

## Bald Ibis

### Kalkoenibis

#### *Geronticus calvus*

The Bald Ibis is endemic to southern Africa, restricted to Lesotho, northeastern South Africa and western Swaziland. The range is discrete, in an arc along the Great Escarpment to the Pietersburg Plateau (2329C,D, 2429A). The well-defined core of the range lies in the northeastern Free State and southeastern Transvaal. It forms a superspecies with the Northern Bald Ibis *G. eremita*, which occurred widely in the Palearctic, but is now essentially restricted to a few dwindling colonies in Morocco (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992).

The Transvaal population is *c.* 2250 birds, with *c.* 478 breeding pairs at 44 colonies (Allan 1985). About 2400 birds occur in the Free State, with 416 breeding pairs at 64 colonies (Collar & Stuart 1985; Manry 1985a). In KwaZulu-Natal the breeding population is *c.* 627 pairs at 57 colonies (Manry 1985a). Three breeding colonies in Swaziland support 10 or more pairs, with several smaller colonies, and a total population of *c.* 110 birds (Parker 1994). The Lesotho population is probably in the low thousands and several breeding colonies are known (Osborne & Tigar 1990). The world population was estimated by Collar & Stuart (1985) to be 5000–8000 birds, but the data above suggest that 8000–10 000 birds (and 2000 breeding pairs) is more realistic.

It is gregarious and usually forages in flocks of up to *c.* 50 birds (Manry 1984). They are conspicuous and easily identified.

**Habitat:** The preferred habitats are high-rainfall, sour and alpine grasslands, characterized by an absence of trees and a short, dense grass sward. It occurs along the montane grasslands of the eastern Transvaal escarpment, flanked to the east and west by woodland areas. At its northern limits, on the Pietersburg Plateau and in northeastern KwaZulu-Natal, it occurs and breeds in lightly wooded and relatively arid country (Cooper & Edwards 1969; Milstein 1973). It forages preferentially on recently burnt ground, and also exploits unburnt natural grassland, cultivated pastures, reaped maize fields and ploughed lands (Manry 1982, 1984, 1985b). Cliffs are required for breeding and roosting.

**Movements:** During breeding it occurs close to colonies but otherwise wanders widely (e.g. Cooper & Edwards 1969; Allan 1985). There is no evidence for migratory patterns or altitudinal movements; the models do not reveal any marked seasonality in reporting rates, although these do decrease slightly in autumn in the northern part of its range (Zone 6).

**Breeding:** Egg-laying in the Transvaal is July–October, mainly August–September (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). In KwaZulu-Natal, egg-laying occurs mostly August–September (Dean 1971; Manry

1985b). The model for Zone 7 spans June–March, with a September–November peak. The unusually early breeding season, starting late winter, coincides with the period when burnt grassland, the favoured foraging habitat, is abundant (Manry 1982, 1984, 1985b).

**Interspecific relationships:** Several predatory birds have been recorded raiding breeding colonies, e.g. Black Eagle *Aquila verreauxii*, Jackal Buzzard *Buteo rufofuscus*, Gymnogene *Polyboroides typus*, Cape Eagle Owl *Bubo capensis* and Pied Crow *Corvus albus* (Milstein & Wolff 1973; Allan 1985, 1995a; Koppij 1995). These predators take both adults and young; the greatest impact comes from raptors that breed on the same cliffs as the ibises, sometimes resulting in desertion.

**Historical distribution and conservation:**

Formerly widespread in the eastern Cape Province and Transkei, its extirpation here, primarily in the early 20th century, was attributed to hunting and habitat degradation through overgrazing (Siegfried 1966a,b, 1971a). There are historical records from the southwestern Cape Province; these may represent vagrants or migratory movements during the nonbreeding season, but it is possible that it once bred in this region.

There is no evidence for range retraction in the remainder of its range (Siegfried 1971a; Collar & Stuart 1985; Manry 1985a). It may have increased in numbers between the late 1960s and the early 1980s in the Transvaal (Allan 1985). It may, however, be decreasing in Lesotho (Bonde 1993).

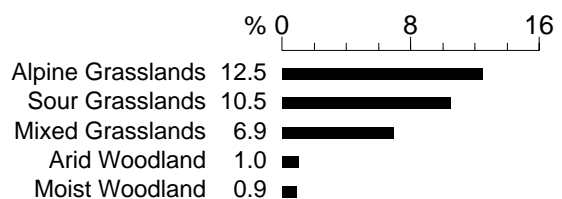
Widespread concern for the conservation status of the Bald Ibis was initiated when the population size was estimated at less than 1000 birds by Siegfried (1966a). Better estimates (Pocock & Uys 1967; Cooper & Edwards 1969; Milstein & Siegfried 1970; Siegfried 1971a; Milstein & Wolff 1973) resulted in an 'out of danger' status in Brooke (1984b). However, because of its restricted range, wide variety of threats and fragile habitat, it will always be of conservation concern; indeed, it was classed as 'vulnerable' globally by Collar *et al.* (1994).

Threats include loss of habitat through commercial afforestation, intensive crop farming, open-cast mining and dense human settlement, and human interference with breeding colonies (Vincent & Symons 1948; Milstein & Wolff 1973; Allan 1985, 1989; Collar & Stuart 1985; Manry 1985a; Collar *et al.* 1994). Pesticide contamination is a potential threat; this was a major factor in the decline of Northern Bald Ibis populations (Siegfried 1966a; Milstein & Wolff 1973; Collar & Stuart 1985). Priorities for conservation action are the protection of its open grassland foraging habitats and the cliffs supporting the largest colonies, ongoing monitoring of its population size and breeding success, and possibly reintroduction to suitable areas in the eastern Cape Province (Allan 1989c).

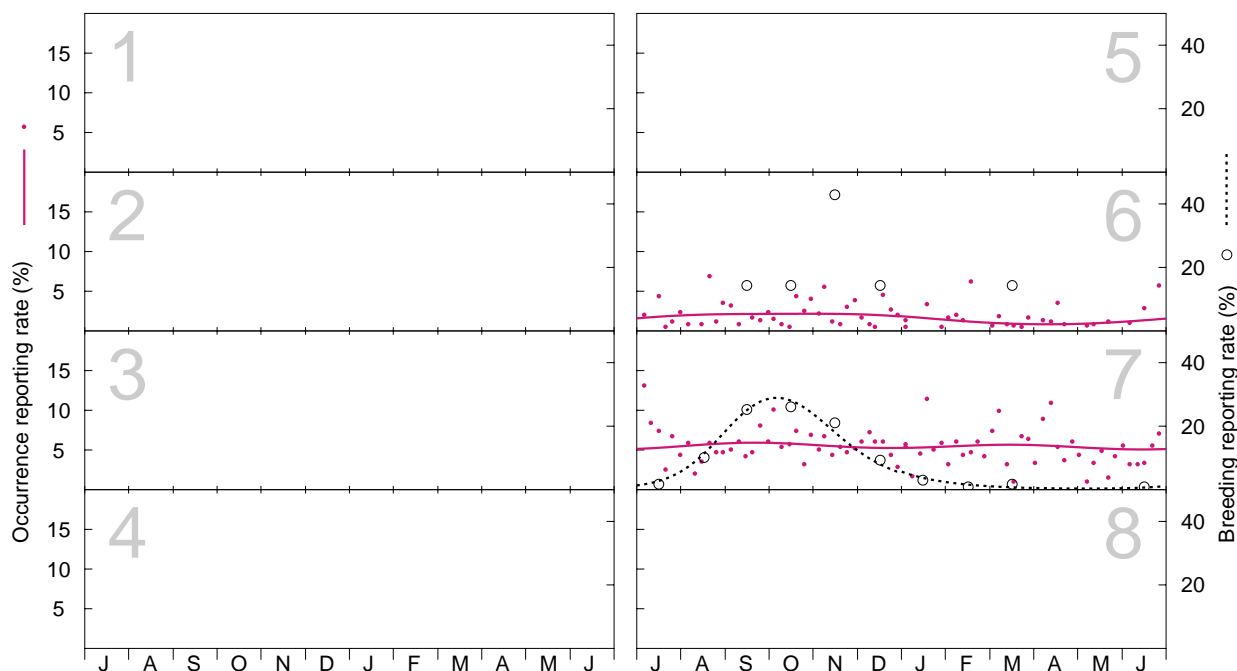
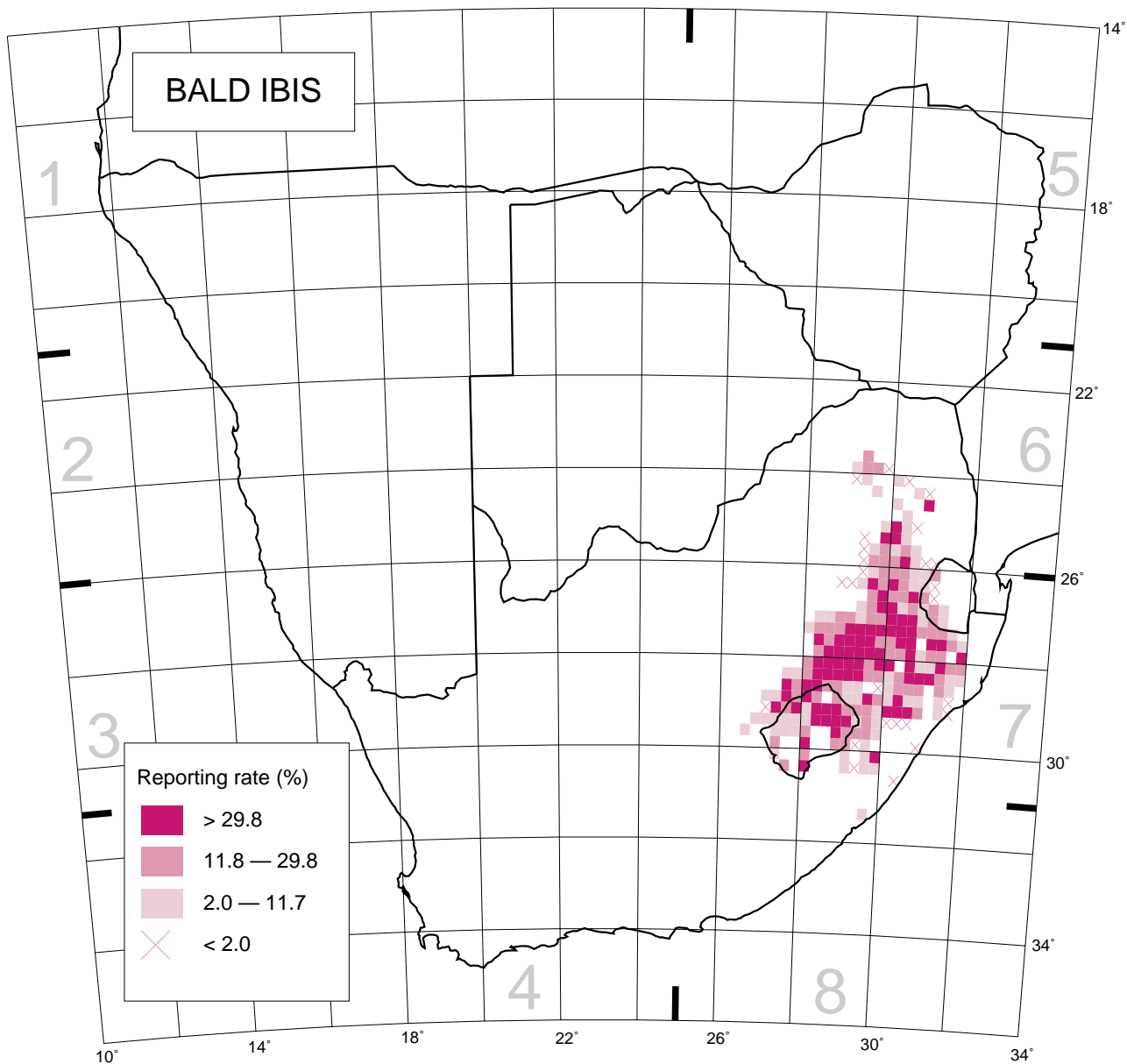
*D.G. Allan*

Recorded in 256 grid cells, 5.6%  
Total number of records: 3713  
Mean reporting rate for range: 19.2%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types



Also marginally in Sweet Grasslands.



Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 181, 1070, 0; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 7, 100, 0.