



Secretarybird

Sekretarisvoël

Sagittarius serpentarius

The Secretarybird is an Afrotropical species occurring throughout the atlas region. The map shows interesting patterns of abundance in different parts of its range. It occurs at low reporting rates in the southwestern Cape Province but is more common along the south than the west coast in this region (cf. Hockey *et al.* 1989). In the eastern parts of South Africa it is noticeably absent or rare in the Lesotho highlands, in Transkei, along the east coast, in eastern Swaziland, in the central highveld of the Transvaal, and along the Transvaal escarpment. In Transkei and the central Transvaal highveld, high human densities probably largely exclude it, especially as a breeding bird, and in Swaziland extensive bush encroachment is responsible for its scarcity (Parker 1994), particularly as it appears to be common in adjacent areas. The paucity of records from the Lesotho highlands, east coast and Transvaal escarpment may be related to natural unsuitability of habitat. In Zimbabwe it prefers the central watershed regions compared with lower-lying adjacent regions to the north and south. It is widespread in Botswana and Namibia but appears to avoid the Namib Desert.

Although the distribution map suggests that it is more common in the eastern half of southern Africa, compared with the western half, the models show little difference, suggesting that it is equally common in both regions and that better coverage in the east is responsible for the larger number of records there. The models, however, do show a clear decrease in reporting rates from north to south.

It usually occurs singly or in pairs, occasionally in family parties of 3–4 birds, with groups of up to 50 recorded at waterholes in arid areas (Brown *et al.* 1982). Densities of 0.2–2.0 pairs/100 km² have been recorded at study sites in the Transvaal (Tarboton & Allan 1984).

Habitat: It chooses open country, mainly savanna, open woodland, grassland and dwarf shrubland. These habitat preferences are confirmed by the relatively high reporting rates in the Karoo, Kalahari, Grassland, Mopane, Miombo and Woodland vegetation types. It is also attracted to man-made habitats such as airfields, grazing paddocks and fallow fields. It is absent from mountain fynbos, and avoids forest, dense woodland and very rocky, hilly or mountainous areas.

Movements: The atlas data do not reveal any regular seasonal movements. The high monthly variation in the reporting rates in the arid westerly parts (Zones 1–3) suggests that the species is nomadic in low-rainfall areas. It is reported elsewhere to undertake increased local movements outside the breeding season and to be highly nomadic in arid areas (Brown *et al.* 1982). At

Nylsvley (2428DA) numbers fluctuated widely and population shifts may occur in other areas, e.g. the Transvaal highveld and lowveld (Tarboton & Allan 1984).

Breeding: The models indicate that breeding takes place throughout the atlas area, in all months, except in southern areas (Zones 4 and 8) where breeding was not recorded in midwinter. They also show a breeding activity peak July–January. These patterns generally concur with published accounts, including peak egg-laying dates (Cyrus & Robson 1980; Brown *et al.* 1982; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Hockey *et al.* 1989; Maclean 1993b).

Historical distribution and conservation: There has not been any apparent change in distribution in the Cape Province (see Boshoff *et al.* 1983). Locally the species may have increased its abundance as a result of extensive bush-clearing programmes. Overall, the current distribution is considered to reflect closely the historical distribution, and any changes are likely to be in abundance rather than distributional limits. Several areas with particularly high reporting rates correspond with large conservation areas, e.g. Kruger National Park, Kalahari Gemsbok Park, Hwange National Park and Etosha. If these are representative of its ancestral abundance, then the species may have undergone a massive decrease outside such areas.

Its conservation status provides cause for concern. It is sensitive to habitat degradation due to overgrazing, bush encroachment, disturbance and loss of habitat to afforestation and crop cultivation. Numbers may have decreased in the northwestern Cape Province and Karoo (Boshoff *et al.* 1983) and also in the southwestern Cape Province since 1960, and particularly during the 1980s (Hockey *et al.* 1989). Bush encroachment is thought to have reduced the suitability of much of the Swaziland lowveld (Parker 1994). On the other hand, bush clearance has created additional habitat, for example in parts of the Transvaal, where the species' conservation status is considered to be good (Tarboton & Allan 1984). A survey is needed to determine the current conservation status of the Secretarybird.

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Recorded in 2034 grid cells, 44.8%
Total number of records: 15 792
Mean reporting rate for range: 13.7%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



