

Black Widowfinch

Gewone Blouvinkie

Vidua funerea

The Black Widowfinch is an uncommon, small viduid finch, restricted to the moister eastern parts of the atlas region, and East Africa. It ranges from the southeastern Cape Province northwards into the central Transvaal, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. There are no density estimates from southern Africa, but Payne & Groschupf (1984) included a map from Cameroon showing active call-sites of breeding males *c.* 125 m apart. Their removal experiments indicated an apparently significant pool of 'floater males'. The population in Swaziland was estimated at 15 000 (Parker 1994).

Identification of widowfinches has been a difficult task, especially in the period of taxonomic confusion that prevailed until recent work (e.g. Payne 1973, 1982; Payne *et al.* 1992; Payne 1996). In particular, confusion between the Black Widowfinch and the recently separated Green Widowfinch *V. codringtoni*, previously regarded as conspecific, probably affected the quality and interpretation of atlas data. Even experienced observers find identification of species in this group difficult, unless they are familiar with the mimetic songs and parasite–host relationships as well as visual traits. Females and nonbreeding males of different widowfinch species are extremely similar and do not sing, so records based on them are especially unreliable. All records of the Black Widowfinch from the Okavango and Caprivi have been rejected because they almost certainly refer to the pale-billed form of the Steelblue Widowfinch *V. chalybeata* which occurs in this area and is difficult to distinguish from the Black Widowfinch on plumage features (Payne 1973, 1996).

Habitat: Infrequently recorded even in the coastal plains and low-lying moist woodlands that form the core of its range, it is a bird of edge habitats. Maclean (1993b) reported it from grassy hillsides and roadsides, agricultural margins and gardens set in savanna and open woodland. In the Transvaal it occurs at the edges of montane and riverine forests, plantations and orchards (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Males appear to favour prominent call-sites with grassy areas adjacent to weedy or rank vegetation, also the preferred habitat of its host. The vegetation analysis illustrates its preference for moist areas with forest–grassland ecotones.

Movements: It is easily overlooked except when males are in breeding plumage and the model reflects this seasonality. Both Ginn *et al.* (1989) and Tarboton *et al.* (1987b) assumed that it is resident, with only local movements, but Maclean (1993b) regarded it as a winter nomad. Elliott & Jarvis (1973) reported movements of 4 km and 15 km from the ringing site between breeding seasons. In the eastern Cape Province it occurs erratically in summer (A.J. Tree *in litt.*).

Breeding: The atlas breeding records were in summer and autumn. A few egg-laying records (Dean 1971; Maclean 1993b), and females with yolky or hard-shelled follicles collected by Payne (1977), indicate breeding January–April. Its host, the Bluebilled Firefinch *Lagonosticta rubricata*, breeds November–April (Maclean 1993b).

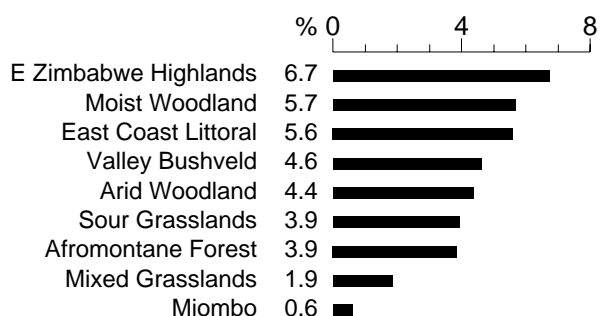
Interspecific relationships: It is a brood parasite of the Bluebilled Firefinch *Lagonosticta rubricata*.

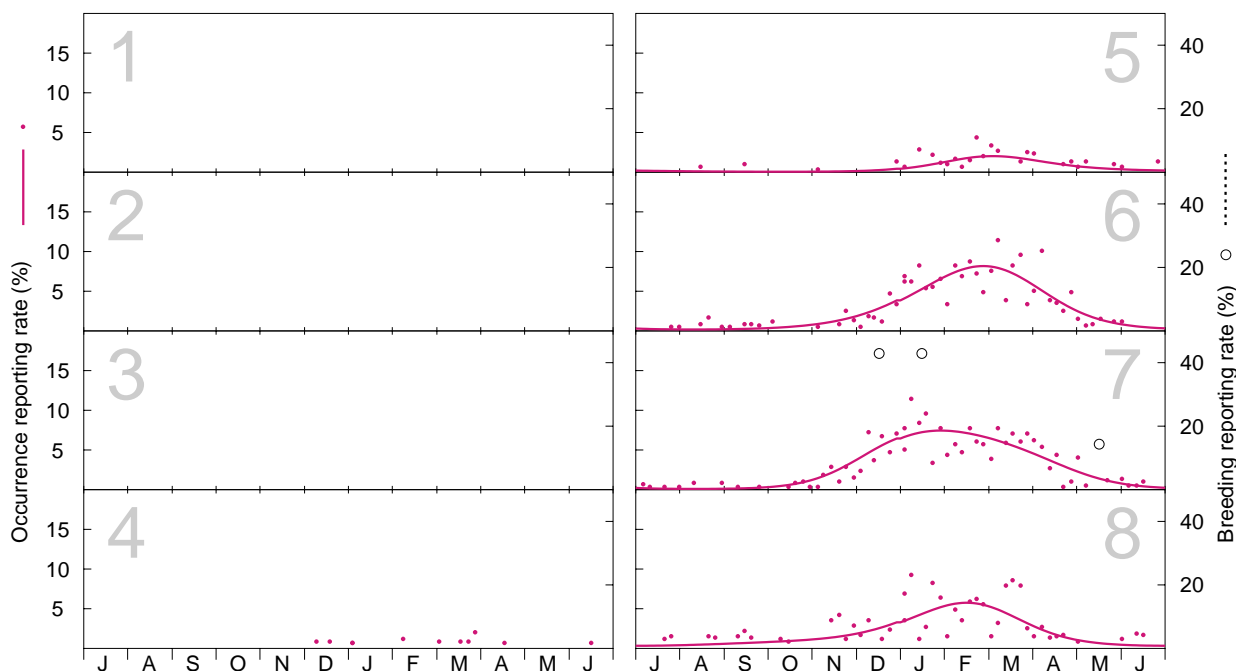
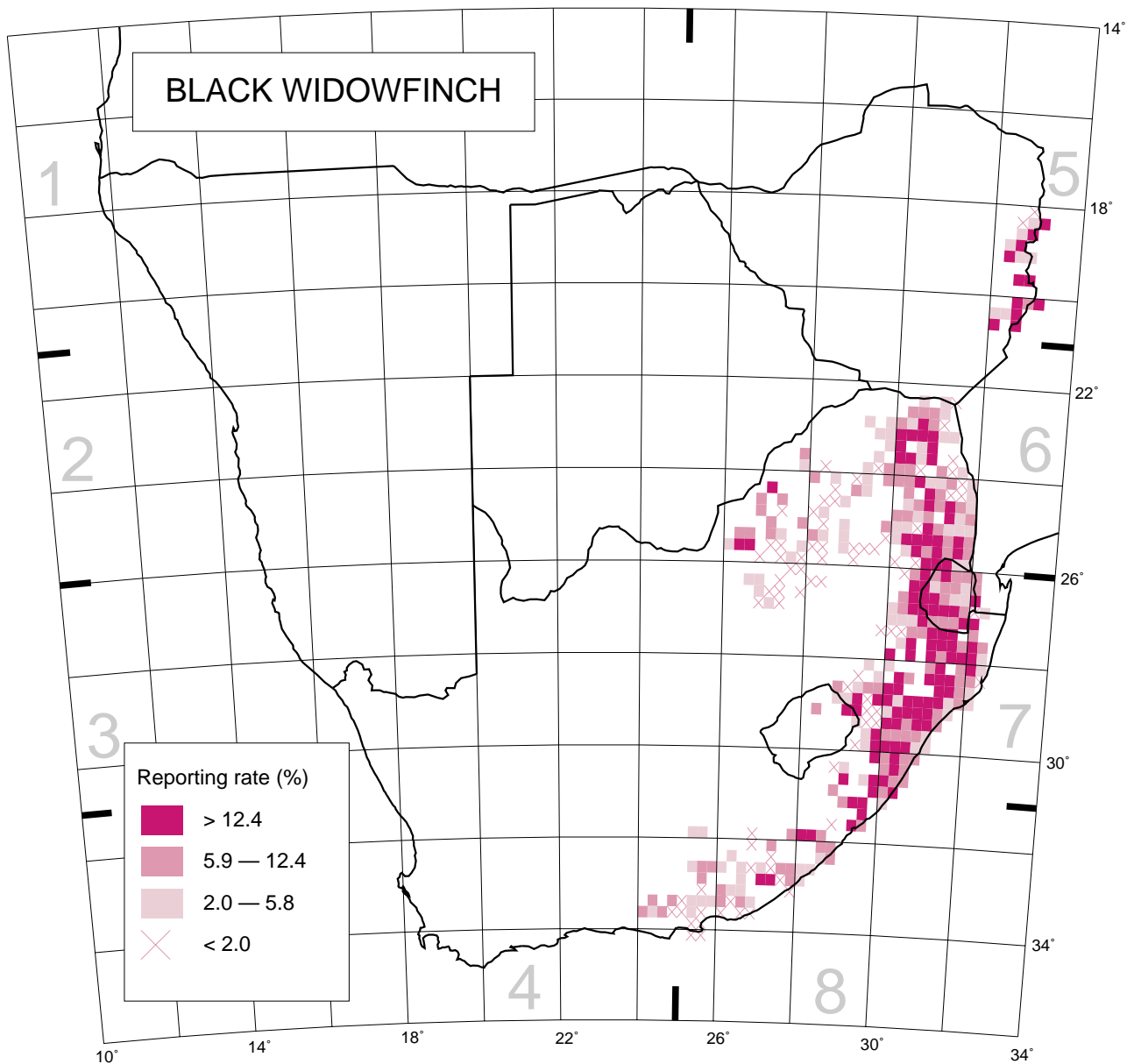
Historical distribution and conservation: The past distribution is not known to have differed from the present. Historical data on widowfinches are, in any case, confounded by the taxonomic complexities of this genus. The Black Widowfinch is unlikely to be of conservation concern, relying as it does on a common host in edge habitats, gardens and agricultural land, although its overall range is restricted.

P. Barnard

Recorded in 420 grid cells, 9.3%
Total number of records: 3423
Mean reporting rate for range: 6.6%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 0, 0, 0, 13, 50, 305, 557, 107; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 7, 0.