African Crake

Afrikaanse Riethaan

Crex egregia

The African Crake is a resident and intra-African migrant, widespread in grassland and marshes of sub-Saharan Africa, to which it is endemic, and locally common, except in rainforest and desert (Urban *et al.* 1986). Its occurrences are relatively well documented because it is less secretive and easier to flush than other grassland crakes. Newly arrived migrants are often seen in the open, and when breeding it has a short, harsh churring call which is distinctive (Taylor 1985; Urban *et al.* 1986).

In southern Africa it is widespread in the east and extreme north, and is scarce to locally common. Its western distributional boundary correlates with the 300-mm summer-rainfall isohyet; the occurrence of stragglers to the Namib Desert and the west coast is attributed to the effect of prolonged easterly winds (Irwin 1981; Urban *et al.* 1986; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Avery *et al.* 1988). Atlas data confirm this pattern, while records from Namibia (2417DD) and Botswana (2424D) constitute small range extensions.

Habitat: Its habitat is predominantly grasslands, from those at the edges of freshwater swamps, marshes and open waters, which are often seasonally moist or inundated, to dry grassland in lightly wooded country (Urban *et al.* 1986). It is also found in rice, maize and cotton fields, neglected cultivation, rank herbage, moist sugar-cane adjacent to marshy areas, and in airfields; it can occur close to human habitation (Irwin 1981; Taylor 1985; Urban *et al.* 1986; pers. obs). At Ndola, Zambia, it preferred tussocky damp grass 0.3–1 m tall; it arrived 7–8 weeks after the start of the rains, when suitable cover had developed (Taylor 1985). Its known habitat preferences are reflected in the vegetation analysis: the highest reporting rates being from the moist grasslands of the Okavango where it breeds at temporary wetlands and is locally common (Hines 1993), and from other vegetation types in which predominantly moist or lush grasslands occur. It is rarely recorded from high-altitude grasslands.

Movements: It moves away from the equator, both north and south, to breed during the rainy season, but also breeds in equatorial regions (Urban *et al.* 1986). Some seasonally occurring nonbreeding populations have been located (Taylor 1985; Brosset & Erard 1986; Urban *et al.* 1986). Existing records from KwaZulu-Natal and the Transvaal (Cyrus & Robson 1980; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), and the models for these regions (Zones 6 and 7) and for northern Namibia and Botswana (Zone 1), suggest that the bird is of seasonal occurrence, rather than a nomadic resident, in these areas (*contra* Avery *et al.* 1988). In Zones 5 and 6, a scattering of nonbreeding-season records suggests that some birds fail to migrate after breeding, as is known from other areas where suitable habitat persists in the nonbreeding season (Taylor 1985; Urban *et al.* 1986). Its breeding habitat is often burnt during the dry season, forcing emigration (Urban *et al.* 1986).

Breeding: It breeds in southern Africa during the rains, December–March in Zimbabwe, mostly January–February (Irwin 1981) and October–March in South Africa (Urban *et al.* 1986; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). There are only three records for Botswana: January (2) and March (1) (N.J. Skinner *in litt.*). The atlas confirms the pattern of breeding in the wet season.

Interspecific relationships: Where it occurs alongside the Palearctic migrant Corncrake *Crex crex* in grassland habitats, the Corncrake normally occupies drier areas and occurs at lower population densities (Taylor, P.B. 1984, 1985).

Historical distribution and conservation: Its distribution is probably largely unchanged overall, although the local distribution of its habitats may have changed. Although killed for food in some regions, the African Crake appears to be under no immediate threat. Overgrazing, cultivation and wetland destruction must have reduced its habitats in many areas but, as for the Corncrake, some of its grassland habitats may have increased locally in recent years.

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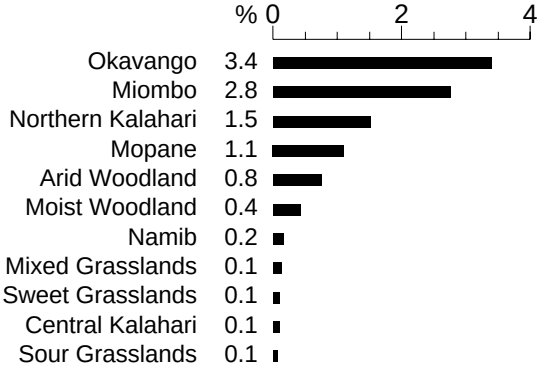
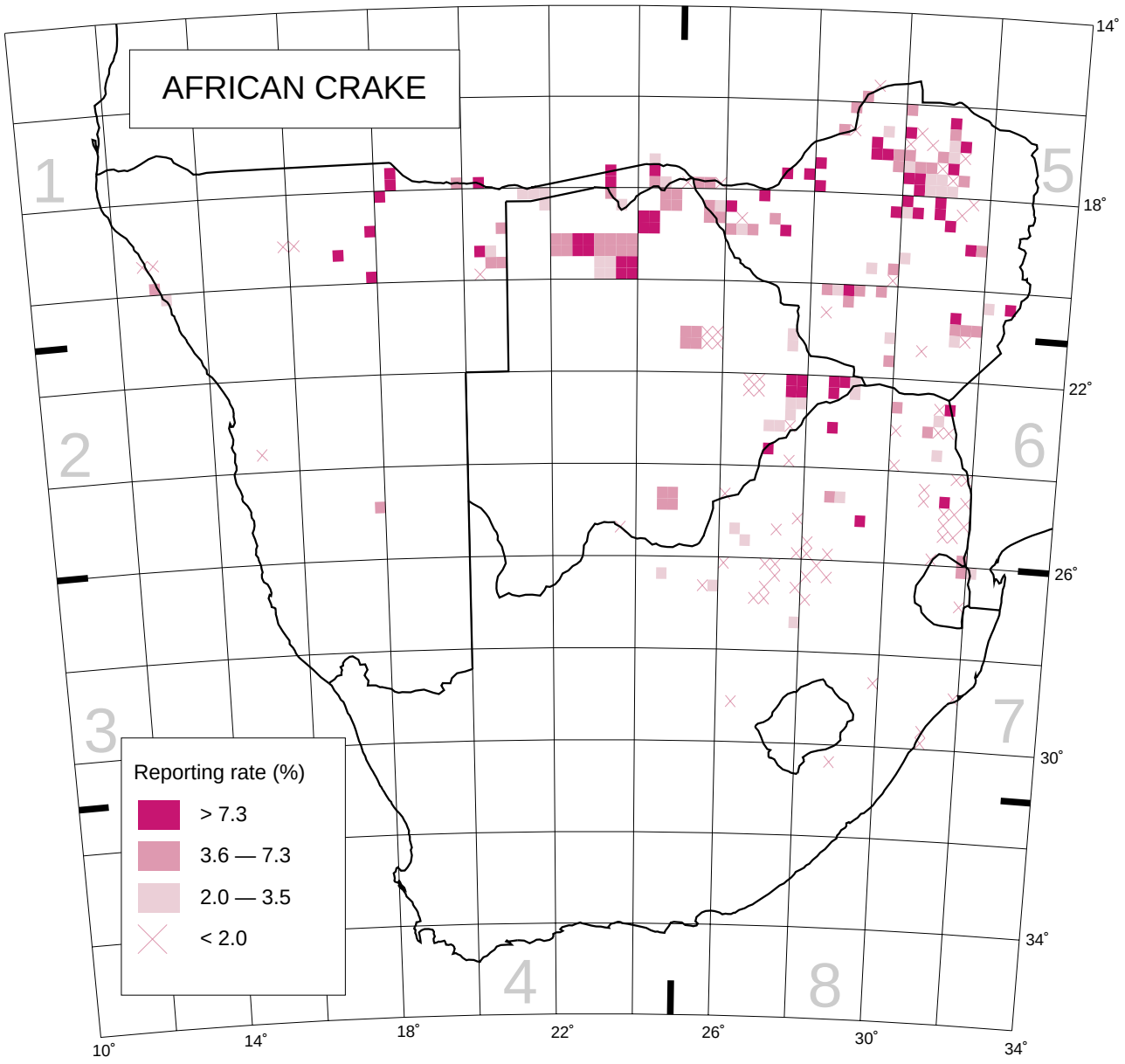
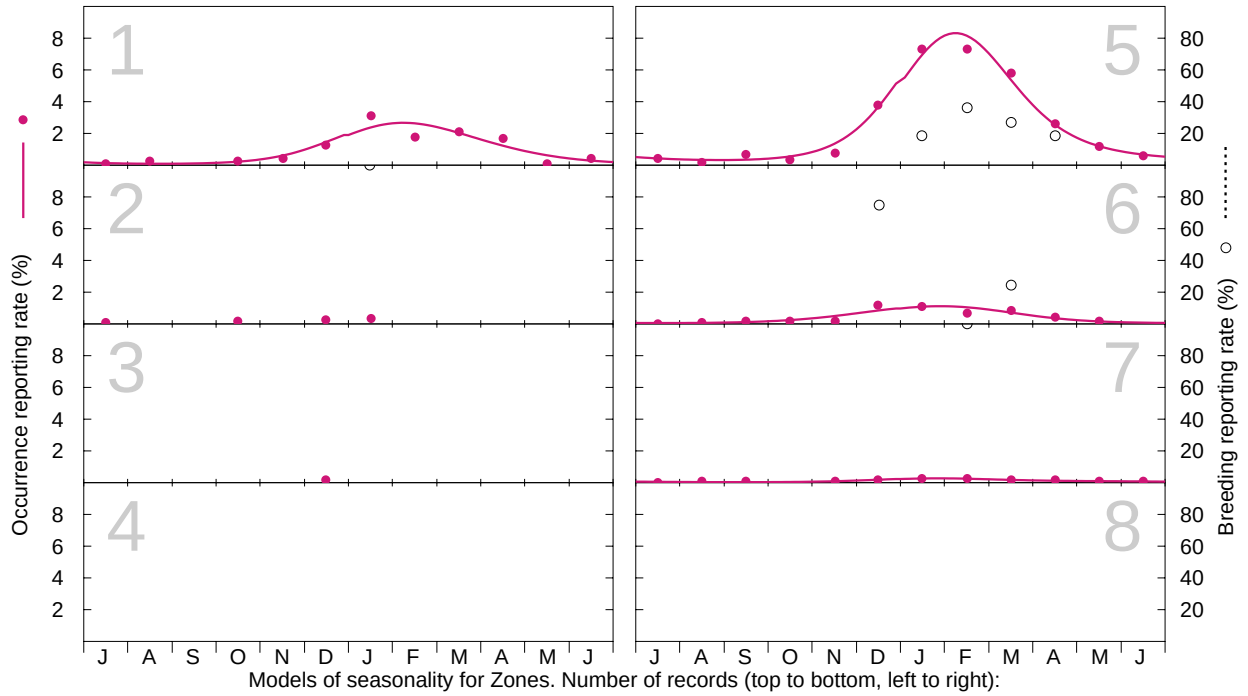
Recorded in 258 grid cells, 5.7%
Total number of records: 542
Mean reporting rate for range: 2.2%

Reporting rates for vegetation types







Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 82, 7, 1, 0, 291, 105, 52, 0; Breeding: 0, 1, 0, 0, 11, 4, 2, 0.