

## Scalyfeathered Finch

### Baardmannetjie

#### *Sporopipes squamifrons*

The Scalyfeathered Finch is near endemic to the southern African thornbelt. Its distribution follows that of other Kalahari-basin *Acacia* specialists, but with a broader tolerance, particularly extending into the more arid, open areas to the west and south of the Kalahari. It occurs from the northern Cape Province, through the northwestern Free State and the western Transvaal, southwest and central Zimbabwe, and throughout Botswana and Namibia, except in the coastal desert. There are apparently two well-isolated small populations in the eastern Cape Province interior, which might warrant taxonomic investigation.

A major stronghold lies in the southern and central Kalahari where an average density of 9 birds/ha was recorded in transect-counts in the Kutse Game Reserve (2424), while an average of 2.5 birds/ha was found in 19 transects in seven bushveld habitats in northern and eastern Botswana (unpubl. data). It is probably the most abundant bird in the Kalahari. It does not need to drink (Irwin 1956a; Willoughby & Cade 1967; Skead 1975a; Ginn *et al.* 1989) and might satisfy water needs from supplementation of the diet with termites (pers. obs). Independence from surface water has allowed it to be widespread and abundant, with a remarkably 'solid' distribution in the arid areas.

It occurs in small flocks throughout the year (Maclean 1993b), but flock size can increase in winter and during droughts. It is abundant, tame and confiding, and the atlas data are comprehensive.

**Habitat:** It prefers low, open thornbush – particularly *Acacia* – interspersed with grassy patches. There were high reporting rates in the three Kalahari biomes as well as all peripheral biomes with a major dry thornbush component (Namibian Escarpment, Moist Woodland, Mopane, Arid Woodland, Sweet Grasslands, Okavango, Nama Karoo and Namib). In the more arid areas to the west and south of the Kalahari, it accepts open areas with only a few low thickets.

**Movements:** No regular movements are documented and the atlas data did not reveal any clear pattern of movements in the region. However, on a local scale, large changes in numbers were noted during the 1992 drought: it increased on average from 5 to 36 birds/10 ha in a grassy region in the

northern Kalahari, while it disappeared almost entirely (340 to 1 birds/70 ha) from an overgrazed area in 2525A, indicating substantial nomadism under unfavourable conditions (pers. obs).

**Breeding:** Breeding records in the atlas were from throughout the year, which accords with published records (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Maclean 1993b; Skinner 1995a). In the more mesic eastern part of the region (Zones 5–8), breeding is predominantly protracted during spring and summer, parallel with most insectivorous birds and granivorous birds that feed their young with insects. The number of records from Zone 5 is low, but evidence for a bimodal breeding pattern in this Zone is also found in Irwin (1981). The records from the more arid southwestern parts of the range (Zones 2–4) are spread throughout the year, with a bimodal tendency; there is some breeding activity in spring and early summer (September–December) in phase

with insectivorous birds, and a larger breeding peak follows during the peak of seed abundance in the early dry season (March–June), more in phase with granivorous birds. The few records from the northwest (Zone 1) suggest that the dry-season peak of breeding is earlier (February–May) and breeding in spring and early summer appears to be reduced. It is unknown whether the bimodal pattern occurs each year or results from lumping records that refer to years with different veld conditions.

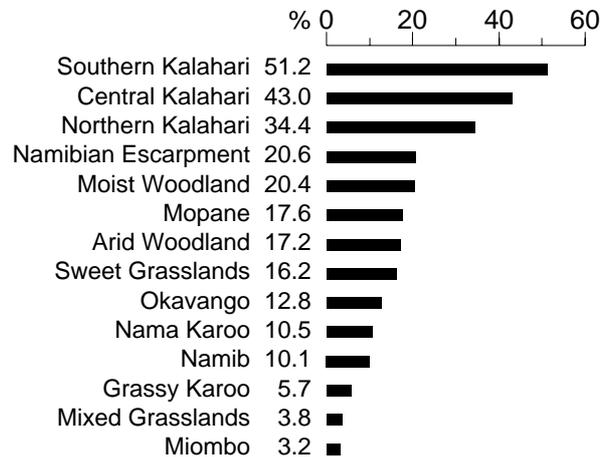
**Interspecific relationships:** Owing to its independence of surface water, it is one of the few granivorous species that can exploit the sometimes abundant seed crop in the arid areas, and this is probably the key to its success. It flocks regularly with estrilids, especially Violeteared Waxbills *Uraeginthus granatinus* and Blue Waxbills *U. angolensis*.

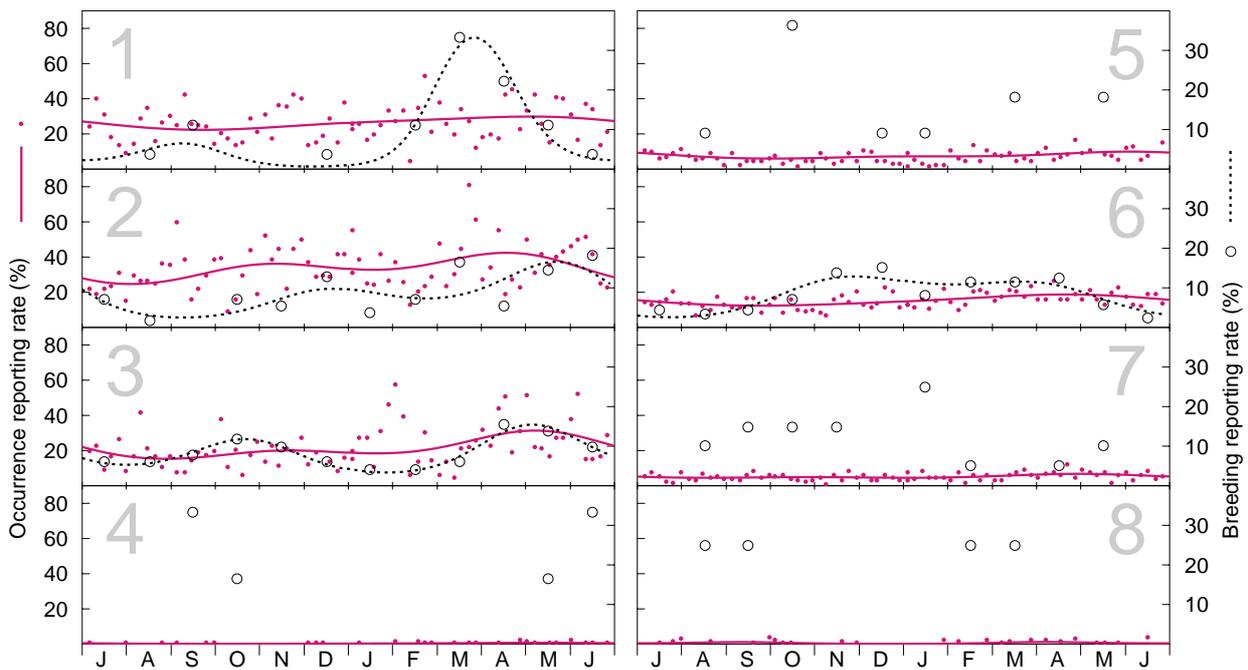
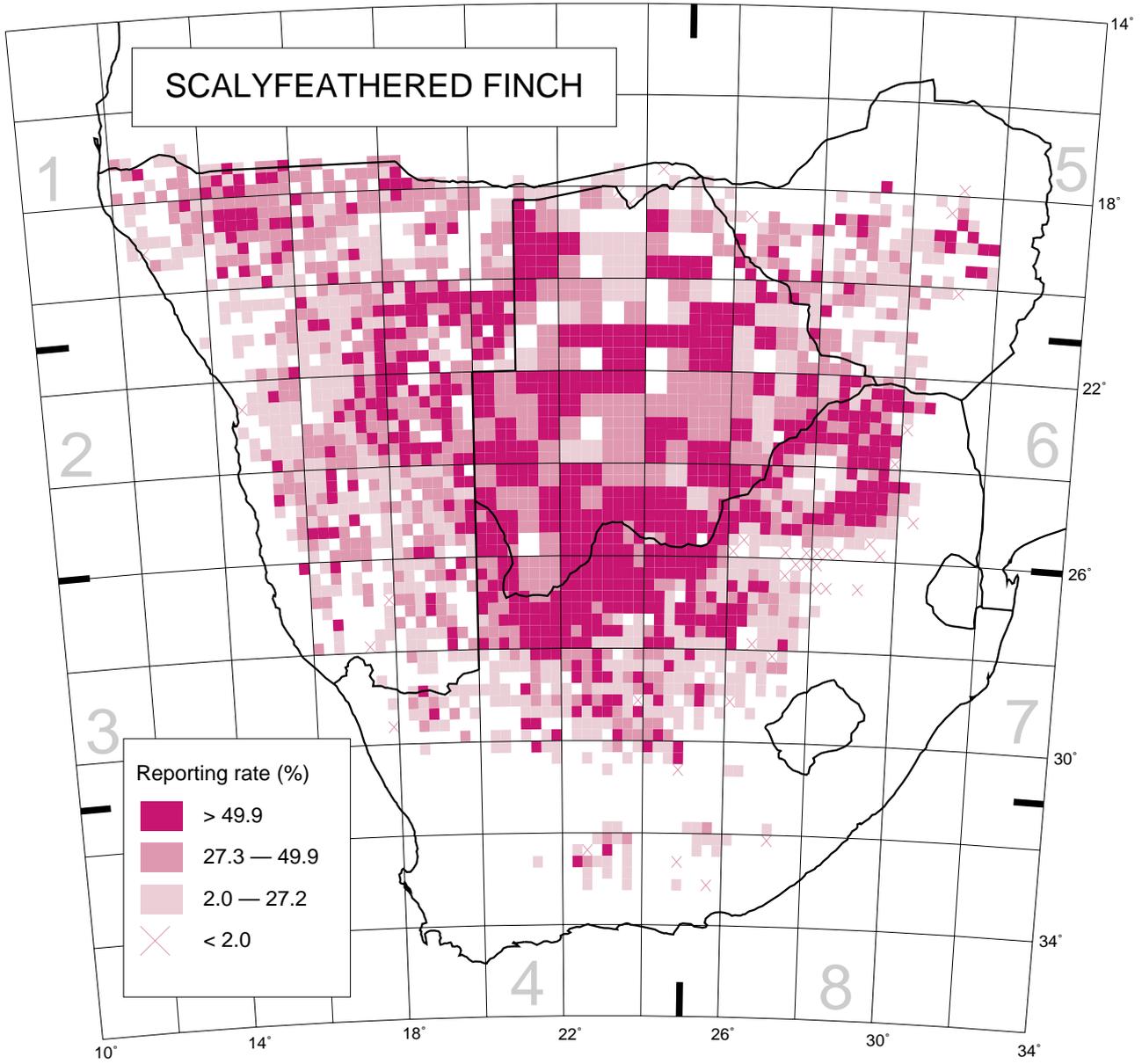
**Historical distribution and conservation:** The historical range is not known to differ from the atlas data. The Scalyfeathered Finch is an abundant bird which responds positively to thornbush encroachment as a result of overgrazing, currently the most widespread modification of its Kalahari habitat.

*M. Herremans*

Recorded in 2337 grid cells, 51.5%  
Total number of records: 14 026  
Mean reporting rate for range: 26.0%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 882, 1230, 1209, 34, 663, 1753, 1025, 34; Breeding: 27, 55, 51, 6, 11, 87, 20, 4.