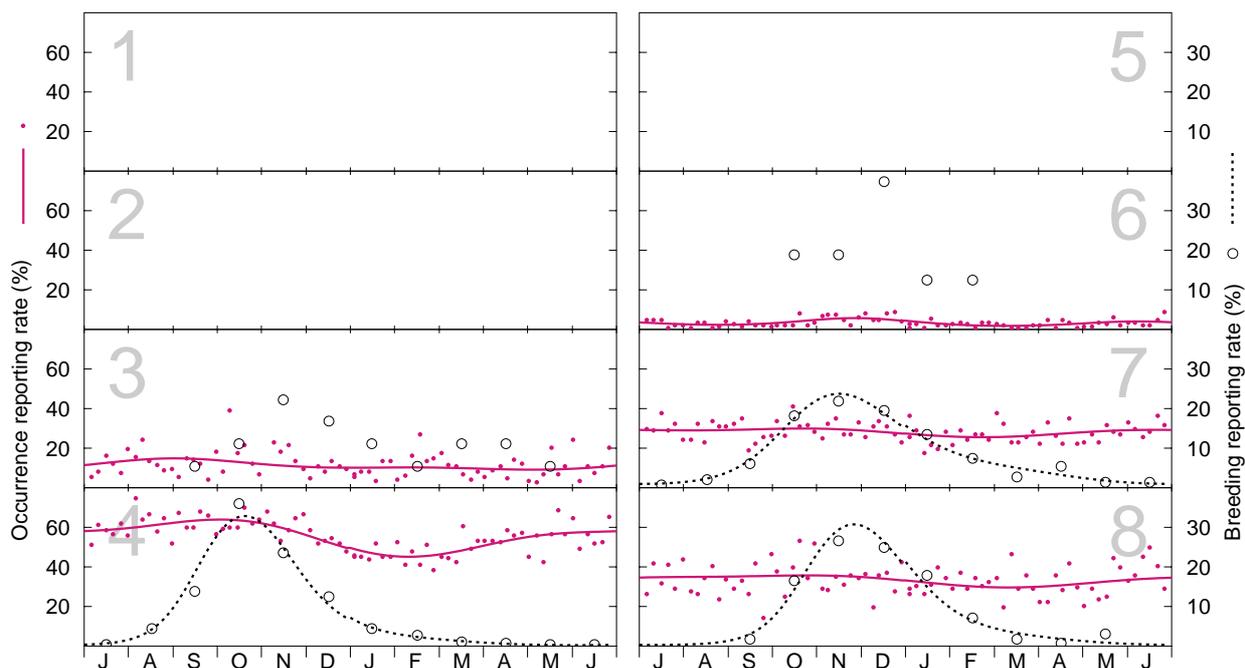
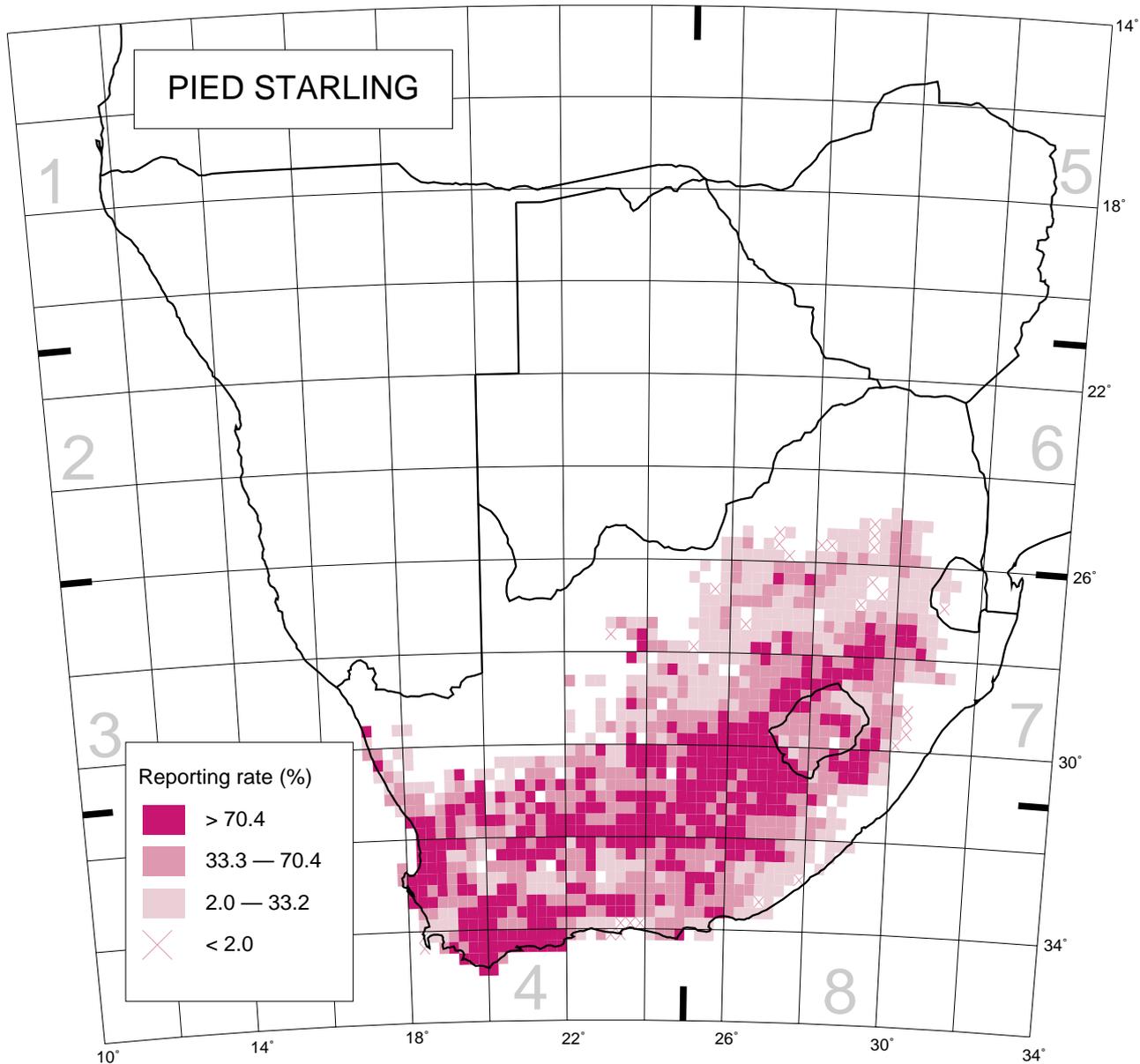
Historical distribution and conservation: It formerly nested on the Cape Peninsula (3418AB) but seems to have been displaced by increased urbanization. Competition with the introduced European Starling is unlikely to have been significant compared to the loss of open areas for foraging (cf. Hockey *et al.* 1989). There is no evidence that it formerly occurred to the north of its present limits. The distribution shown here includes more western outliers than the map in Craig (1985) and most of the gaps in the interior of the country have been filled in.

The Pied Starling is in no danger and is present in large numbers in many parts of its range. Loss of grassland habitat to agriculture does not displace it since it is common on farmland, and in these days of oxpecker-friendly dips for tick control, its habit of removing ticks from domestic stock poses little danger. It is still found in small rural towns but avoids extensive built-up areas. The present distributional limits were probably set by historical events in the biogeography of the region, rather than by any recent habitat changes.

A.J.F.K. Craig

Recorded in 1167 grid cells, 25.7%
Total number of records: 33 538
Mean reporting rate for range: 41.9%





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 0, 0, 626, 4872, 0, 380, 5516, 1830; Breeding: 0, 0, 18, 326, 0, 16, 256, 128.