



Whitefronted Plover

Vaalstrandkiewiet

Charadrius marginatus

The Whitefronted Plover is restricted to the Afrotropical region. The grey nominate race is distributed along the west coast of southern Africa, while the sandy-coloured *C. m. arenaceus* is found along the south and east coast as far north as the Limpopo River; a smaller race, *mechowi*, occurs on major tropical rivers with large sandbanks (Clancey 1971a). This migratory inland form may be found on passage to and from the coast in suitable habitat in Botswana and Zimbabwe (pers. obs) but very rarely in the Transvaal and Free State. Inland birds in Namibia are *mechowi* (C.J. Brown *in litt.*).

The coastal population in Namibia and South Africa is estimated to be 18 000 birds (Summers *et al.* 1987a), but this is probably an underestimate because it is easily overlooked during surveys on wide beaches backed by dunes. The largest densities are on the west coast adjacent to the cold Benguela upwelling and on the southern Cape Province coastline as far as Knysna (3423AA) (Summers *et al.* 1987a).

Although there are quite marked regional differences in appearance, it is readily identified; the inland race can be confused with Kittlitz's Plover *C. pecuarius*.

Habitat: It may be found in any coastal habitat type except those totally dominated by rock. It is particularly numerous on beaches where both rock and sand are found (Summers *et al.* 1977). It is common in estuaries; both sandy and muddy substrates are favoured. Inland it occurs along sandy rivers such as the Zambezi, Limpopo, Chobe, Okavango and Nata, but it also uses a variety of wetlands, including natural salt-pans and large bodies of water with gently sloping shorelines when on passage, e.g. the Makgadikgadi Pans and Lake Ngami (2022BD) in Botswana, and the Manyame Lakes (1730DC,DD) in Zimbabwe (pers. obs). In Namibia, it visits seasonal pans, particularly extensive systems such as the Tsumkwe wetlands (1920) in Bushmanland (C.J. Brown *in litt.*).

Movements: Coastal populations, especially breeding territory holders, are essentially sedentary, although some must move considerable distances from exposed shores to estuaries and sheltered bays during stormy winter months. For example, in Algoa Bay, the most exposed shoreline between

the Sundays River estuary (3325DB) and Woody Cape (3326CD) was almost deserted after April and during winter, but numbers at the Sundays and Swartkops (3325DD) river estuaries increased tenfold during winter; meanwhile, on 4 km of more sheltered coastline northwest of Cape Recife (3425DA), there was a c. 30% winter increase (Martin & Baird 1987; Van der Merwe 1987; Spearpoint *et al.* 1988). In Zone 3, where there is little data owing to difficulties in gaining access to the coastline, winter reporting rates were much lower than in summer; heavy birds with fat reserves, found on beaches of the southwestern Cape Province in winter, may well be migrants from this region (pers. obs). Numbers at the Berg River estuary (3218CC) increase about threefold in winter (Velasquez *et al.* 1991).

The subspecies *mechowi* occurs on tropical rivers mainly during winter; its movements are dictated by the flooding of rivers; during recent droughts, some birds may have been able to

oversummer (pers. obs). It is thought that the large majority move to the east coast in summer, probably in Mozambique, where the migrant population is easily masked by resident birds (Irwin 1981). The race *mechowi* has, however, been recorded as far south as Port Alfred (3326DB) in midsummer (Tree 1992a).

There have not yet been any long-distance recoveries of ringed Whitefronted Plovers; nine of 13 recoveries were made at the ringing locality, and the furthest recorded movement was 18 km, from the Swartkops estuary to Cape Recife (SAFRING).

Breeding: Although breeding activity is recorded throughout the year, the models show that most breeding takes place August–February in the four southern Zones. Breeding along the central Namibian coastline (Zone 2) shows little seasonality. In Zimbabwe the inland race breeds mainly July–October when water-levels of the tropical rivers are at their lowest (Irwin 1981). Breeding records in Botswana are September (2) and February (1) (N.J. Skinner *in litt.*).

Historical distribution and conservation: There has been no change in the distribution of coastal populations. An overall decline in numbers and a reduction in breeding success has probably occurred with the increasing use of beaches by holiday-makers and off-road vehicles. For inland populations, a considerable contraction of breeding range has been noted on the tropical sandy rivers with the advent of dam-building and droughts (Tree 1988c). A sharp decline in numbers along the middle Zambezi River has been noted over a decade; 56 birds were seen on 256 km of river in 1991 (Wood & Tree 1992) in comparison with an estimated density in 1981 of 1 bird/ha of sandbank (Elliot 1982). Although the Whitefronted Plover populations of southern Africa are relatively secure, monitoring is needed to detect possible declines on both coastal beaches and inland sandy rivers.

A.J. Tree

Recorded in 379 grid cells, 8.4%
Total number of records: 10 113
Mean reporting rate for range: 25.9%

