

## Lesser Jacana

### Dwerglangtoon

*Microparra capensis*

This diminutive jacana, restricted to sub-Saharan Africa, is less common, less widespread and less predictable in its occurrence than the African Jacana *Actophilornis africanus*, both in southern Africa and in the Afrotropics as a whole (Hayman *et al.* 1986; Tarboton & Fry 1986). The map and vegetation analysis clearly demonstrate the extent to which the Okavango Delta is the southern African stronghold of the Lesser Jacana; it is a resident breeder here. Outside of the Delta it is found at scattered localities in Zimbabwe and northern KwaZulu-Natal; it breeds in both these areas and is regularly present, though perhaps not resident. There are a few records of birds seen in the interior of the Transvaal, KwaZulu-Natal, Swaziland and central Namibia, but at best it is an infrequent, nonbreeding visitor in these regions.

In northern KwaZulu-Natal, a density of about 22 birds/100 ha of wetland was recorded; in the Okavango Delta, 19 were counted along 2 km of floodplain edge (Tarboton & Fry 1986). Elsewhere in their breeding range it is unusual to find more than one or two pairs on a pan. While breeding they are in pairs, whereas at other times single birds, or sometimes loosely associated groups of up to about 20 birds are encountered (e.g. Tree 1987h).

All sight records, but particularly those from outside the known breeding range, are confounded by the possibility of misidentification with the similar-looking juveniles of the African Jacana (Tarboton 1996d); some of the outlying records on the distribution map may be the result of such

identification errors, although this was a species for which records were carefully evaluated.

**Habitat:** It frequents shallow waterbodies, often those which flood only seasonally or erratically, on which there is sufficient cover, especially grass, sedge, *Potamogeton* or some other hydrophyte that provides a suitable substrate on which the birds can forage and seek cover. In the Okavango it is often found on lagoons covered with waterlilies *Nymphaea* spp., whereas at Lake St Lucia and in Hwange National Park grassy substrates are favoured (Tarboton & Fry 1986). Apparently it breeds only on wetlands in hot climates.

**Movements:** There is no evidence of seasonality in the atlas data, but the ephemeral nature of its habitat in much of southern Africa dictates that it moves about in response to changing conditions. In drought periods, for example, it is unlikely that any remain in KwaZulu-Natal, whereas when temporary pans fill, a population that probably numbers hundreds of birds moves into the area.

**Breeding:** It has a mainly summer (November–May) breeding season (Irwin 1981; Tarboton & Fry 1986).

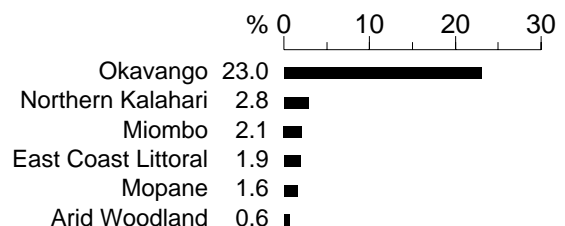
**Interspecific relationships:** It is often found on the same wetlands as the much larger African Jacana. In northern KwaZulu-Natal the two species occupy different parts of wetlands, the smaller species being found mostly in shallower, grassed areas, and the African Jacana on floating beds of *Nymphaea*. When the two come into contact, usually on the *Nymphaea*, the larger species often displaces and even pursues the smaller species. In grassy areas Lesser Jacanas do not face this aggression as the substrate here does not sink under their weight whereas African Jacana are excluded from using these areas by their greater weight (Tarboton & Fry 1986).

**Historical distribution and conservation:** The type specimen (collected in 1839) came from Algoa Bay (3325D), several hundred kilometres south of its present southern limit. It bred regularly at wetlands near Durban (2930D) at the start of the 20th century, and vagrants occurred in the eastern Cape Province (Stark & Sclater 1906). The contraction of range is probably due to loss of natural wetlands, and it is listed as 'rare' in South Africa on the basis of its limited occurrence and small population (Brooke 1984b). The conservation of the Lesser Jacana in southern Africa depends on the protection of swamp wetlands, especially the Okavango Delta.

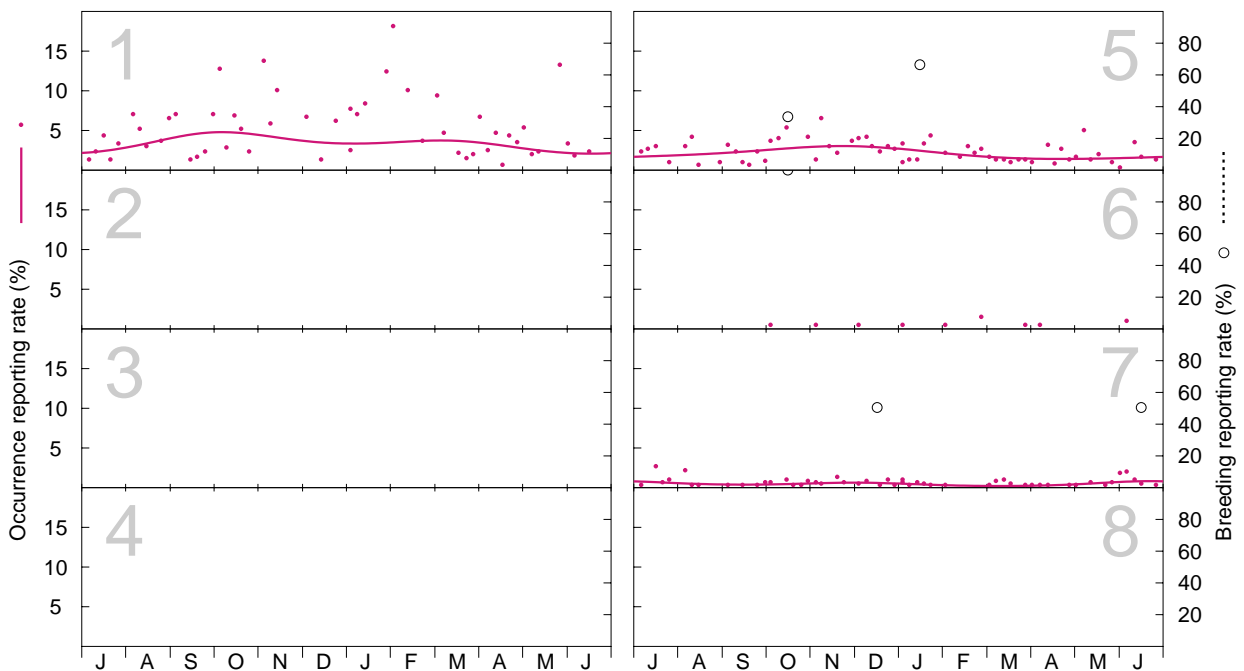
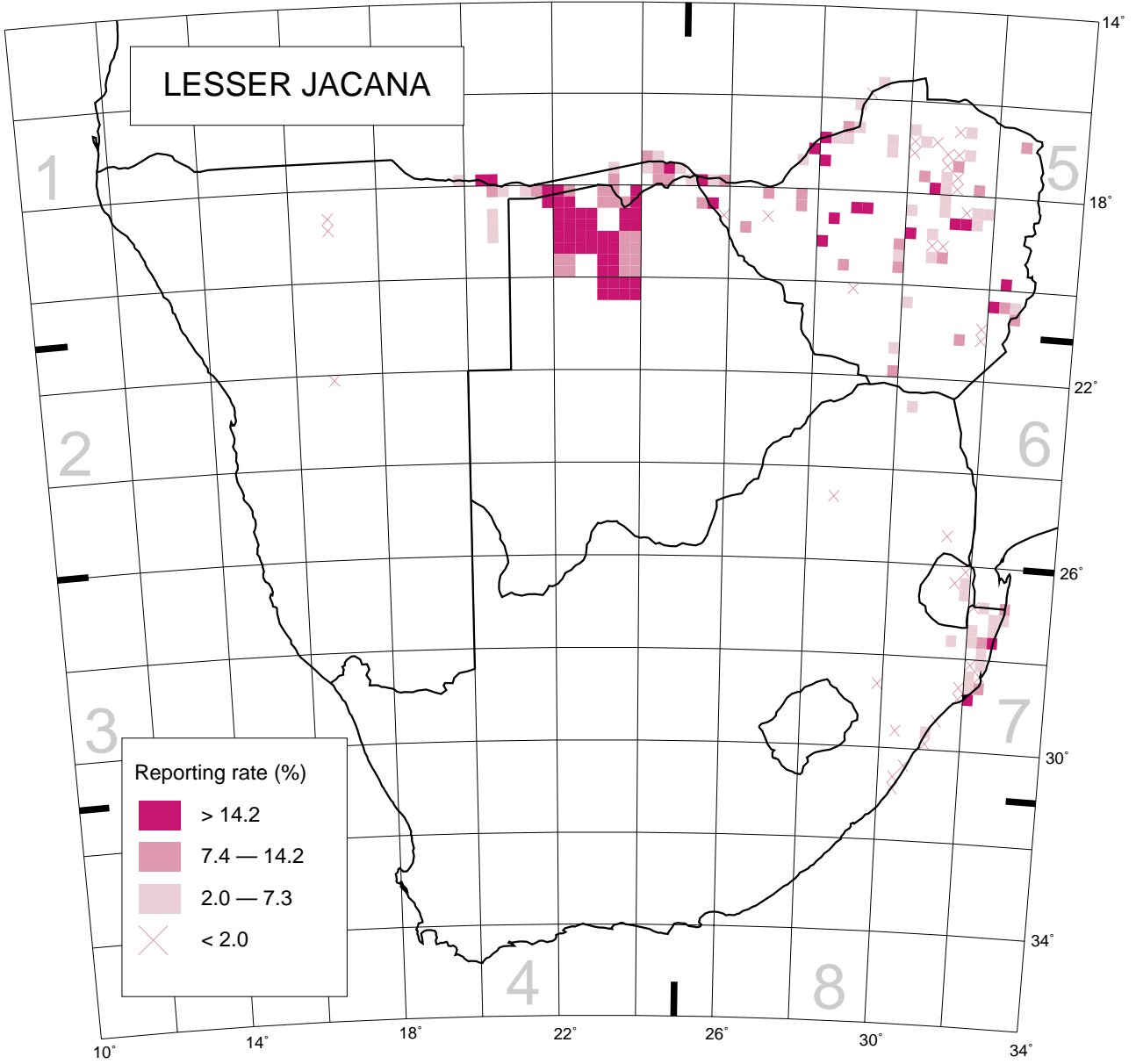
W.R. Tarboton

Recorded in 201 grid cells, 4.4%  
Total number of records: 744  
Mean reporting rate for range: 5.2%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types



Also marginally in Moist Woodland.



Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 111, 0, 0, 0, 183, 11, 94, 0; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 3, 1, 2, 0.