

# Martial Eagle

## Breëkoparend

### *Polemaetus bellicosus*

The Martial Eagle is an Afrotropical species which is widespread but generally uncommon, although locally common in some regions, most notably in extensive protected areas (e.g. the Kruger and Kalahari Gemsbok National Parks) and in rural areas with low human population densities and no intensive small-stock farming, e.g. large parts of Botswana. It is locally absent or rare in parts, e.g. in the high mountains of Lesotho, in the grasslands of the central South African plateau, in heavily forested areas, and in treeless or radically transformed habitats, such as parts of KwaZulu-Natal, Transkei and southern Namibia. The availability of nest sites is a limiting factor in its distribution.

Linear densities have been measured as follows: 19.0 km (between breeding pairs) in the Nama Karoo (Boshoff 1993); 18.9 km in Namibia (Brown 1991a); 16.3–19.6 km in Hwange National Park (Howells & Hustler 1984); 11.7 km in the Kruger National Park and adjacent conservation areas (Tarboton & Allan 1984).

It usually occurs singly or in pairs. It is fairly conspicuous, although it often soars extremely high up (Steyn 1982b). It is easily identified, but adults can be confused with adult Blackbreasted Snake Eagles *Circaetus pectoralis* and immatures with immature Crowned Eagles *Stephanoaetus coronatus*, and even with griffon vultures *Gyps* spp.

**Habitat:** It is found in open grassland and scrub, and woodland. It relies on large trees to provide nest sites. It is typically found in flat country and is rarer in mountainous areas. It also avoids extreme deserts, and densely wooded and forested areas. It occurs across a wide range of vegetation types, with the highest reporting rates in Mopane, Okavango, Southern Kalahari, Northern Kalahari, and Arid Woodland. It is known to nest on man-made structures, such as electricity pylons and windpumps, and also on cliffs in treeless areas, and in alien trees (Steyn 1982b; Tarboton & Allan 1984).

**Movements:** The models show increased reporting rates in some regions from late summer to spring. This period largely coincides with the breeding season, and is the time when the eagles are highly territorial in behaviour and are bound to their nest sites, and therefore perhaps more conspicuous. Breeding adults are thought to be sedentary but juveniles and immatures wander widely from their natal areas (Brown *et al.* 1982).

**Breeding:** Breeding occurs throughout the atlas area and the models show that the season is mainly May–November. This accords with previous studies which reported breeding March–November, with an April–June egg-laying peak (Irwin 1981; Brown *et al.* 1982; Tarboton & Allan 1984; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Boshoff 1993; Maclean 1993b). The models and data for Zones 1–3 and 5–7 suggest a trend of later breeding with increasing latitude. This does not appear to hold for Zones 4 and 8, possibly relating to the winter or even-rainfall seasonality in these two Zones.

**Historical distribution and conservation:** No overall change in distribution is evident in the Cape Province (cf. Boshoff *et al.* 1983). The ability to nest on man-made



structures may have increased densities in parts of the Karoo (Hockey *et al.* 1989; Boshoff 1993). Although numbers have decreased locally in many areas, often dramatically, the Martial Eagle is still widespread in southern Africa. However, the lower reporting rates outside protected and sparsely inhabited regions suggest major declines in regions with human populations. The obvious paucity of records from the grasslands of the central plateau in the Transvaal and Free State probably reflects its extermination in this densely settled region.

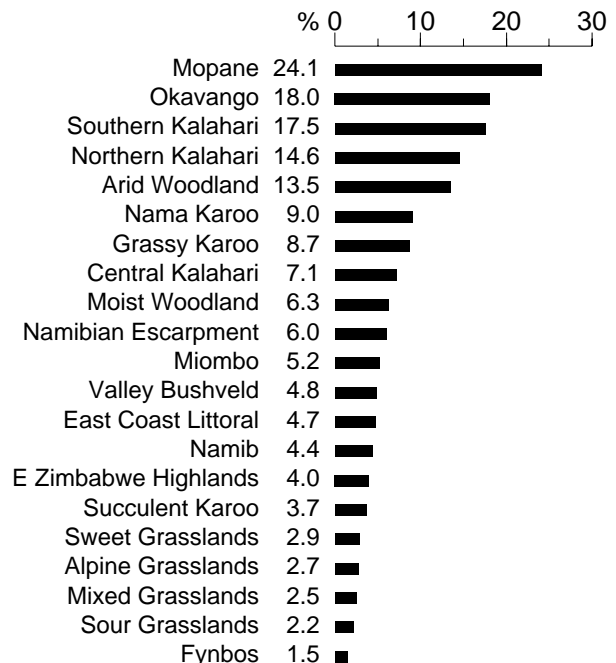
The conservation status of the Martial Eagle, which is listed as 'vulnerable' (Brooke 1984b), provides cause for concern. A decrease in numbers has been reported from many parts of the atlas region, viz. the Cape Province (Boshoff & Vernon 1980a), Transvaal (Tarboton & Allan 1984), Namibia (Brown 1991a) and possibly Zimbabwe (Hustler & Howells 1987).

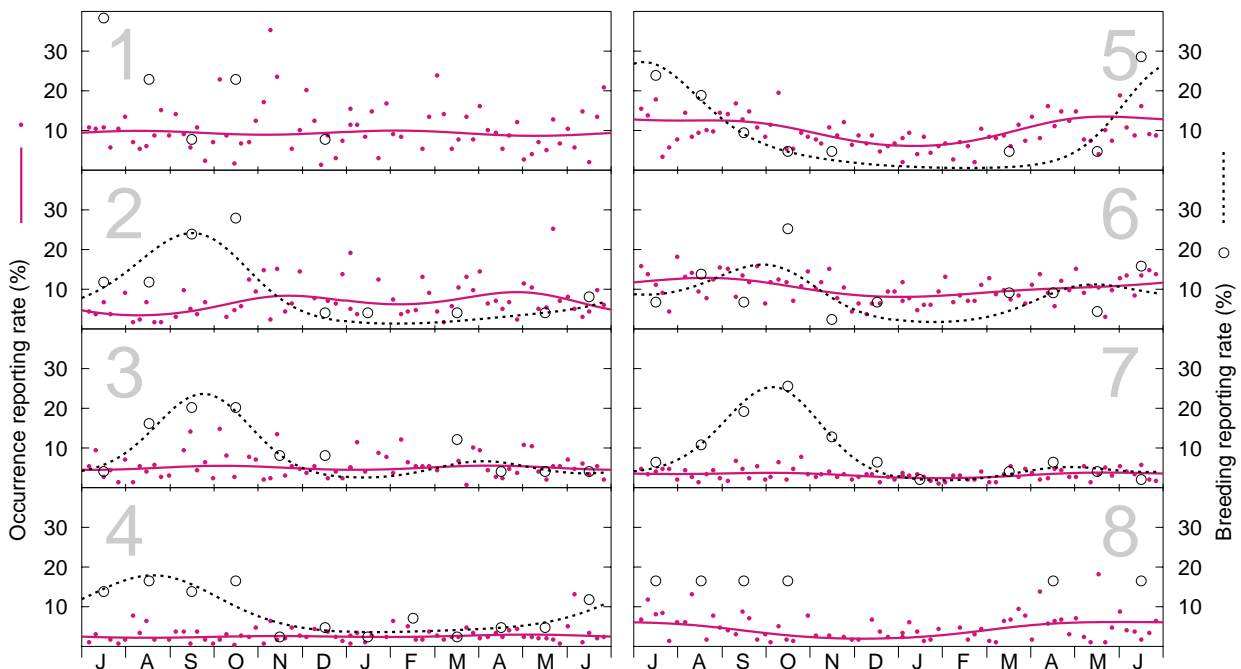
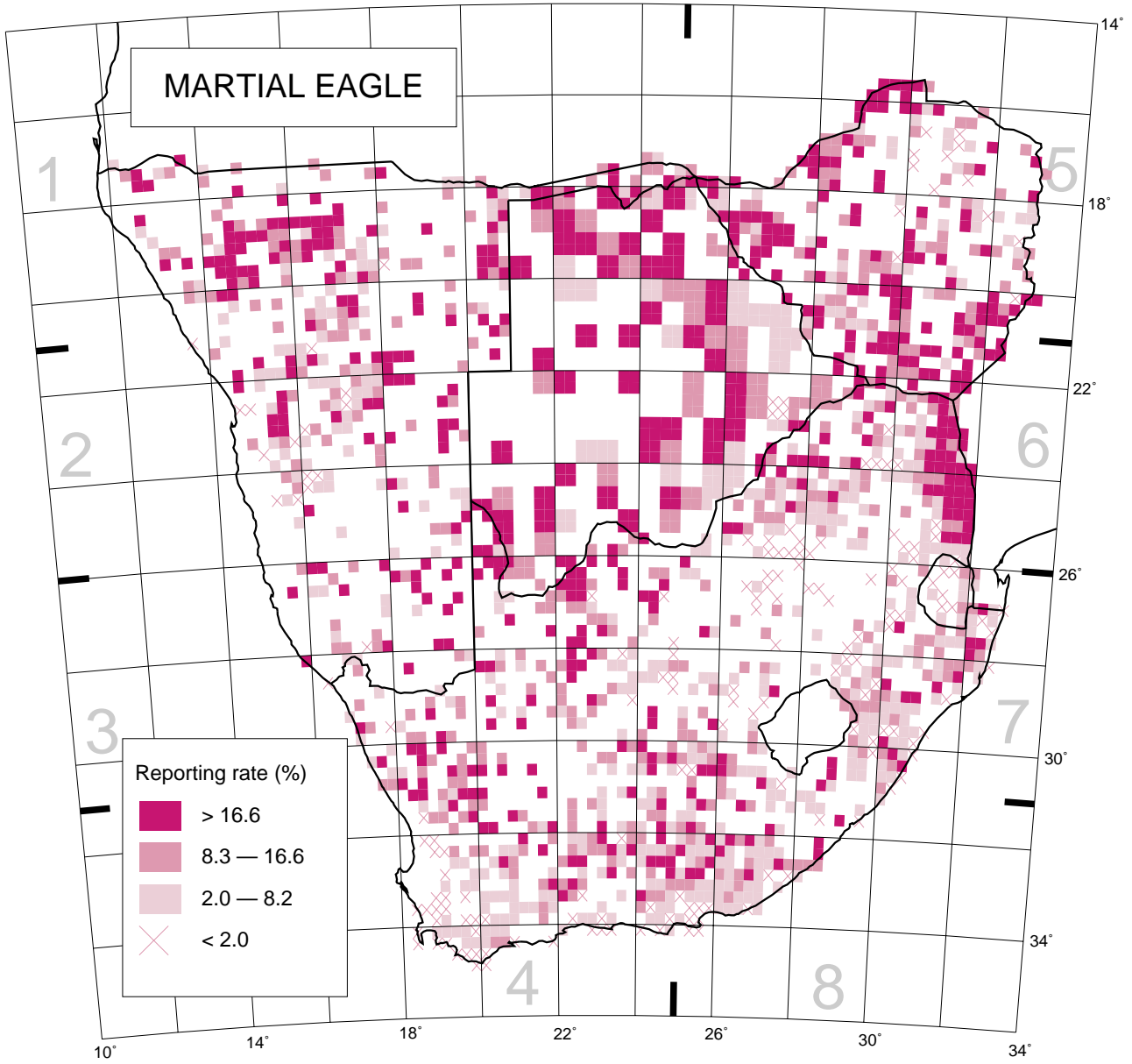
The main causes are direct persecution (shooting and trapping) by small-stock farmers, indirect persecution by poisoning, drowning in sheer-walled reservoirs, reduction of natural prey through habitat alteration and degradation, and electrocution on electricity pylons. Juvenile birds are more vulnerable to direct persecution than adults (Steyn 1982b).

A.F. Boshoff

Recorded in 1876 grid cells, 41.3%  
Total number of records: 9859  
Mean reporting rate for range: 9.8%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 309, 237, 278, 222, 922, 1178, 637, 231; Breeding: 13, 25, 25, 43, 21, 44, 47, 6.