



Common Waxbill

Rooibeksysie

Estrilda astrild

The Common Waxbill is a widespread and adaptable estrildid which ranges throughout sub-Saharan Africa in many mesic habitats (Hall & Moreau 1970). Its southern African distribution is concentrated in the Afromontane and coastal zones but not restricted to them: it is nearly ubiquitous in South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe, avoiding only areas without surface water or rank vegetation. It also occurs patchily across Namibia and Botswana along river lines or in towns and villages where artificial waterworks or watered, unnaturally lush vegetation are found. Strongholds are apparent in Swaziland, southern KwaZulu-Natal and over most of the northern and eastern Transvaal. No density estimates are available, but of 331 birds mist-netted in the pre-breeding season from a resident population in the Sedgfield estuary (3422BB) in July–September of 1985 and 1986, 207 birds were retrapped locally (Barnard 1988).

Six subspecies have been admitted for the region (Clancey 1980b), of which *E. a. ngamiensis* from the Okavango, Caprivi and western Zimbabwe, and *damarensis* from the northwestern Cape Province and most of western Namibia, have rather isolated ranges.

It is highly gregarious, usually occurring in flocks of up to 30–50 birds (Maclean 1993b; Penry 1994). Misidentification is unlikely in our region, with the possible exception of confusion with the male Orangebreasted Waxbill *Sporaeeginthus subflavus* or the Blackcheeked Waxbill *E. erythronotos* in poor light, so the atlas data are reliable.

Habitat: This waxbill is absent from hyper-arid desert and thick forest, but occurs in rank grasslands, reedbeds, croplands, coastal estuaries, inland wetlands and dams, suburban gardens, sewage works, farmsteads, edge habitats and along ephemeral and permanent rivers. Particularly in the drier areas it occurs mostly in or near wetlands (e.g. the distribution along the Orange and Vaal rivers). Populations are localized and possibly isolated in the drier areas (Ginn *et al.* 1989); in Namibia small populations occur even along the major west-flowing ephemeral rivers through the Namib Desert to the Skeleton Coast. The vegetation analysis shows the diverse range of biomes occupied, but is misleading in that the link with localized patches of rank wetland vegetation is not explicit.

Movements: There is no firm evidence for seasonal movements in the models. Although reporting rates dip slightly in mid- to late winter in several Zones, this is likely to be the result of seasonal changes in flocking behaviour and foraging range. Common Waxbills are regarded as resident throughout their range (Maclean 1993b), wandering only in times of severe drought (Ginn *et al.* 1989).

Breeding: Atlas data indicate breeding mostly December–April in the summer-rainfall areas (Zones 5–8), avoiding the dry winter months of June–September, which is in agreement with previously published data (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), except that data for KwaZulu-Natal (Zone 7) (Dean 1971) indicate that significant breeding can occur in November. In the winter-rainfall area of the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4), it breeds mainly September–December, with records extending into May (cf. Winterbottom

1968a).

Although it is closely associated with less seasonal environments, such as permanent water and human habitation, it remains dependent on seasonally available seeding grass heads and insects, for nestbuilding and food (pers. obs).

Interspecific relationships: The Common Waxbill is the primary host of the Pintailed Whydah *Vidua macroura*. The ranges of the two species coincide closely, although the waxbill is apparently better able to colonize dry areas of the Karoo, northern Cape Province and Namibia.

Historical distribution and conservation: No data exist on its historical range. The Common Waxbill is not regarded as threatened, although destruction and degradation of wetlands throughout the region reduces available habitat.

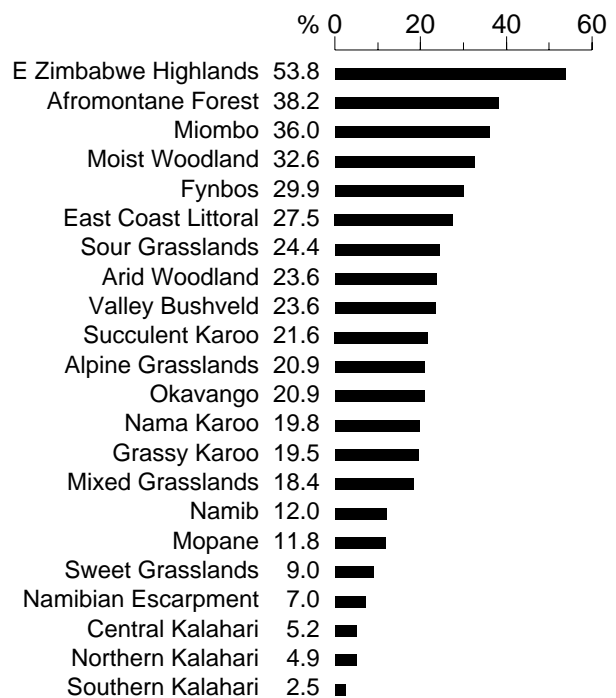
P. Barnard

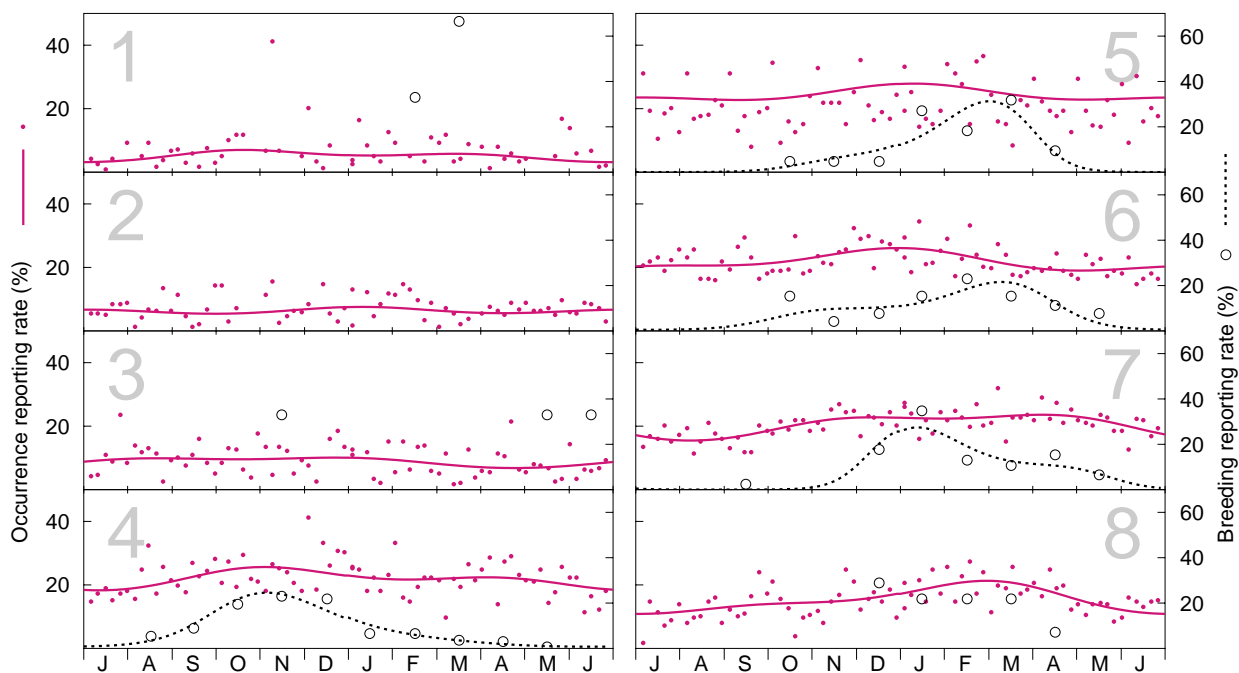
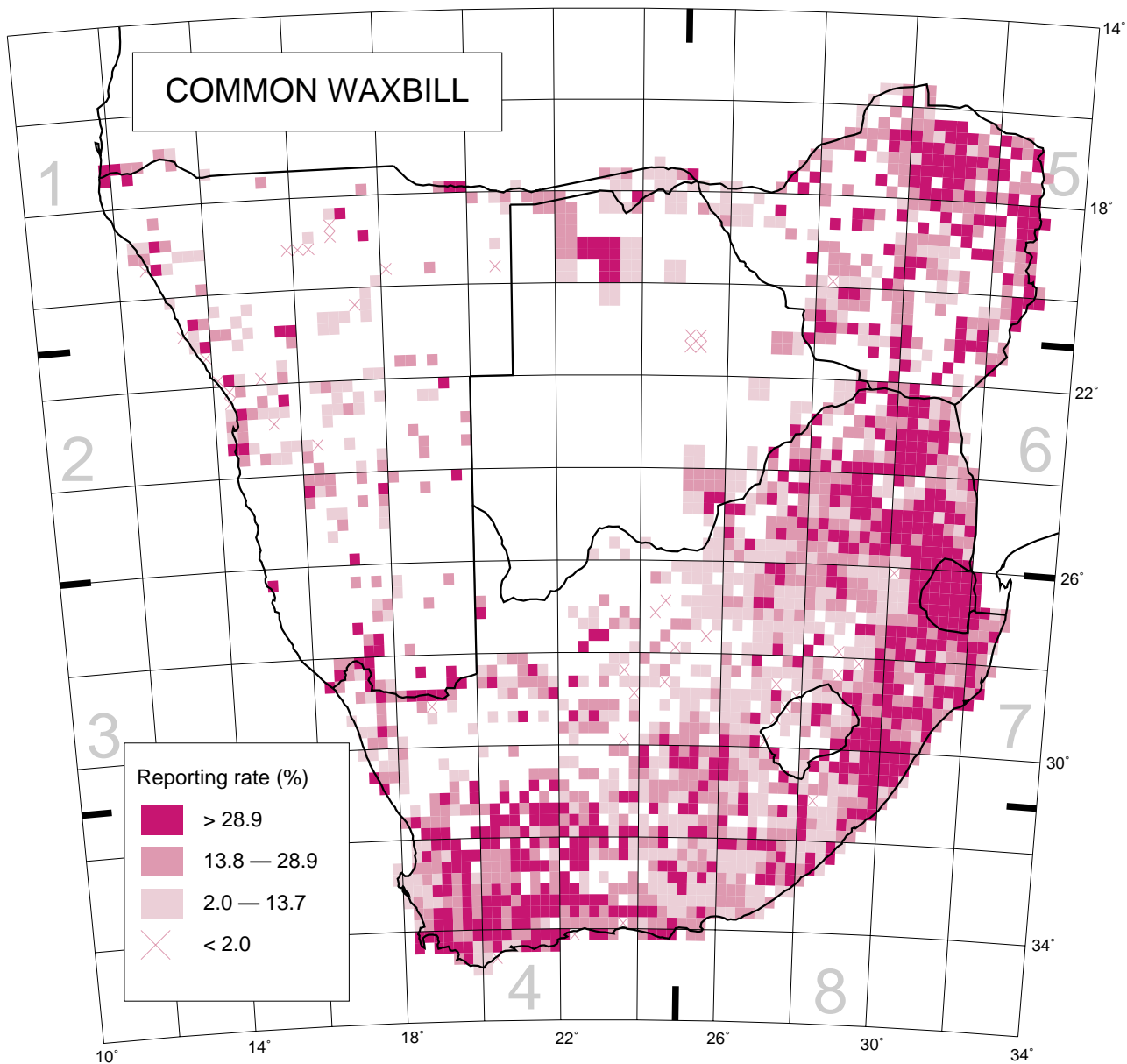
Recorded in 2044 grid cells, 45.1%

Total number of records: 33 834

Mean reporting rate for range: 26.2%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 168, 227, 485, 1916, 2130, 2493, 4024, 846; Breeding: 3, 0, 3, 108, 22, 26, 46, 14.