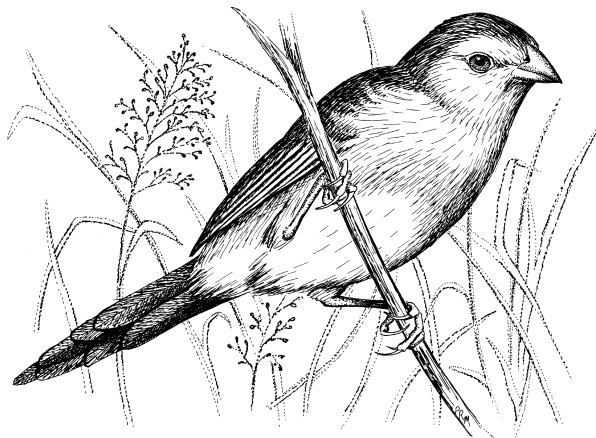




Blue Waxbill

Gewone Blousysie

Uraeginthus angolensis

The Blue Waxbill is a small estrildid of semi-arid and mesic savannas and woodlands, especially *Acacia tortilis* savanna. Despite association with *Acacia*, it is most widespread in the moister eastern parts of the subcontinent with rainfall about 400–800 mm p.a. Beyond the atlas region it occurs from Angola to Tanzania (Maclean 1993b). It is found throughout Zimbabwe, northeastern South Africa, and eastern Swaziland, and reaches westwards through northern Botswana and Namibia. It is scarce or absent in the higher parts of the eastern escarpment in South Africa.

Four subspecies have been described from the region, of which *U. a. angolensis* in northern Namibia and *cyanopleurus* in northern Botswana have somewhat isolated population centres.

In open *Acacia–Dichrostachys* savanna on the Nyl floodplain (2428DB), 0.25–0.75 breeding pairs/ha were found in census plots (Barnard & Markus 1991; P.B. unpubl. data). Skead (1975b) noted qualitatively higher densities in 'short and dense' thorn savanna than in open savanna with thickets. The southern African population must number in the hundreds of thousands or even low millions, as R.M. Harwin (in Ginn *et al.* 1989) saw flocks totalling between 5000–10 000 birds on a 50-km transect driven in the northern Transvaal, presumably during the nonbreeding season.

Misidentification is unlikely, as the Blue Waxbill is allopatric with its nearest congener, the Redcheeked Cordon-bleu *U. bengalus*. However, the hypothesis that these species diverged only recently (Hall & Moreau 1970; Goodwin 1982) is strongly supported by rare phenotypic reversions in which male Blue Waxbills show scarlet cheek feathering like that of male cordon-bleus (Kelsey & Barnard 1988). Confusion could thus occur in the atlas region, but the incidence of this aberrant feathering is very low (Kelsey & Barnard 1988; M.H. pers. obs).

Habitat: It needs to drink regularly and its distribution clearly reflects areas of reliable availability of surface water: e.g. the sharp border in eastern Botswana follows the boundary between well-drained Kalahari sands in the west and poorly drained hardveld with springs and rivers in the east. Scattered records in the dry areas mostly reflect small populations occurring near boreholes.

Although many accounts in the literature describe it favouring arid thorn savannas, the distribution map shows that it is most widespread in the moister north and east, thus being absent from a significant part of the thornbelt, but this anomaly is explained by water availability. Tarboton

et al. (1987b) noted its occurrence 'in virtually any non-forested wooded habitat in the savanna areas'. Blue Waxbills do occur in extremely diverse habitats, even along the west-flowing rivers of hyper-arid western Namibia.

Movements: It appears to be resident in areas with more than about 400 mm rainfall p.a., but may move nomadically in the winter and spring, particularly following periods of low rainfall. The models suggests this only very weakly. For example, a small isolated population moved into eastern Windhoek (2217CA) between July–March during most years, with newly independent juveniles being ringed in mid-January (P.B. unpubl. data). After March the birds leave for autumn/winter, presumably to the moister northeast. Many birds are retrapped in the same place in subsequent years (see also Skead 1975b).

Breeding: Breeding is in mid- to late summer, autumn and early winter, depending on local rainfall (peaking December–April). Peak breeding appears to occur progressively earlier with increasing latitude (from Zone 5 to Zone 7), but Irwin (1981) indicated earlier peak breeding (October–April) than recorded during the atlas for Zone 5 (January–May); this may reflect drier years and later onset of rains. Spring breeding may occur in the moister eastern areas where suitable grass for food and nest-building remains available from the previous rains. The yearly occurrence of breeding is highly variable dependent on rainfall and in the drier areas significant breeding only occurs in normal to wet years (Herremans 1995b).

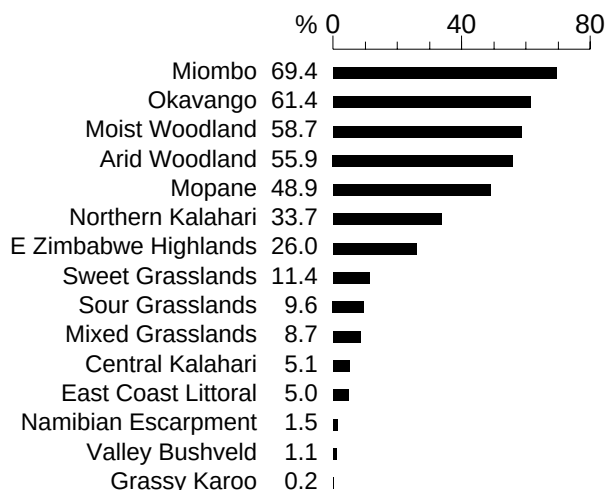
Interspecific relationships: On two occasions in March 1996, evidence of brood parasitism by the Shafttailed Whydah *Vidua regia* was observed in the Sandveld Nature Reserve (2725D) (R.J. Nuttall unpubl. data).

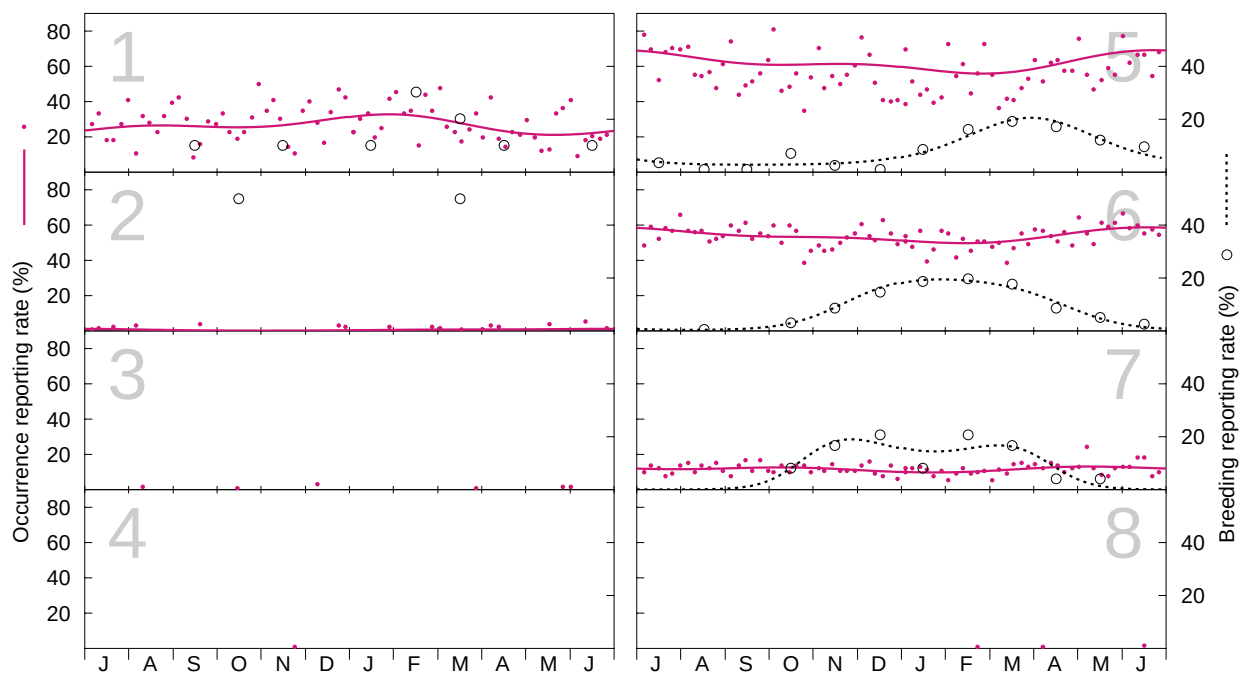
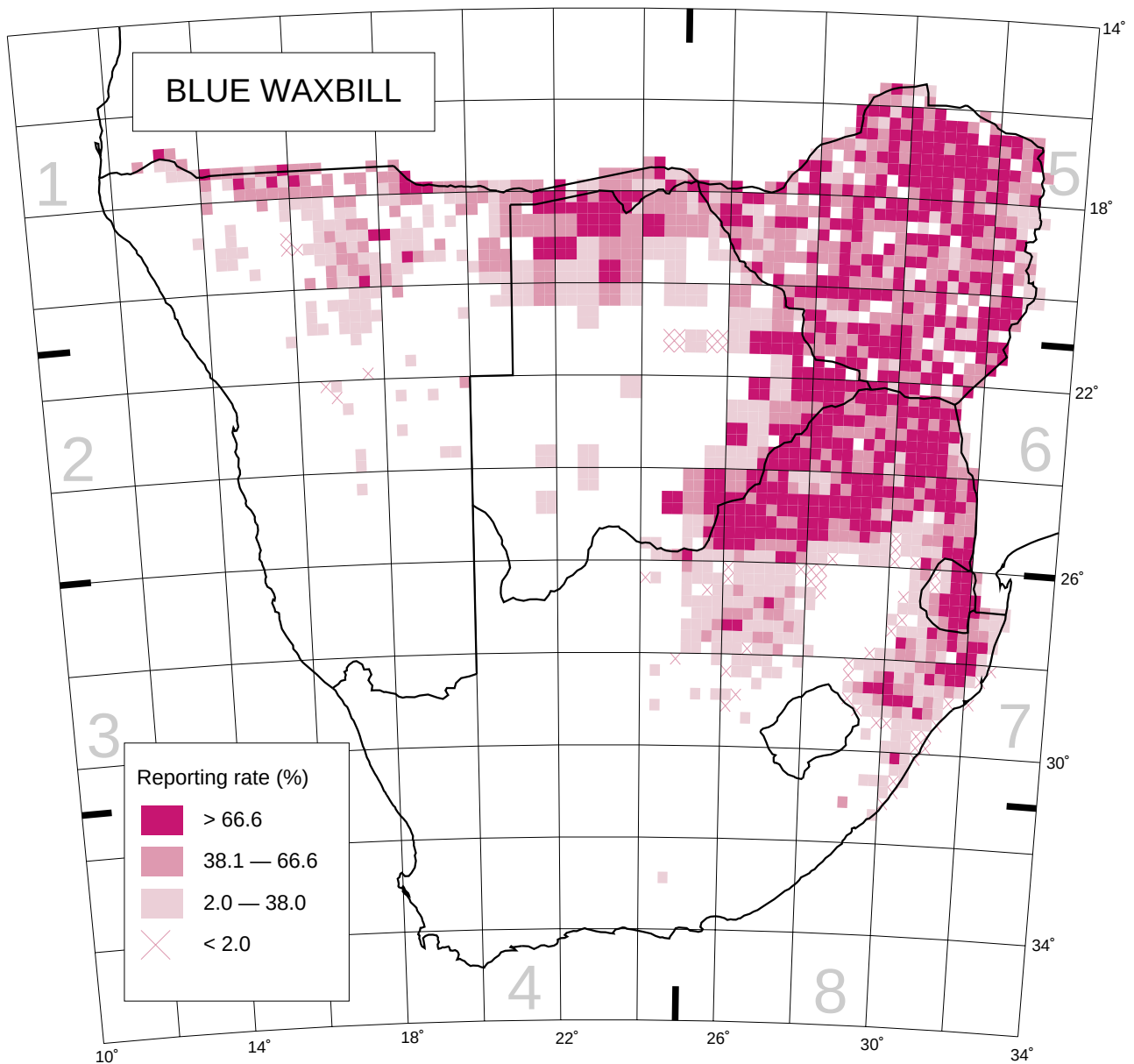
Historical distribution and conservation: No changes from the past distribution are known. Droughts reduce populations considerably and in the drier areas overgrazing may locally deprive it of food and suitable grasses for nest-building. The Blue Waxbill is common, and in Botswana it is extensively exploited for the cage-bird trade. Illegal catching may occur throughout the region.

P. Barnard and M. Herremans

Recorded in 1679 grid cells, 37.0%
Total number of records: 29 696
Mean reporting rate for range: 38.8%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right): Occurrence: 856, 26, 6, 1, 5424, 6151, 2283, 3; Breeding: 10, 2, 0, 0, 82, 134, 24, 0.