

## Helmeted Guineafowl

### Gewone Tarentaal

#### *Numida meleagris*

The Helmeted Guineafowl is probably Africa's most widespread and well-known gamebird, occurring in all sub-Saharan open-country vegetation, from forest edge to sub-desert steppe. In southern Africa, it is locally common to very abundant, especially in savannas mixed with cultivation. The only extensive areas where it is absent are in the semi-arid and desert regions of southern Namibia, southwestern Botswana and the northern Cape Province, where it is probably limited by the availability of drinking water and safe elevated roosts. Strongholds are in areas with permanent water, but it also occurs, unexpectedly, in parts of the Kalahari where surface water occurs only irregularly, while numbers in the Okavango Delta are inexplicably low (Herremans *et al.* 1994f). There is a clear gap in the distribution in Lesotho and the Transkei. Populations can fluctuate dramatically and can be predicted by the frequency of rainfall prior to the breeding season (Crowe 1978b; Crowe & Siegfried 1978; Berry & Crowe 1985). In the semi-arid areas, breeding success is virtually nil during years of below-average rainfall (Herremans 1993d, 1995c).

Two of nine subspecies occur in southern Africa, *N. m. damarensis* confined to the drier western parts of Botswana and Namibia, and *coronata* throughout the rest of the species' range in southern Africa (Crowe 1978a).

Adults occur in pairs or small groups during the breeding season and in small to large flocks during the remainder of the year. It is a conspicuous and easily identifiable species.

**Habitat:** It is a commensal of humans, inhabiting most agricultural regions, both of extensive and intensive agriculture, town limits and suburban parks and gardens, as well as natural habitats. Vegetation associations were presumably more limited before habitat modification wrought by humans.

**Movements:** In most places it is resident, with long-term stability of flock membership (Crowe & Elbin 1987), but in northern Botswana, short-distance movements from a hinterland in the dry *Baikiaea* woodlands to sites of large aggregations along the Chobe riverfront have been inferred (Herremans *et al.* 1994f). The formation of large nonbreeding flocks from pairs or small family parties also assumes some mobility. The strong seasonal patterns in the models reflect seasonal changes in conspicuousness linked to their raucous calling early in the breeding season.

**Breeding:** It is more reliant on and responsive to rainfall in its timing of breeding and its breeding success than the francolins (Berry & Crowe 1985). Peak egg-laying is November–February

in the Transvaal (Zone 6), November–January in Zimbabwe (Zone 5) and KwaZulu-Natal (Zone 7), and spans October–March in Botswana (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; N.J. Skinner *in litt.*). An earlier September–December peak occurs in the winter-rainfall region of the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4), while a later peak in March occurs in Namibia where late-summer rains are usual (Winterbottom 1968a; Brown & Clinning *in press*). Atlas data confirm this pattern, but with a later bias caused by records of chicks.

**Interspecific relationships:** Its closest relative in southern Africa is the Crested Guineafowl *Guttera pucherani*. They prefer different habitats but can occur together, e.g. in the Zambezi Valley (A.J. Tree pers. comm.).

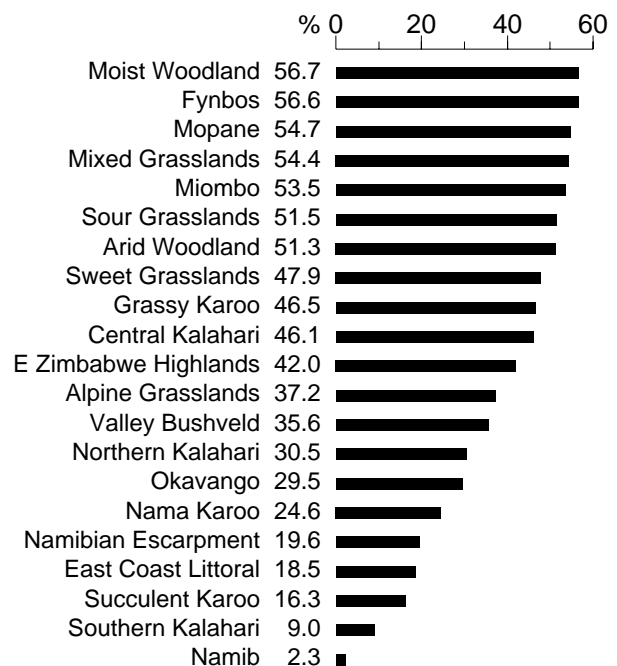
**Historical distribution and conservation:** The Helmeted Guineafowl has undergone greater range expansion than any other gamebird in southern Africa. Prior to the 20th century, it was not found south of the Orange River or west of Graaff-Reinet (3224BA) (T.M. Crowe pers. comm.). The reasons are probably a combination of translocations and natural expansions following cultivation, particularly of grain crops, increased artificial water points in the drier regions, and the use of telephone poles as roosts in treeless areas (Wolff & Milstein 1977).

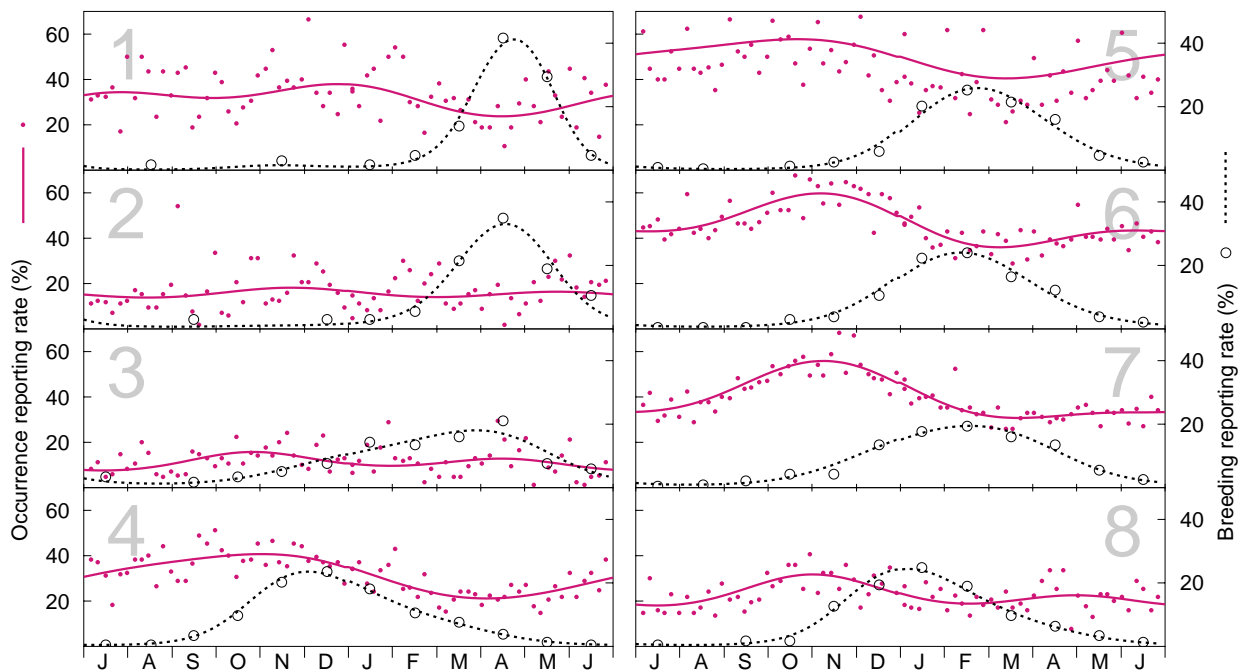
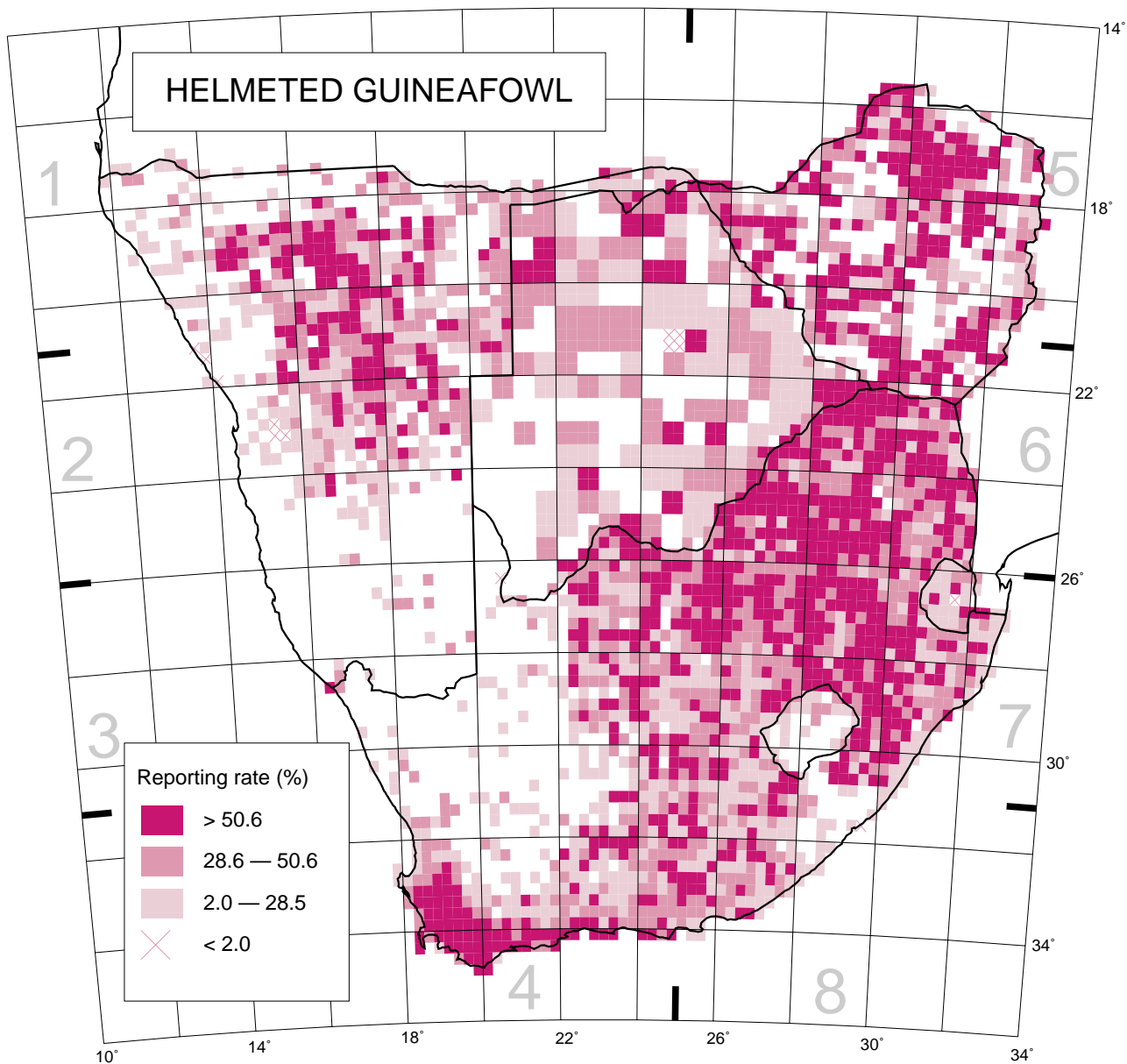
The 'holes' in Lesotho and Transkei suggest the effects of anthropogenic factors, although altitude may also be a factor in Lesotho. As with the Redwing Francolin *Francolinus levaillantii*, these gaps indicate dramatic local extinctions resulting from severe habitat degradation, and persecution by humans and domestic animals. The conservation status of the land also has a dramatic effect on the density of guineafowl in Botswana, which is almost certainly related to hunting and grazing pressure (Herremans 1993d; Herremans *et al.* 1994e; Rutina 1994). A further threat is the introduction of domesticated guineafowl, originating from West Africa, into wild populations. These birds have been selected and bred for commercially desirable traits which, if introduced by released stock, could make wild populations less viable (Wolff & Milstein 1987).

R.M. Little

Recorded in 3009 grid cells, 66.3%  
Total number of records: 66 666  
Mean reporting rate for range: 48.3%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 1017, 557, 617, 2731, 4374, 5270, 7866, 1273; Breeding: 65, 37, 118, 655, 300, 571, 869, 175.