

Redbilled Oxpecker

Rooibekrenostervoël

Buphagus erythrorhynchus

The Redbilled Oxpecker is distributed from Ethiopia to South Africa, but does not occur west of the White Nile. In southern Africa it is much more widespread and numerous than the Yellowbilled Oxpecker *B. africanus*, being common in most areas except the Cape Province, Free State, Lesotho and Namibia outside the Caprivi Strip. It is absent from arid areas with well-drained soils where no reliable sources of drinking water are available, such as most of the Kalahari and Namibia. This is the only oxpecker in the Zambezi Valley, most of Kruger National Park and the upper Limpopo catchment.

It has been the subject of translocations: unsuccessfully to Matobo National Park (2028) in 1975 (Grobler 1979); to Loskop Dam (2529AD) and the northern Transvaal in the 1980s; and to three places in the eastern Cape Province, including the Addo Elephant Park (3325B,D) in 1990 (Craig 1993c). Elephants are not hosts to Redbilled Oxpeckers, but the latter park has other host species, such as Buffalo *Syncerus caffer*. Many translocations were done in the 1990s into the interior of Zimbabwe, and it is also extending its range there naturally (Rockingham-Gill 1992). Translocations continue in South Africa (Lockwood 1995).

Three subspecies have been recognized in southern Africa: *B. e. scotinus* in the eastern lowlands, *caffer* in the upper Limpopo catchment, and *angolensis* in the Caprivi and Okavango (Clancey 1976b). The atlas data indeed indicate three centres of distribution corresponding with the subspecific ranges, and separated by areas of lower reporting rates.

Habitat: More catholic in its choice of vegetation types than the Yellowbilled Oxpecker, it uses hosts in a variety of woodlands, all in rainfall zones of more than 400 mm p.a. It also needs holes in trees for nesting (Stutterheim 1982a) and uses Ilala Palms *Hyphaene natalensis*, reedbeds and larger game to roost at night (Maclean 1993b). As its main food supply it

eats ticks on about 15 species of wild mammalian hosts, particularly Giraffe *Giraffa camelopardalis*, but healthy populations also exist where only livestock (mainly cattle and donkeys) is present. Several antelope, including Tsessebe *Damaliscus lunatus* and Waterbuck *Kobus ellipsiprymnus*, are not used as hosts (Buskirk 1975; Grobler 1980; Stutterheim 1980). It is a natural tick-control agent (Grobler 1980).

Movements: Among marked birds in the Kruger National Park, during a 22-month period, the maximum distance between marking and resighting was 8 km (Stutterheim 1981). However, longer movements must occur during natural range expansions. A translocated bird moved 87 km away from the place of release and another two flew back to the place of capture, one over a distance of 170 km (Lockwood 1995). The reporting rates vary considerably and are higher in the dry season in Zimbabwe and the Transvaal (Zones 5–6), but not in the Okavango (Zone 1); this probably relates to increased game-viewing activities in the dry season when game is concentrated near waterholes in the east, but not in the Okavango where the dry season coincides with peak flood-levels.

Breeding: Atlas data show a clear-cut wet season pattern only in the southern areas. Almost throughout the year, however, juveniles with brown bills (Stutterheim *et al.* 1976) can be seen begging from red-billed adults, and this may have resulted in 'dependent fledglings' having been recorded outside the breeding season. Egglaying data in the region span September–February (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Stutterheim 1982a; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Skinner 1995a).

Interspecific relationships: Marginally smaller than the Yellowbilled Oxpecker, it is submissive to the larger bird but is nevertheless usually more common. Both use the same range of hosts, but some specialization may occur locally, e.g. Giraffe is generally a key species for Redbilled Oxpecker and Buffalo for Yellowbilled Oxpecker (Attwell 1966; Buskirk 1975; Grobler 1980; Irwin 1981). The bill morphology differs between the species and it is assumed that they have different diets and feed differently (Attwell 1966; Stutterheim 1976; Grobler 1980), but studies have not yet fully explained their coexistence and wide overlap.

Historical distribution and conservation: There has been a range contraction eastwards in the Cape Province and southwestern Transvaal (Stutterheim 1982b). In the past, Redbilled Oxpeckers were vulnerable to arsenic-based 'purple-label' cattle dips. These poisoned and killed both the ticks and the oxpeckers that foraged on dipped cattle. With the use of oxpecker-friendly 'green-label' dips, it is now experiencing a recovery and there is no particular concern for the Redbilled Oxpecker at present.

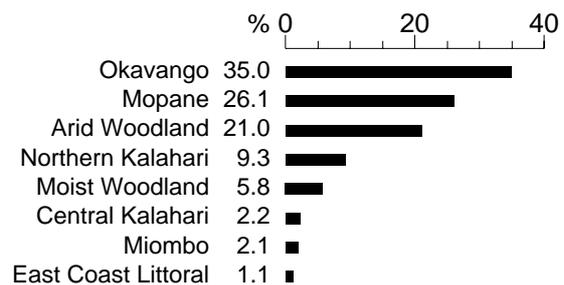
P.J. Mundy

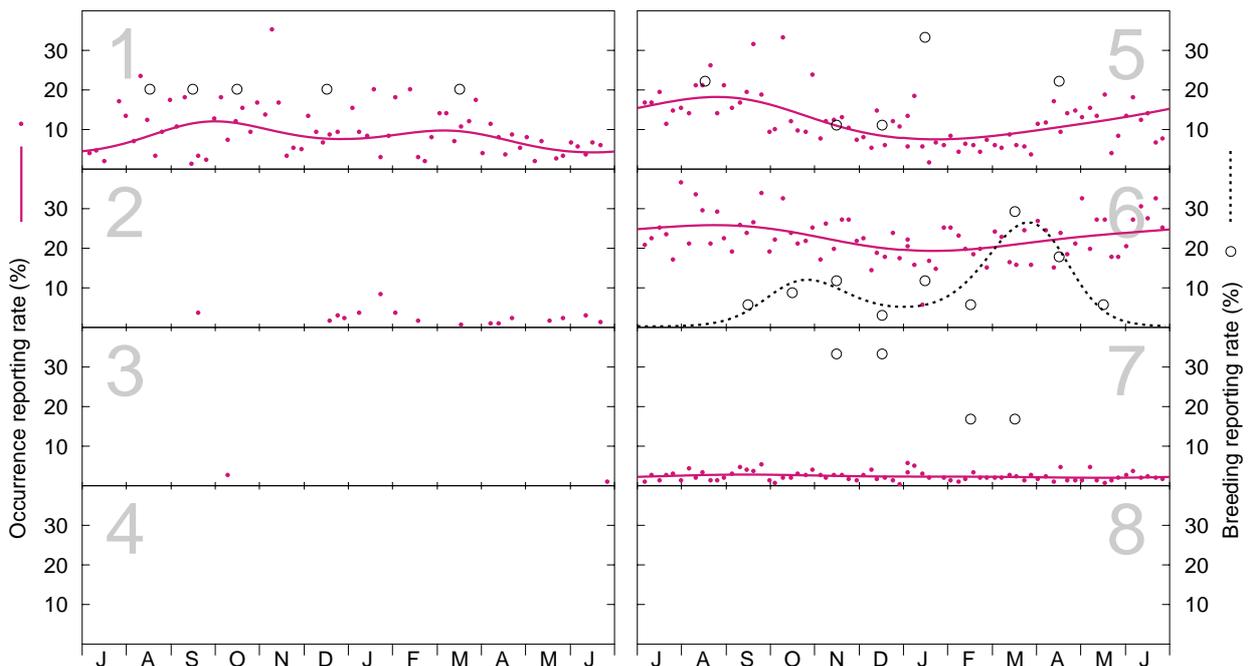
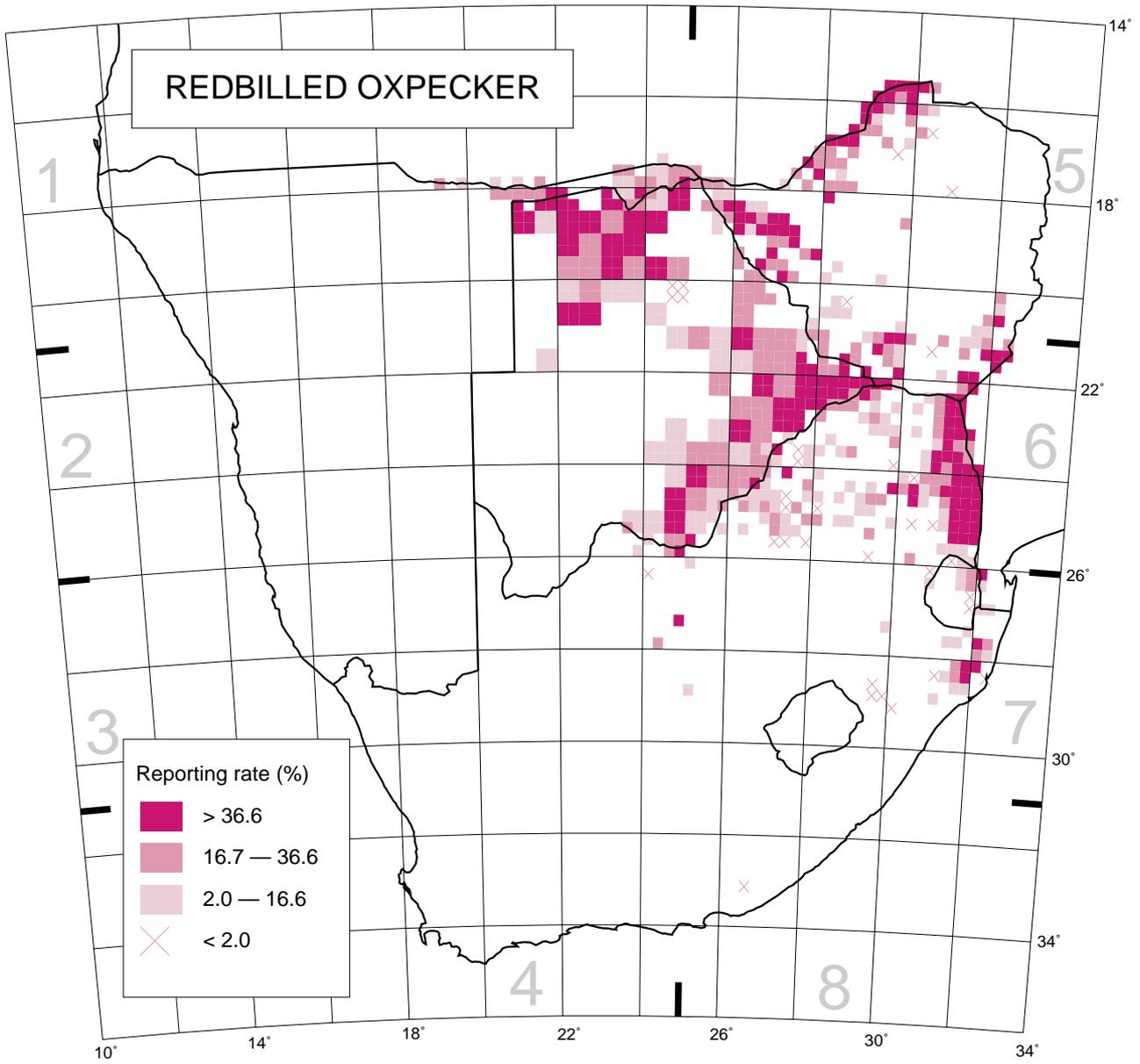
Recorded in 680 grid cells, 15.0%

Total number of records: 7279

Mean reporting rate for range: 31.2%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 265, 18, 2, 0, 1101, 2591, 464, 0; Breeding: 5, 0, 0, 0, 9, 34, 6, 0.