



## Pygmy Falcon

### Dwergvalk

*Polihierax semitorquatus*

The Pygmy Falcon population in southern Africa is quite isolated from another population in northeastern Africa. This disjunct distribution reflects climatic changes during which arid habitats have expanded and contracted. Current higher rainfalls have produced tropical woodlands across central Africa which separate arid zones in southern and northeastern Africa. A small population reported in central Mozambique (Clancey 1976c) is said to associate with Redbilled Buffalo Weavers *Bubalornis niger*. This isolated group may be more closely related to northeast African birds. In the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park (2520), neighbouring pairs were seldom less than *c.* 0.8 km apart (Maclean 1970a). In the Namib, Brown (1989a) found nine pairs at an average of 0.96 km apart (range: 0.2–1.3 km).

This is the smallest diurnal raptor in southern Africa. Being so small means that it is rather inconspicuous, often being mistaken for a Fiscal *Lanius collaris* or Lesser Grey *L. minor* Shrike. Like these shrikes, it often perches high up on trees and telephone poles from where it scans the ground for prey.

**Habitat:** It occurs most frequently in areas where scattered large trees, especially Camelthorns *Acacia erioloba*, grow in open, arid grassy areas in the Kalahari, Namib and marginally in the northern Karoo. The highest reporting rates were in the southern Kalahari where birds were reported about five times more frequently than in any other habitat.

**Movements:** While young birds probably move around on a local scale, adults appear to be year-round residents in territories. The models, although varying quite widely, show no clear-cut evidence for migration.

**Breeding:** Nesting has been reported August–March, with a peak in egg-laying September–December (Maclean 1993b; Brown & Clinning in press). Atlas records show little seasonality and span spring to early winter, September–June. Two and perhaps more broods may be produced in a year if food supplies remain adequate.

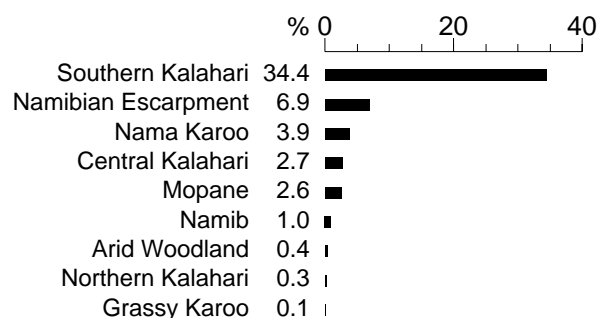
**Interspecific relationships:** It is closely associated with weavers, Sociable Weavers *Philetairus socius* in southern Africa and Whiteheaded Buffalo Weavers *Dinemellia dinemelli* in northeastern Africa. These associations are so strong that its distribution closely approximates to the ranges of these two weavers (Brown *et al.* 1982). The Pygmy Falcon thus occurs only where Sociable Weavers are recorded in southern Africa, as shown clearly by distribution maps. The close relationship with the Sociable Weaver is a result of the obligate use of weaver nest chambers for roosting and nesting. The weavers usually tolerate the falcons' presence, even though weavers and their nestlings are sometimes taken as prey (e.g. De Swardt 1990). A pair of falcons may occupy more than one Sociable Weaver colony, and the largest nest masses are preferred (Brown 1989a). Atlas reporting rates in different areas indicate that the Pygmy Falcon is most frequently reported in areas where the Sociable Weaver is also most abundant, suggesting that the abundance of these falcons is largely dependent on the presence of weaver nests. Three studies have found that about 25% of weaver colonies are occupied by Pygmy Falcons (Hoesch 1935; Maclean 1970a; Brown 1989a).

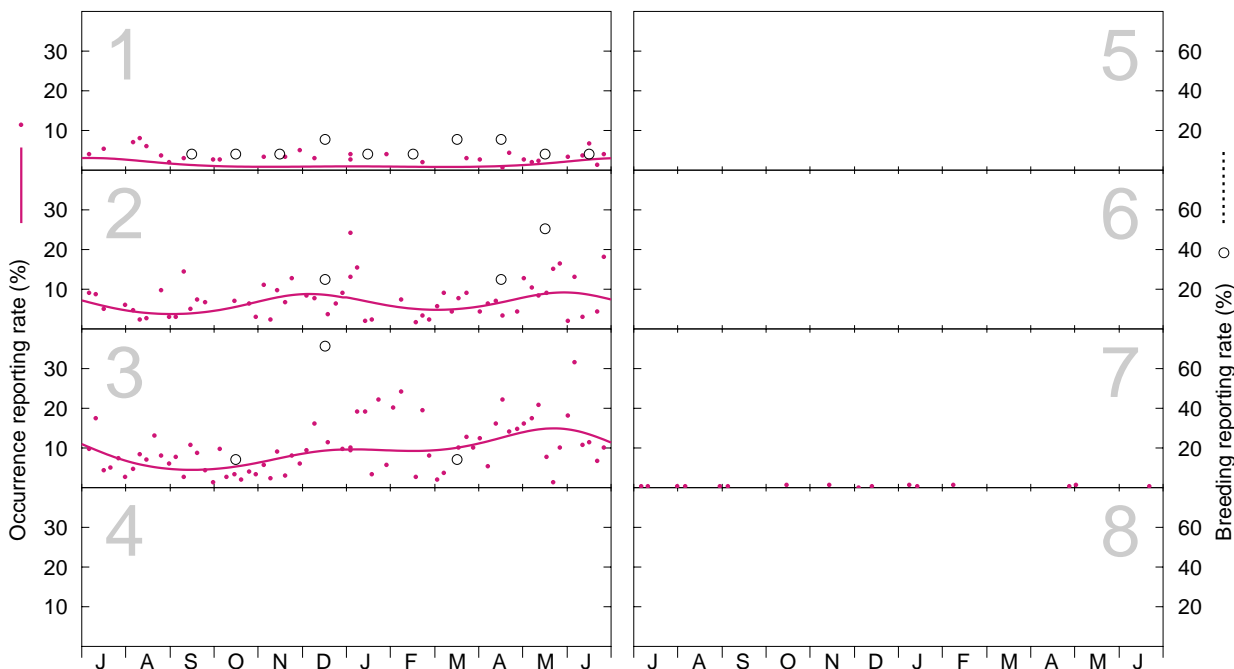
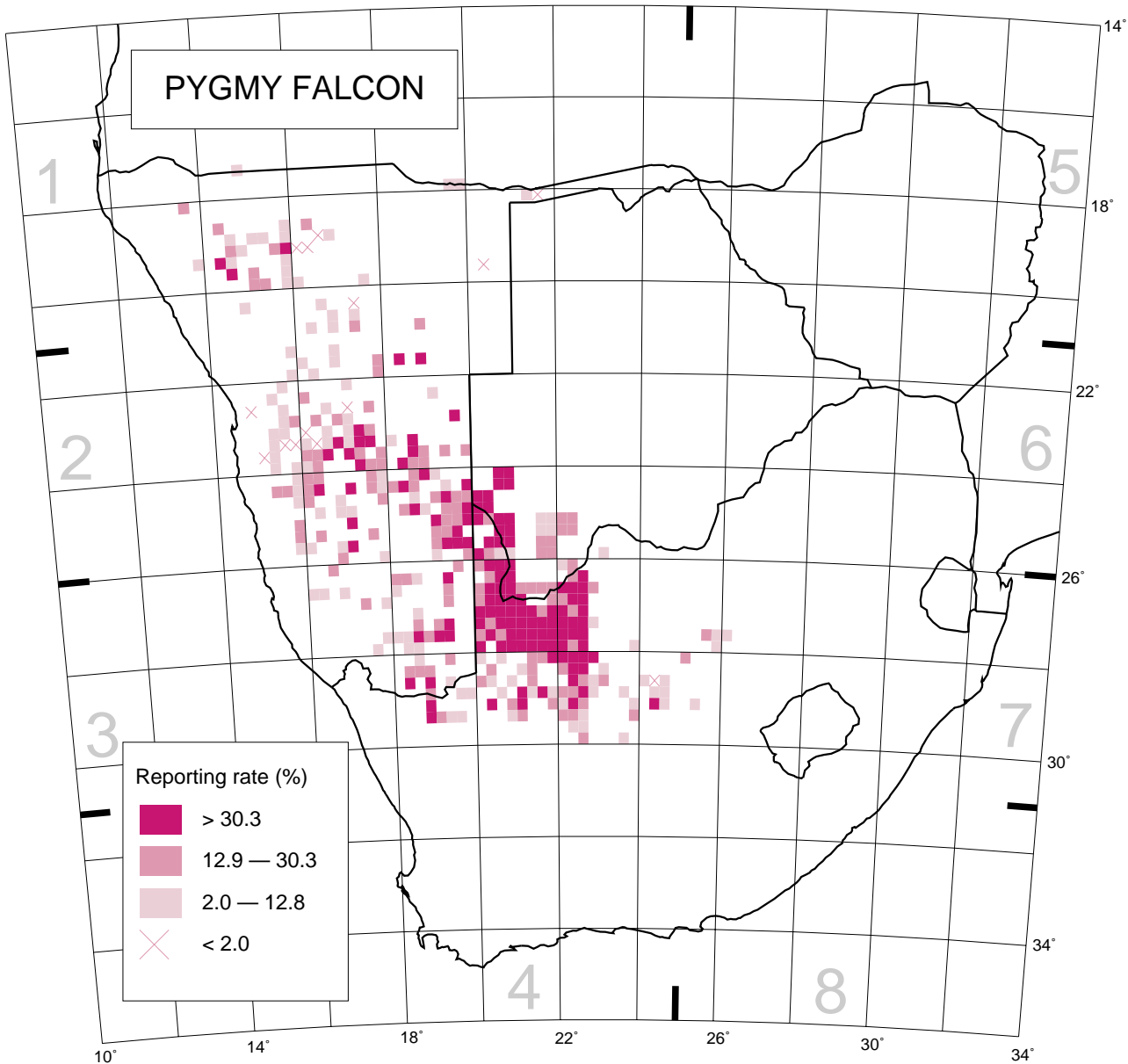
**Historical distribution and conservation:** In the southern Kalahari regions of South Africa, the piping of water from the Orange River deep into this region to provide drinking water for livestock seems to have resulted in dramatically increased numbers of both Sociable Weavers and Pygmy Falcons (D.G. Allan pers. obs). Since the Pygmy Falcon's preferred habitat is unlikely to be changed substantially in the near future, its conservation status would seem to be quite secure.

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Recorded in 393 grid cells, 8.7%  
Total number of records: 1709  
Mean reporting rate for range: 16.2%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 50, 230, 518, 0, 0, 0, 19, 0; Breeding: 13, 4, 7, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0.