

Darter

Slanghalsvoël

Anhinga melanogaster

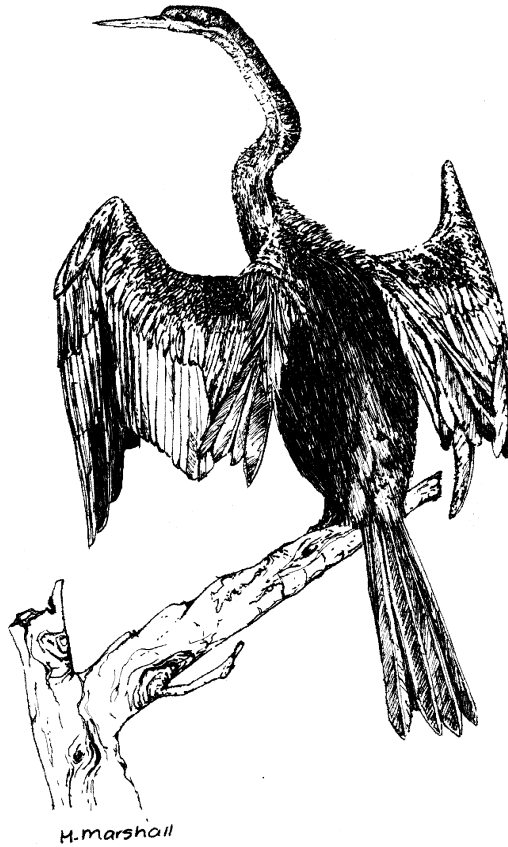
The Darter occurs in Africa south of the Sahara, in Madagascar, the Middle East, India to southeast Asia and Australia (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). Its southern African stronghold is in the Okavango Delta; elsewhere the highest reporting rates are mainly in the mesic eastern and southern parts. There is a striking band of occurrence across the arid interior along the Orange River, especially in the Richtersveld (2817A) and Fish River Canyon areas (2717DA). Allan & Jenkins (1993) counted 206 Darters along a 160-km section of the lower Orange River; it was the most abundant of 25 species of waterbird recorded. In central Namibia it is associated mainly with impoundments. It is largely absent from the high-altitude areas of Lesotho. The fragmented distribution in parts of the northern Transvaal and western Zimbabwe is due to the scarcity of suitable waterbodies in these woodland habitats.

Habitat: It occurs on freshwater wetlands, rivers and streams, provided they are stocked with fish. It generally avoids fast-flowing and turbulent water. It has adapted to artificial wetlands, rapidly colonizing dams and sewage works (Williams & Randall 1995).

Movements: Extensive seasonal differences in numbers have been recorded at various localities in southern Africa. At two large impoundments in Zimbabwe, numbers peak December–January and decrease to a low in the dry season, April–August (Junor 1969; Junor & Marshall 1987; Hustler 1991b). At Barberspan (2625DA) in the Transvaal, numbers are low December–January and peak May–June (Skead & Dean 1977). At the Wilderness Lakes complex (3322DC), and the Berg River estuary (3218CC), numbers peak in winter and reach a minimum in summer (Boshoff *et al.* 1991a; Velasquez *et al.* 1991). Williams & Randall (1995) suggested that birds move to coastal wetlands in winter when seasonal wetlands in the interior dry out. The pattern of these differences in number is not reflected in the models. This may be due to recording presence/absence rather than actual numbers of birds, though it indicates that such movements are only partial.

Breeding: There are breeding records for all Zones. In the northeastern Zones 5 and 6, breeding occurs throughout the year. Irwin (1981) recorded egg-laying in all months, but with the same slight bimodality as portrayed in the model for Zone 5, with peaks near the beginning and end of the summer rains. In Zone 7, in the summer-rainfall area, breeding activity coincides with the wet season; in the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4) breeding peaks at the end of the winter rains, but extends through summer.

Interspecific relationships: Its distribution in the interior of southern Africa is similar to that of the Reed *Phalacrocorax africanus* and Whitebreasted *P. carbo* Cormorants. The three species feed in similar ways on the same prey base. The Darter is ecologically separated from both cormorants by



its buoyancy and feeding behaviour (Hustler 1991b, 1992b). Although the Darter is traditionally considered to be closely allied to the cormorants (Phalacrocoracidae), closer examination of its foraging behaviour (Hustler 1991b) and its genetic relationships (Sibley & Alquist 1988) shows it to be more closely related to the herons (Ardeidae) than the cormorants.

Historical distribution and conservation: It has probably benefited from the construction of dams and their stocking with fish across the whole subcontinent. This is well illustrated in the arid interior and in Namibia in particular, where its occurrence coincides with suitable impoundments. The current distribution is therefore probably wider than that of the past.

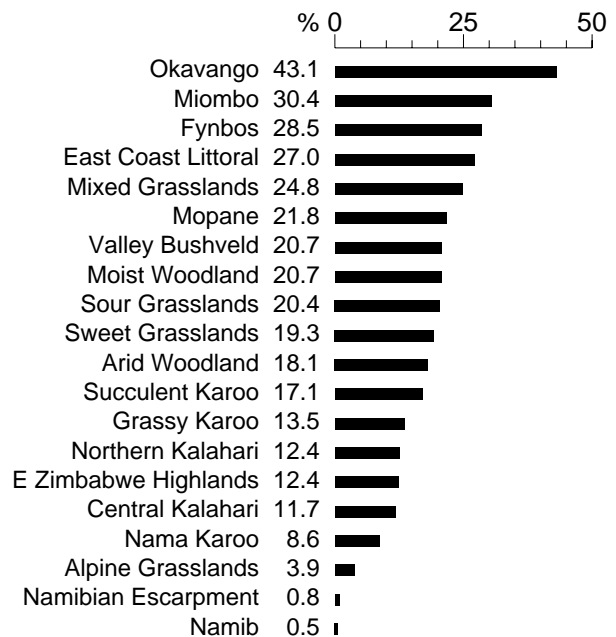
However, it is impacted by loss of wetlands and degradation of river systems. It may be vulnerable to DDT and its metabolites, such as in the Zambezi River system where the Reed Cormorant is known to be at risk (Douthwaite *et al.* 1992) and the

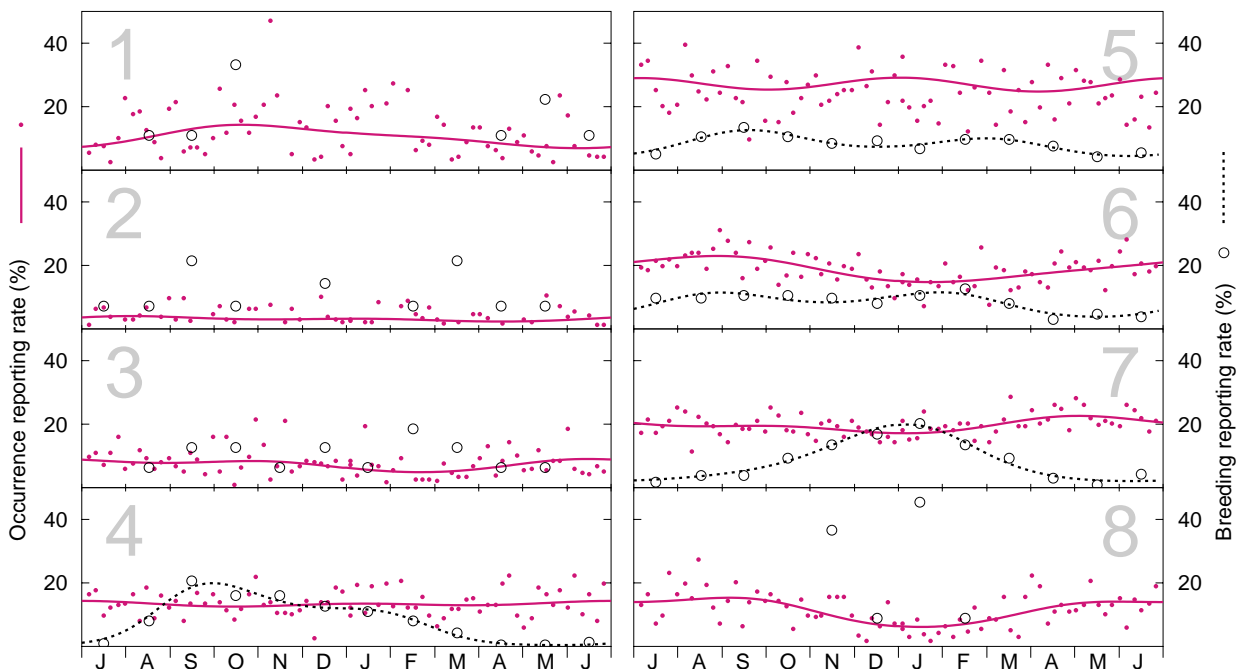
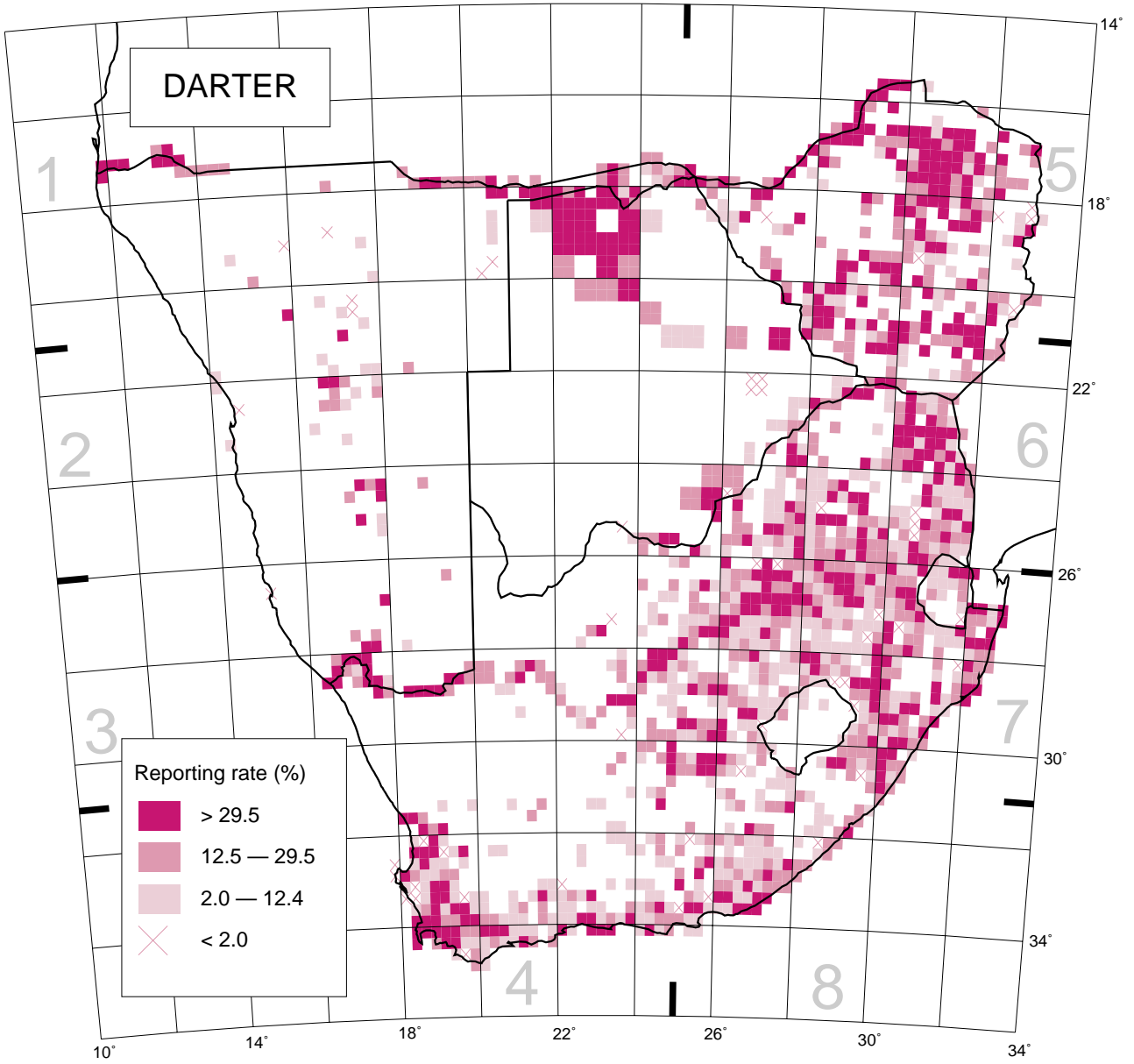
Darter preys on the same fish species (Birkhead 1978; Hustler 1995). It is seen as a pest by some fish-farmers who sometimes illegally shoot it and destroy its breeding sites. However, it also feeds on the minnow *Barbus anoplus*, which competes with trout for food (Alletson 1985; Williams & Randall 1995).

C.W. Hustler

Recorded in 1522 grid cells, 33.5%
Total number of records: 29 933
Mean reporting rate for range: 25.7%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 335, 112, 408, 1162, 2356, 2136, 3840, 632; Breeding: 9, 14, 16, 219, 144, 126, 162, 11.