

Blackbreasted Snake Eagle

Swartborsslangarend

Circaetus pectoralis

This Afrotropical species is widespread and uncommon to locally common in its southern African range. The Blackbreasted Snake Eagle shows a clearly truncated distribution in the east of the region, where the woodland and grassland biomes abut. The distribution extends far to the south in the west, into the arid scrublands of the Nama Karoo. The Blackbreasted Snake Eagle was formerly considered conspecific with the Eurasian Short-toed Snake Eagle *C. gallicus* (Clancey 1980b), but is now generally accepted as a separate Afrotropical species (Brown *et al.* 1982; Maclean 1993b; Del Hoyo *et al.* 1994).

In Botswana, 120 550 km of road counts gave an index of 1 bird/1000 km (W. Borello unpubl. data).

It usually occurs solitarily but is reported to roost communally during the nonbreeding period (December–May) in the Transvaal (Tarboton & Allan 1984), and during the winter months (May–September) in Zimbabwe (Steyn 1982b).

It is conspicuous as it usually hunts on the wing, flying fairly low down. Adults are easily identified, although they may be confused with adult Martial Eagles *Polemaetus bellicosus*, and the immatures are readily confused with other large birds of prey.

Habitat: It is an open country species which occurs mainly in savanna woodlands, dwarf shrublands (Karoo) and semi-desert. It avoids mountainous and forested areas. Of the vegetation types falling within its range, the highest reporting rates were in Miombo and the lowest in the Karoo, with the various woodland types falling between these extremes.

Movements: The models indicate that it is present throughout its range in all months of the year. In Zones 1–4 and 6, however, there was a summer to autumn increase in reporting rates, especially in the western Zones 2 and 3. In the Transvaal it occurs throughout the year in the bushveld and lowveld, but is present on the highveld only during the nonbreeding period (December–May), during which time communal roosts have been recorded. At Nylsvley (2428DA) in the Transvaal bushveld, numbers fluctuate throughout the year but not according to any clear seasonal pattern (Tarboton

& Allan 1984). In the southwestern Cape Province it is said to be a rare winter visitor (Hockey *et al.* 1989) but the data for Zone 4 contradict this and fit the pattern established by Zones 2 and 3 to the north. In Zimbabwe, an influx and communal roosting have been recorded in the dry winter months, but also in summer months in dry years (Steyn 1982b; Tree 1990b).

Possibly two populations occur in southern Africa: a nomadic breeding population, and nonbreeding visitors from beyond the region (Brown *et al.* 1982; Steyn 1982b). Conditions with little grass cover may be an advantage when hunting snakes, and conversely for tall grass, hence the Blackbreasted Snake Eagle seems to avoid the mesic east in the wet season and prefer the more arid west at that time. The pattern in the models would fit post-breeding movements from relatively mesic areas in the northeast, e.g. Zimbabwe and possibly further north, to the arid southwest in midsummer, but nonbreeding winter influxes in Zimbabwe appear contradictory. These phenomena need clarification and may be different during dry and wet cycles.

Breeding: Breeding can occur in any month, but the data indicate mainly late dry-season breeding, with an August–November peak (e.g. Cyrus & Robson 1980; Irwin 1981; Steyn 1982b). The main egg-laying months are June–August, with a July peak in the Transvaal, and June–September in Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981; Steyn 1982b; Tarboton & Allan 1984).

Interspecific relationships: It occupies more open country than its woodland counterpart, the Brown Snake Eagle *Circaetus cinereus*, but there is a wide overlap (Steyn 1982b; Tarboton & Allan 1984).

Historical distribution and conservation: There has been no apparent change in distribution in the Cape Province (Boshoff *et al.* 1983). An apparent decrease in records of vagrant birds from the Karoo to the southwestern Cape Province suggests that the Karoo population may be declining (Hockey *et al.* 1989). At present the status of the Blackbreasted Snake Eagle does not warrant conservation concern.

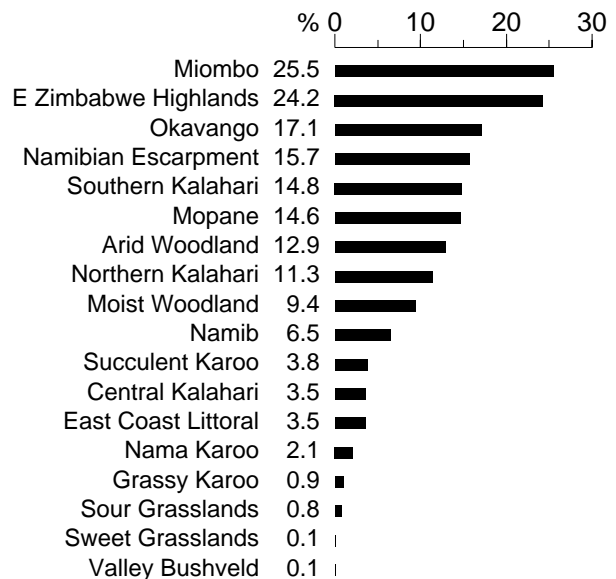
A.F. Boshoff

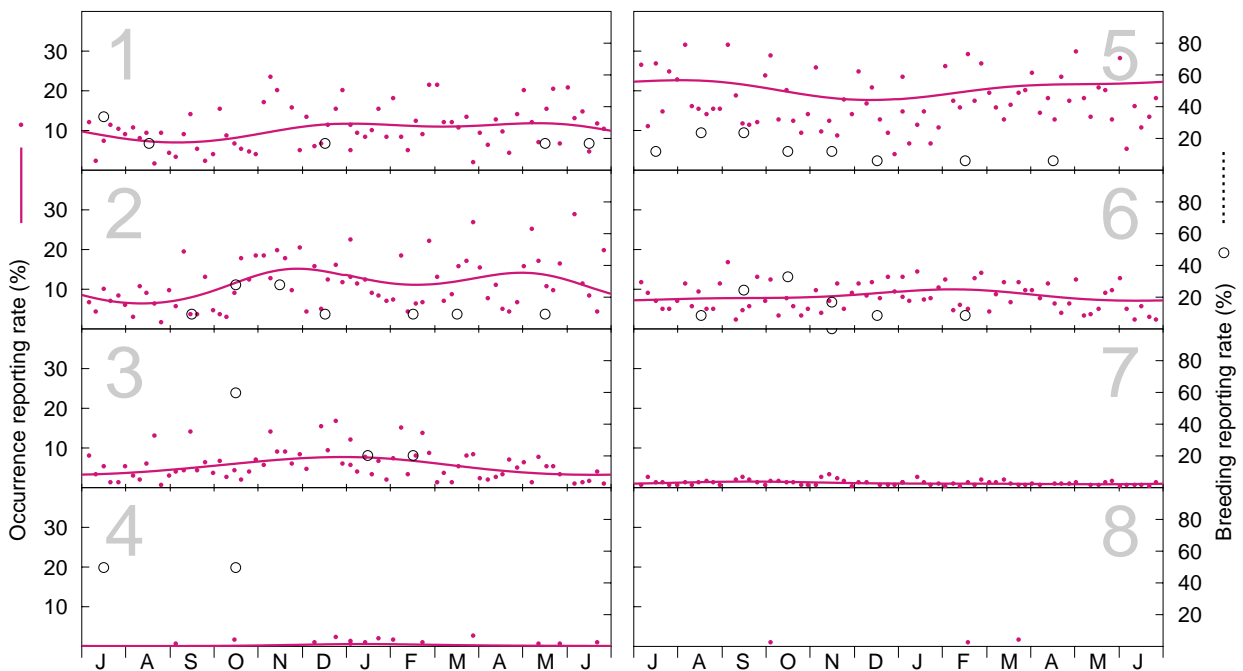
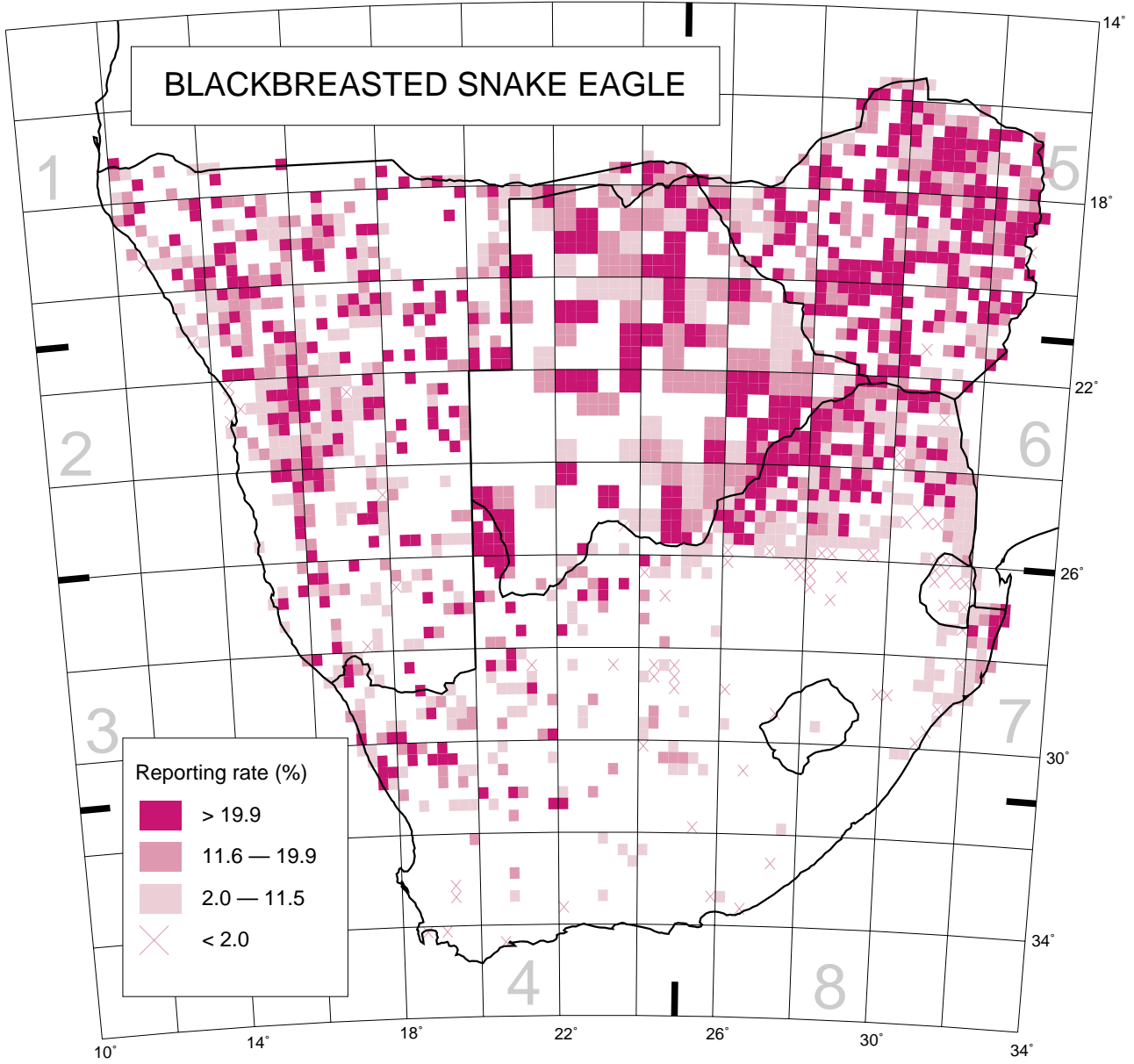
Recorded in 1731 grid cells, 38.2%

Total number of records: 8420

Mean reporting rate for range: 12.2%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 333, 405, 281, 22, 1806, 945, 220, 3; Breeding: 6, 11, 5, 2, 17, 12, 2, 0.