

Moorhen

Waterhoender

Gallinula chloropus

The Moorhen is a familiar waterbird with an almost worldwide distribution in tropical and temperate zones, being absent only from Australasia where it is replaced by the closely related Dusky Moorhen *G. tenebrosa* (Snow 1978; Urban *et al.* 1986). The nominate race occurs in North Africa and through Eurasia, and Palearctic birds winter in Africa south to Senegal, Gambia, Mali, northern Nigeria, central Chad and northern Sudan (Urban *et al.* 1986). The race *G. c. meridionalis* is patchily distributed in sub-Saharan Africa, being largely absent from forested and arid regions, and from northern Angola and parts of East Africa (Urban *et al.* 1986).

In southern Africa it is widely distributed and common, being absent only from parts of the dry west and most of the Kalahari (Urban *et al.* 1986; Maclean 1993b). The atlas data show that its distribution is similar to that of the Redknobbed Coot *Fulica cristata* although it is not as ubiquitous or as frequently recorded as that species, except in the Okavango where the coot is almost entirely absent.

Habitat: It exploits a wide range of natural and artificial wetlands with fringing (usually emergent) vegetation, including lakes, dams, ponds, pans, rivers, streams, canals, ditches, rice fields, swamps and marshes. It normally avoids saline conditions but inhabits brackish waters on the Namibian coast (Urban *et al.* 1986; Del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). Although it requires ready access to some open water, it prefers sheltered sites and avoids very open situations (Cramp *et al.* 1980; Del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). The vegetation analysis shows a similar pattern to that for the Redknobbed Coot, the highest reporting rates being from those biomes which contain suitable natural and artificial waterbodies.

Movements: The northernmost populations of this widespread species are migratory, but the race *meridionalis* is mainly sedentary, although seasonal local movements are widely reported. In Zimbabwe some birds may disperse to the major river valley systems and the southeast lowveld during the rains, and it breeds at temporary wetlands, e.g. at the Nyl River floodplain (2428DA) in the Transvaal and in northeastern Namibia (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Hines 1993). The models show little seasonal variation in

reporting rates, except for a slight increase during the rains in some Zones.

Breeding: The atlas data give evidence of breeding activity throughout the year in all areas. Peaks occurred during the rains in Zones 2, 3 and 7, before and during the rains in Zones 6 and 8, after the rains in Zone 1, and during the dry season in Zones 4 and 5, coinciding with summer and winter, respectively. Breeding is probably opportunistic in response to wetland conditions and different studies may thus find striking differences in breeding seasonality reflecting year-to-year variability. The present records deviate from egg-laying data in Zimbabwe, recorded throughout the year but peaking January–April and June–August (Irwin 1981), but confirm that peak breeding is mostly in autumn in Namibia, during the rains in the Transvaal and during early summer in the southwestern Cape Province (Winterbottom 1968a; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Brown & Clinning in press.).

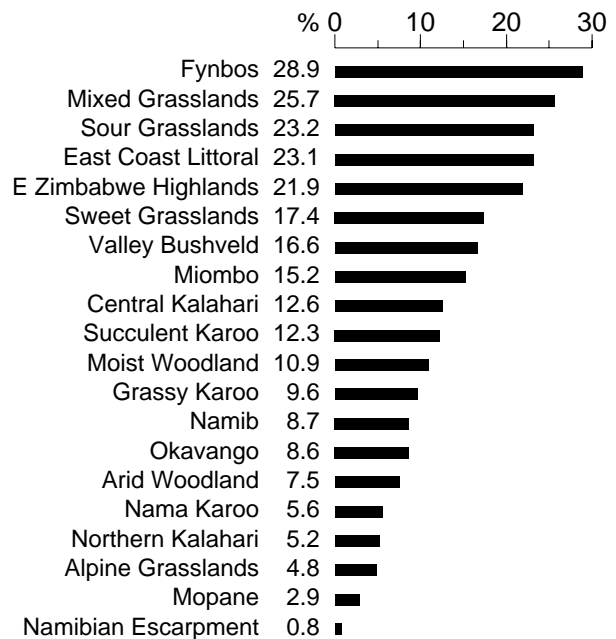
Interspecific relationships: In contrast to the Lesser Moorhen *G. angulata*, it prefers permanent waters with fringing vegetation; nevertheless both species regularly occur together. It frequently occurs alongside the Redknobbed Coot at wetland margins but is less prone to venture far out into open water.

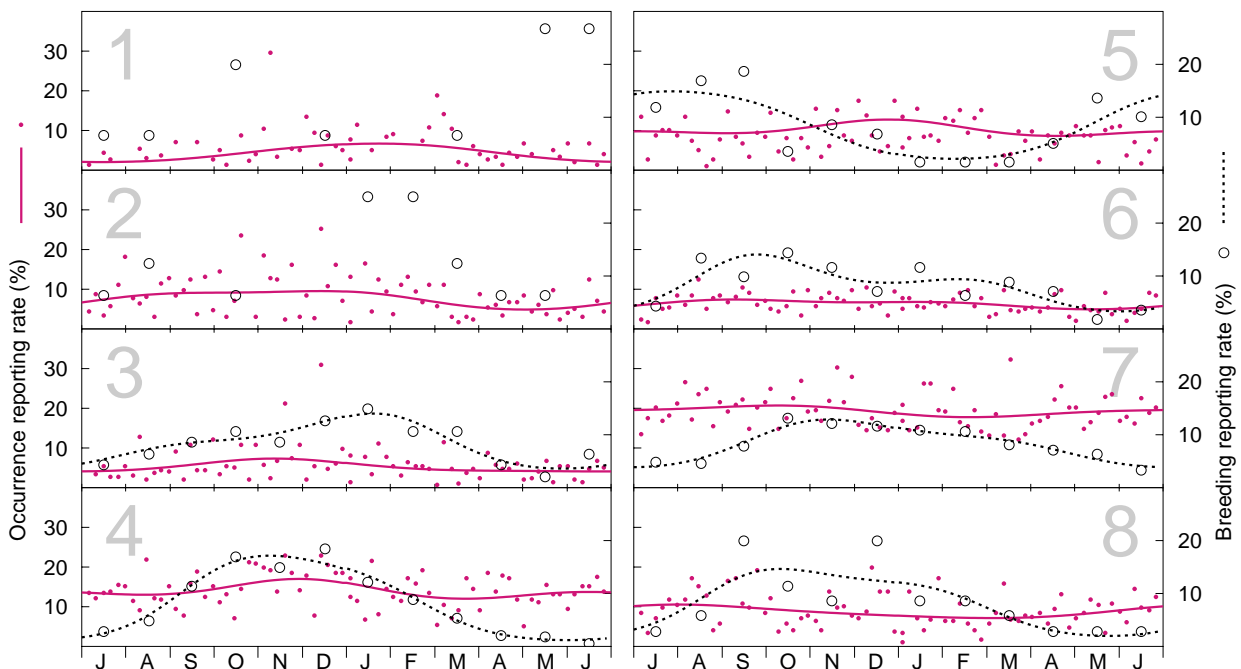
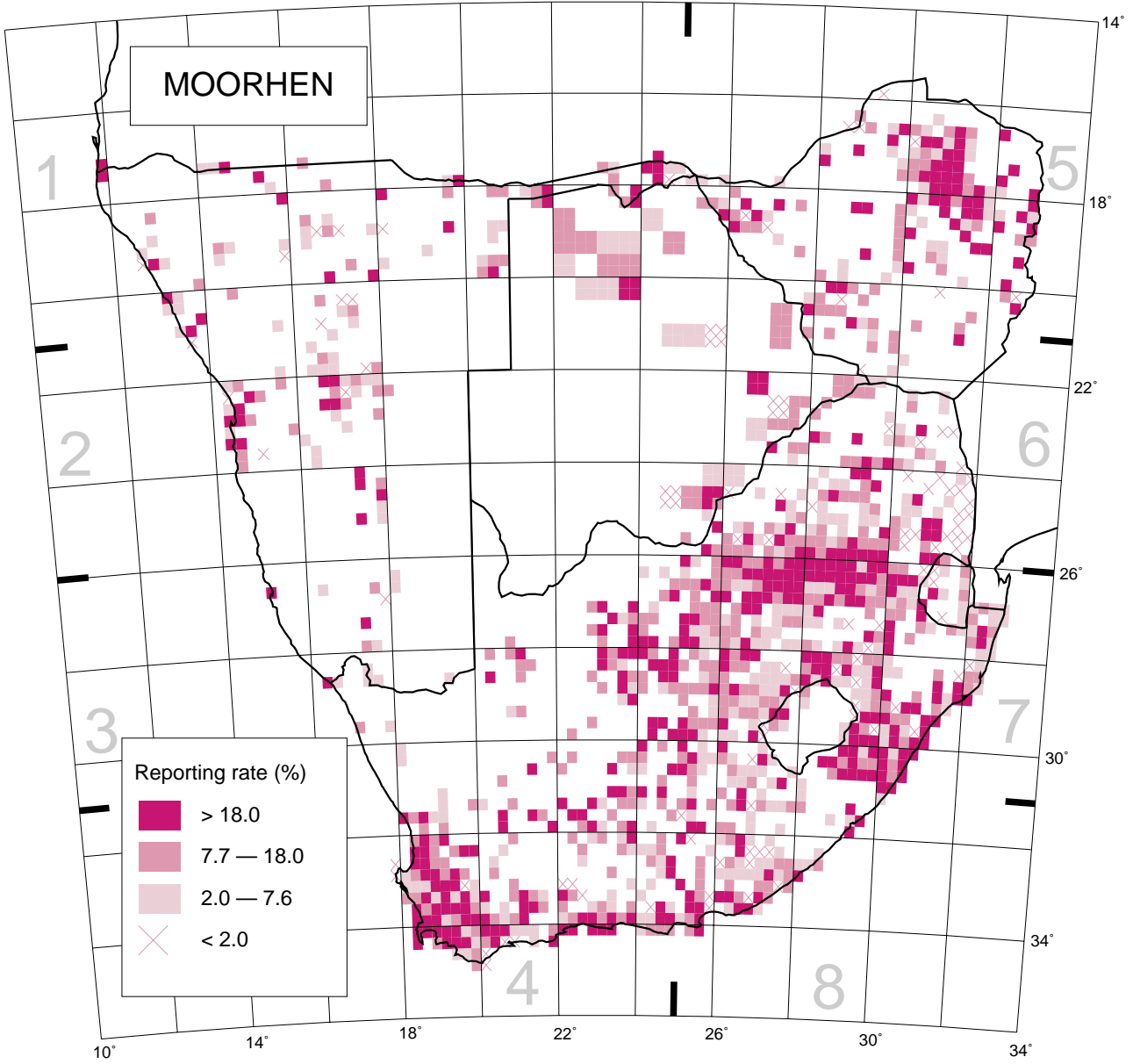
Historical distribution and conservation: The Moorhen readily exploits new and artificially created habitats, even in urban areas, and is not easily displaced by changes or by human disturbance (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). It has benefited from the construction of artificial waterbodies, especially in the southwestern Cape Province and in KwaZulu-Natal (Hockey *et al.* 1989; pers. obs).

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Recorded in 1347 grid cells, 29.7%
Total number of records: 24 643
Mean reporting rate for range: 21.9%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 133, 264, 282, 1217, 886, 722, 3772, 475; Breeding: 15, 16, 47, 346, 59, 112, 669, 35.