

Common Quail

Afrikaanse Kwartel

Coturnix coturnix

In its wide African range, the Common Quail is both a resident and a nomad, both a breeding intra-African migrant and a Palearctic visitor (Urban *et al.* 1986). The nonbreeding range of the Palearctic migrants lies mainly north of the equator; it is still uncertain what proportion, if indeed any, of the Palearctic populations regularly visit southern Africa (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1994). It is widespread in southern Africa but avoids the most arid areas in the west and the densely wooded areas of Zimbabwe and northern Botswana. The southern breeding populations belong to *C. c. coturnix*, while a different, resident race, *erlangeri*, occurs in eastern Zimbabwe, western Mozambique and northwards in East Africa (Clancey 1980b). Densities of 1.7–9.6 birds/ha were found in KwaZulu-Natal and the total South African population has been estimated at about 12.6 million birds (Borquin 1980).

It is rarely seen unless flushed underfoot singly or in pairs, and most atlas records probably refer to birds heard calling during the breeding season. It is easily confused with the Harlequin Quail *C. delegorguei*, which is similar in appearance when viewed in flight from the rear.

Habitat: While the distribution map and vegetation analysis both suggest a catholic use of habitats, the favoured habitats are generally perennial grasslands, usually less than 0.5 m in height, agricultural lands such as those growing crops (particularly cereals), fallow weedy fields, pastures (e.g. lucerne, clover, *Eragrostis*, kikuyu and rye grass), and grasslands regenerating after burning (Mentis 1972; Urban *et al.* 1986; Borquin 1987). Grasslands which are seldom burnt or grazed, or which are burnt too frequently and/or are overgrazed, are unlikely to attract Common Quail. The intermediate condition, i.e. grasslands which are burnt biennially and/or moderately grazed, provides the best combination of cover for escape and nesting, and spaciousness for unhindered foraging (Mentis 1972). Low rainfall and high-temperature regimes and areas with heavy bush or tree cover are avoided (Urban *et al.* 1986).

Movements: The South African population has been claimed to be migratory, on its breeding grounds September–April and migrating to extreme northern Namibia, Angola, western Zambia and southern Zaire in the austral winter (Benson & Irwin 1966a; Clancey 1976d). The race *erlangeri* is thought to be largely sedentary (Benson & Irwin 1966a). The interpretation of the models and seasonal maps is bedevilled by the fact that most atlas records were probably of birds heard calling, rather than seen, and calling is linked to the breeding season. The marked drop in reporting rates during the winter in South Africa may therefore represent less calling, rather than movement. It is obvious from

both the models and the seasonal maps that at least a substantial proportion of the population remains on the breeding grounds during the winter. The seasonal maps nevertheless suggest an increase in Namibia during the winter months and this is mirrored in the model for central Namibia (Zone 2), supporting the suggestion of winter movement into Namibia. The extent of seasonal influxes appears to be variable, possibly affected by rainfall (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Breeding: Egg-laying has been recorded in the Transvaal (Zone 6) November–April, in the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4) September–December, and in KwaZulu-Natal October–December (Winterbottom 1968a; Dean 1971; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The atlas data confirm an earlier breeding season for Zone 4. The few atlas records from areas further north (Zones 1, 2, 3 and 5) suggest the possibility of breeding during winter which, if indeed the case, might change the interpretation of movements outlined above. Irwin (1981) reported two breeding records for Zimbabwe (Zone 5), one each for June and December.

Interspecific relationships: It inhabits moister, more open regions, usually at higher altitudes in the north of the range, than the woodland-favouring Harlequin Quail, although the two species do overlap in distribution. They are altitudinally separated in Zimbabwe (Benson & Irwin 1966a).

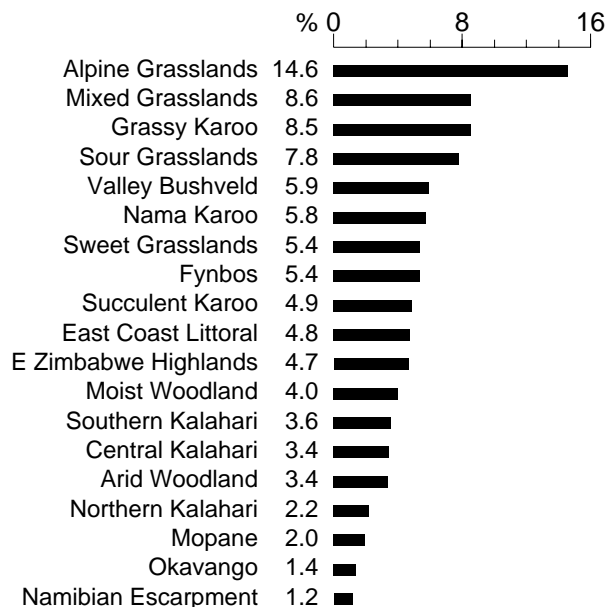
Historical distribution and conservation: It is likely to have benefited from crop farming in many regions, e.g. in the southwestern Cape Province (Hockey *et al.* 1989), although commercial afforestation, overgrazing and dense human settlement must have deprived it of suitable habitat in other regions.

Quails are increasingly sought after for sport shooting. Unfortunately, because these birds concentrate to breed during summer in suitable habitats in the eastern parts of South Africa, they are hunted mostly during their breeding season (Borquin 1987; Little 1993). The species nevertheless remains common and is of no immediate conservation concern.

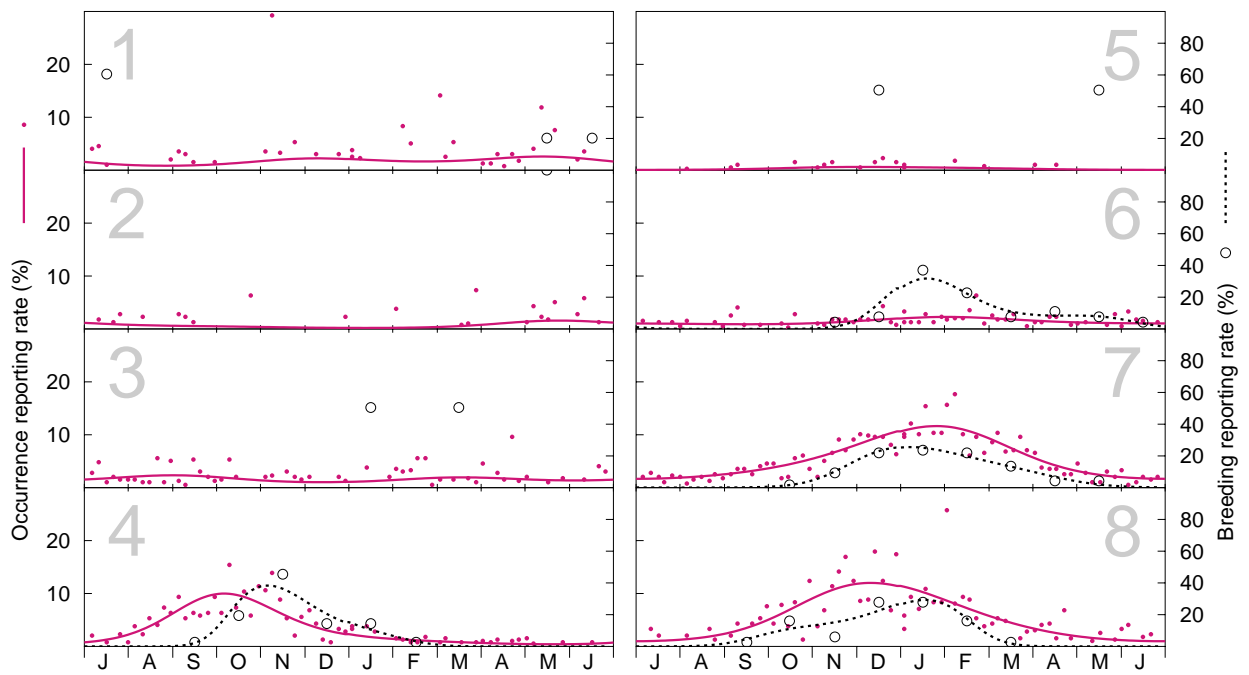
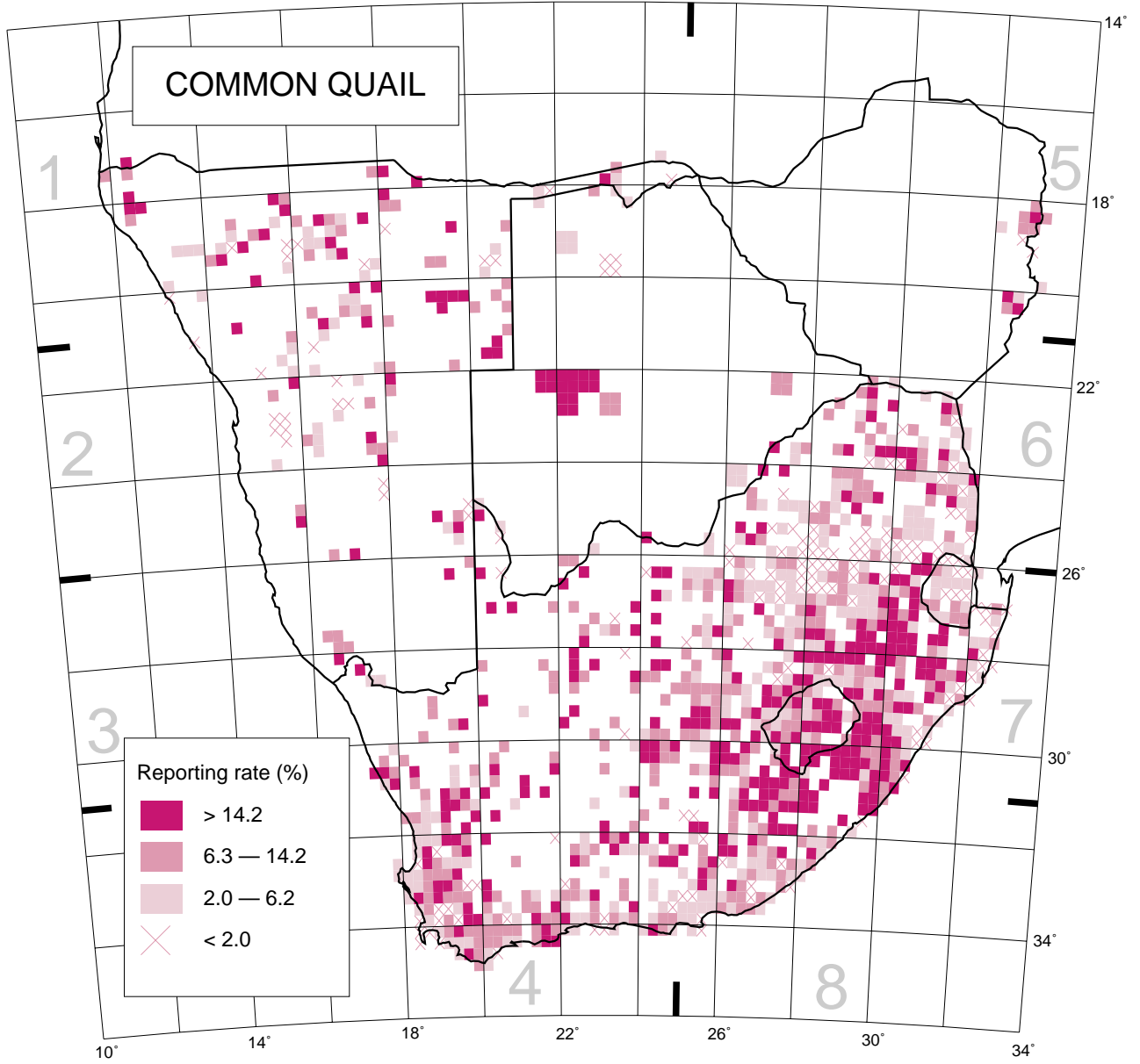
R.M. Little and D.G. Allan

Extent of range: 1198 grid cells, 26.4%
Total number of records: 7538
Mean reporting rate for range: 7.3%

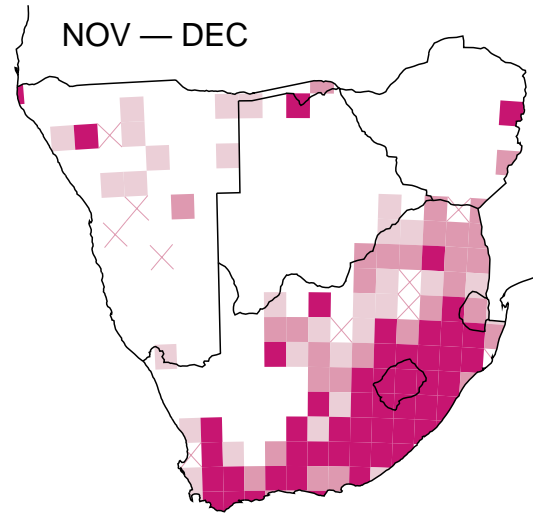
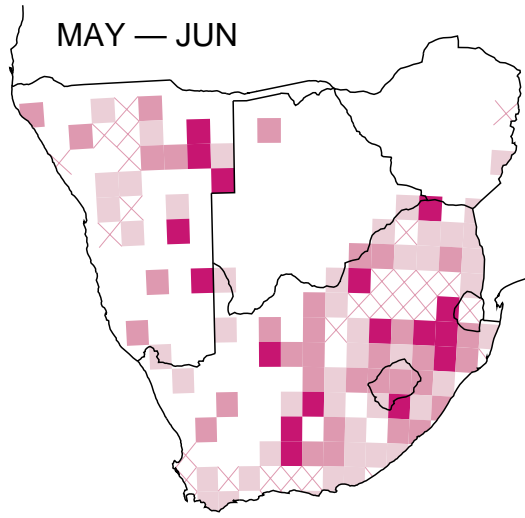
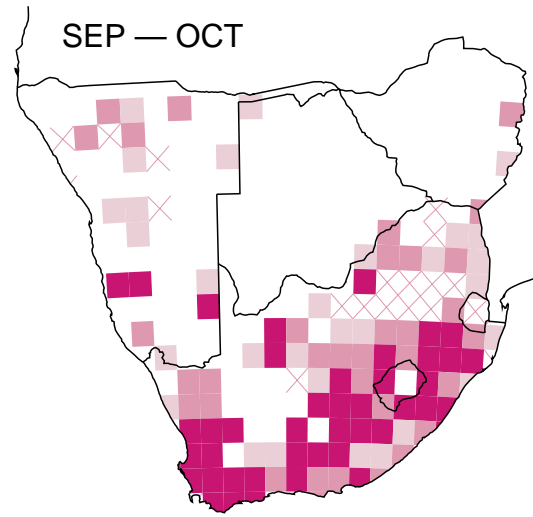
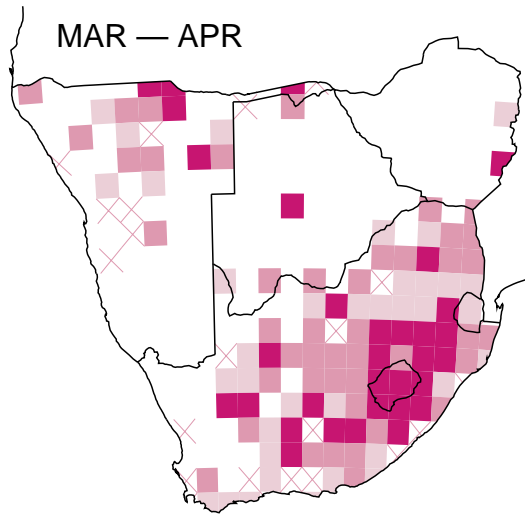
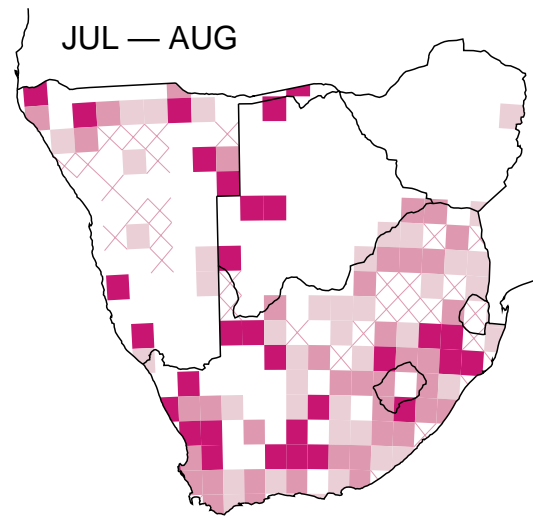
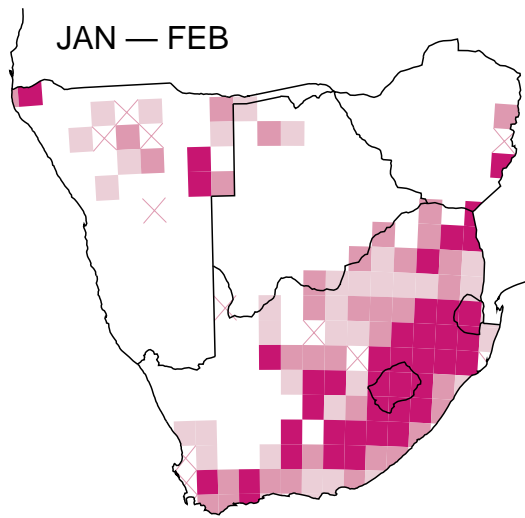
Reporting rates for vegetation types



Also marginally in Namib and Miombo.



COMMON QUAIL



Seasonal distribution maps; one-degree grid.