

Little Bittern

Woudapie

Ixobrychus minutus

This generally uncommon species is represented by two subspecies in southern Africa: the nominate race breeds in the Palearctic and is present mainly in the eastern half of Africa during the austral summer; the subspecies *I. m. payesii* breeds through most of sub-Saharan Africa but is rare in the southern part of the range, with an estimated 100 pairs in South Africa (Brown *et al.* 1982; Brooke 1984b). The striking feature of the distribution map is the extent of fragmentation of occurrence throughout the atlas region. Areas with generally high reporting rates are northern and eastern Botswana, Zimbabwe, the Transvaal and the southwestern Cape Province. It is absent from dry interior of southwestern Botswana and adjacent eastern Namibia. The many isolated occurrences indicate that the Little Bittern is an opportunistic wanderer.

Adult males of the two subspecies are separable in the field, but only if good views are obtained; *payesii* has a russet neck while that of *minutus* is buff (Brown *et al.* 1982). It is therefore difficult to determine the range of the Palearctic migrants; in Zimbabwe, *minutus* is the commoner subspecies during the austral summer (pers. obs). In specimens in southern African museums, mostly accidental deaths, *minutus* outnumbers *payesii* by more than two to one (Brooke 1984b). In years of high rainfall, *minutus* has been recorded in the Transvaal and KwaZulu-Natal (Clancey 1964b; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b); the southern and western limits of this Palearctic race have been established from museum specimens to be near Uitenhage (3325CD) and Rustenburg (2527CA) (Brooke 1984b). Many Botswanan records are probably also Palearctic *minutus*; elsewhere in southern Africa this subspecies is likely to be a rare, irregular vagrant. Owing to its inconspicuous nature, this species was under-reported in the atlas period.

Habitat: It is almost totally confined to *Typha* and *Phragmites* reedbeds in standing water, but migrants are sometimes found in stands of sedges or rank emergent waterside grasses where these are shallowly inundated.

Movements: Migrants from the Palearctic mostly arrive in December and leave by late March or early April, although there is a record in late May for the Zambezi Valley (Brooke 1984b; Tree 1990c). In Zimbabwe and the Transvaal, *payesii* is also essentially a migrant (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), arriving about December with most birds departing by late April; the seasonal maps indicate that it is almost totally absent from the Zimbabwean plateau July–August, with few records September–October, increasing from November–December when occurrence is masked by Palearctic migrants which probably form the bulk of the peak population in January–February. In the Transvaal and eastern Botswana, lowest reporting rates were May–October. In KwaZulu-Natal, lowest reporting rates are May–August with a gradual increase September–October. In the Okavango Delta, reporting rates are higher August–November; the swamps might therefore be a dry season refuge for *payesii*. The few Namibian records show lowest occurrence March–October. In the Cape



Province, birds appear to move westwards along the coastal plain from September–October; in the southwestern Cape Province, the highest reporting rates and widest distribution occur November–February, contrasting with lowest occurrence May–August. It is possible that these birds migrate to and from Mozambique.

Breeding: Most breeding records were from the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4), August–February. At Rondevlei (3418BA), in this region, all except one of 22 egg-laying dates were August–February, with a September–November peak (Langley 1983). Published egg-laying data elsewhere are sparse, and are mostly in summer, September–March (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Brown & Clinning in press).

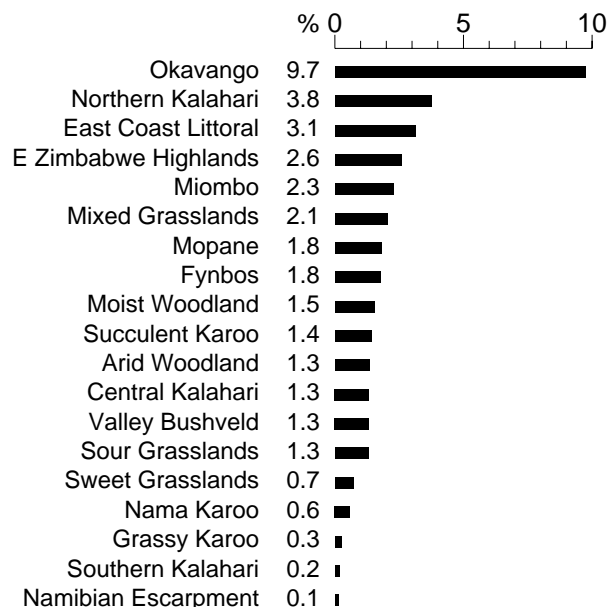
Historical distribution and conservation: Brooke (1984b), who classified the Little Bittern as 'rare'

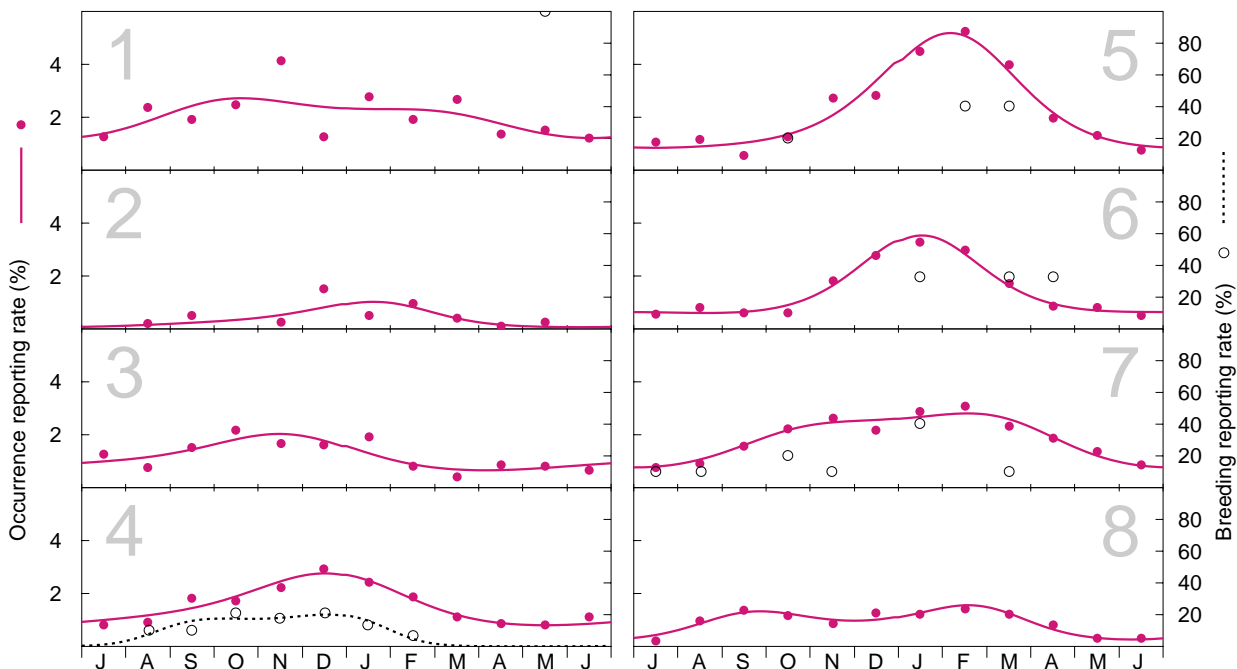
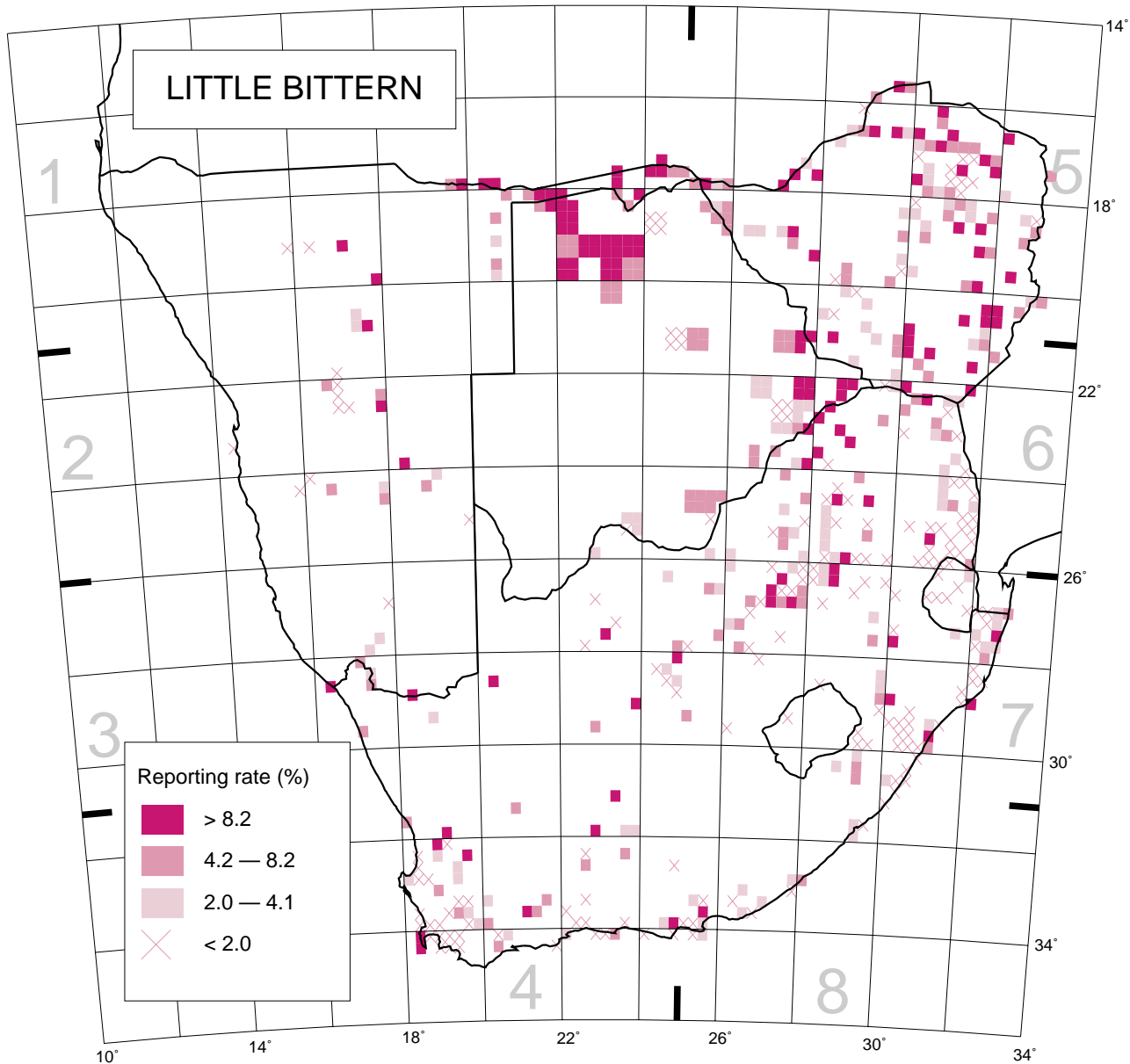
in South Africa, considered that the distribution and abundance of the breeding subspecies *payesii* had changed little since the 19th century, but that the migrant subspecies *minutus* had probably become more common. Large reedbeds, which provide foraging and breeding sites, need protection. Brooke's (1984b) recommendation that a detailed survey of *payesii* be undertaken, a difficult task because of its skulking habits and the presence of *minutus*, has not yet been implemented.

A.J. Tree

Recorded in 560 grid cells, 12.3%
Total number of records: 2289
Mean reporting rate for range: 3.4%

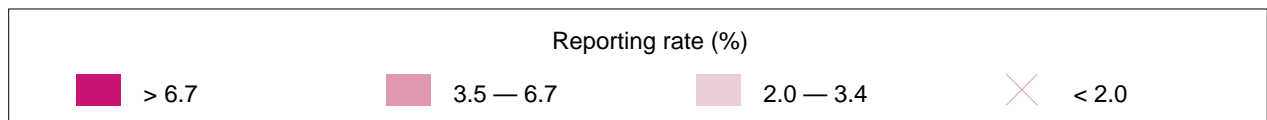
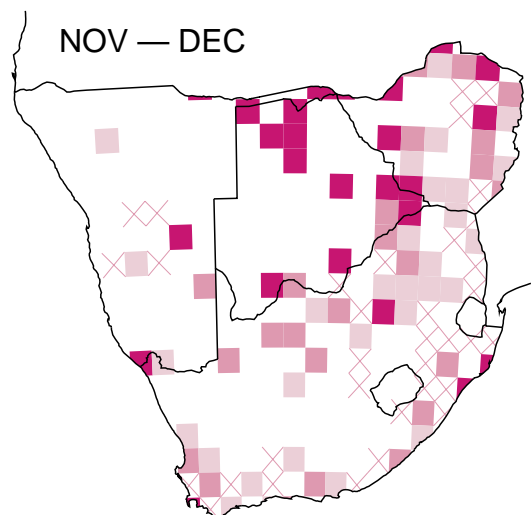
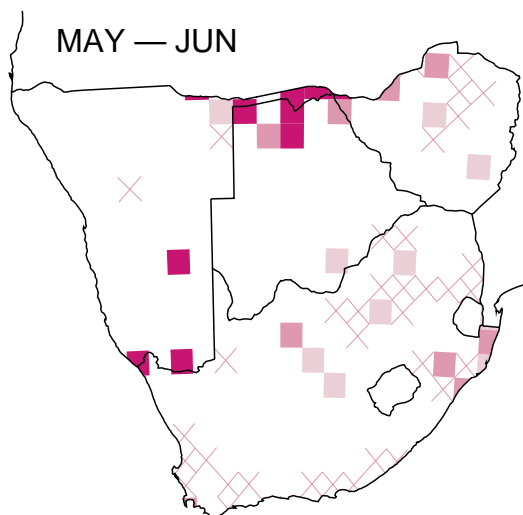
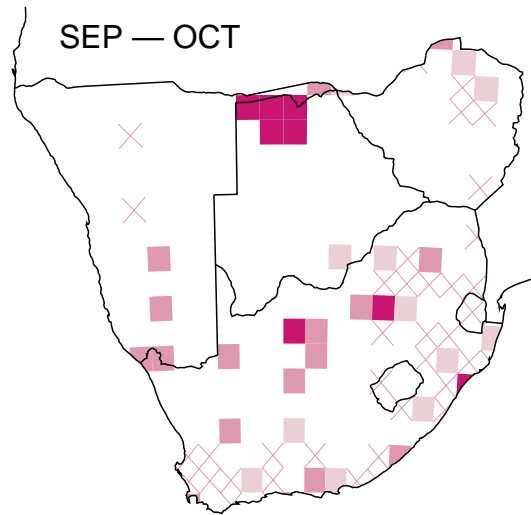
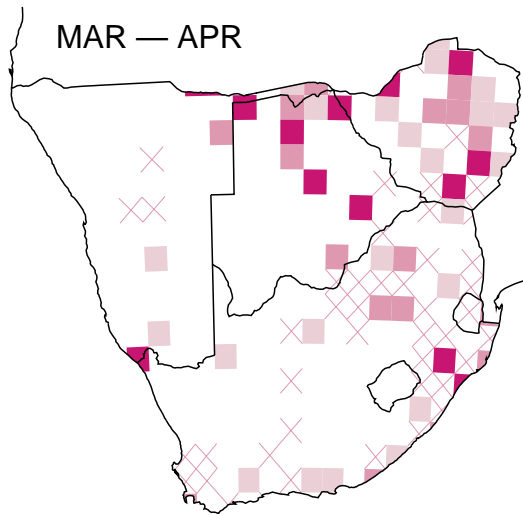
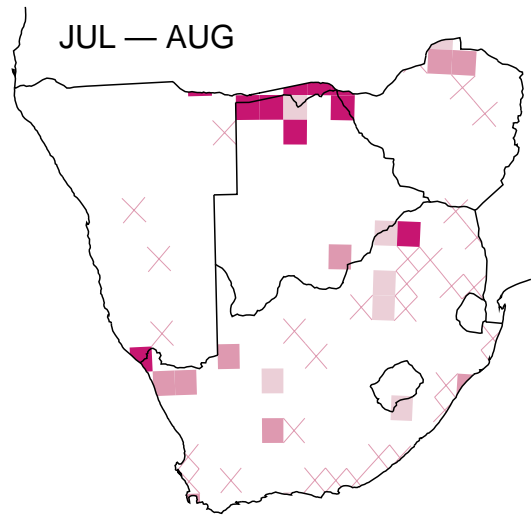
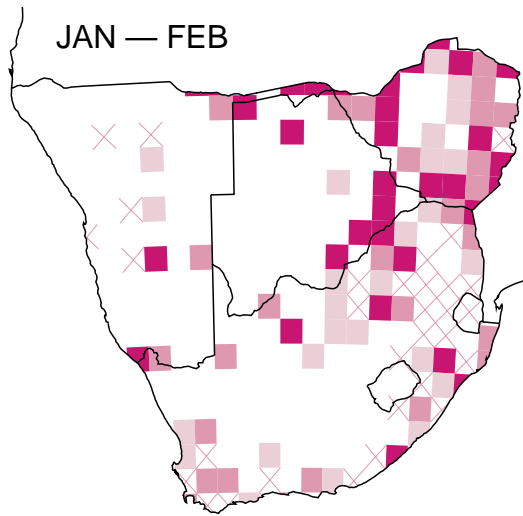
Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 181, 38, 111, 391, 258, 351, 837, 108; Breeding: 1, 0, 0, 29, 5, 3, 10, 0.

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Seasonal distribution maps; one-degree grid.