

White-crowned Plover

Witkopkiewiet

Vanellus albiceps

Restricted to sub-Saharan Africa, the White-crowned Plover has a fragmented distribution along the major river systems of tropical Africa. The northern limit is from Senegal eastwards to the Sudan and Kenya. In the west, the southern limit is the Congo River basin (Hayman *et al.* 1986). In the east, the southern limit falls within southern Africa where it occurs within the drainage systems of the Zambezi, Save and Limpopo rivers, and along the rivers that flow through the Kruger National Park.

Its phylogenetic relationships are uncertain, although the extralimital Yellow-wattled Plover *V. malabaricus* of the Indian subcontinent may be the most closely related extant species (Ward 1992).

It may sometimes be misidentified because of superficial similarities (white face, yellow wattles, wingspurs) with the more common Wattled Plover *V. senegallus* (for differences see text for the latter species). In flight, confusion may occur with the Longtoed Plover *V. crassirostris* as both species show extensive white on the upper wings. It is unlikely, however, that many misidentifications occurred, because there is limited overlap between the three species in their chosen habitats.

Habitat: It occurs on sandy and muddy banks of the large tropical river systems in the eastern and northern parts of the atlas region. Occasionally it may be found on sandbanks and gravel bars on the edges of lakes, especially Lake Kariba where it is common (Brooke 1984b). It is not totally dependent on water, and may remain to forage in a riverbed after the river has dried up (Hayman *et al.* 1986). It is virtually absent from the Okavango Delta.

Movements: It is resident, with local movements when rivers flood or dry out (Tree 1969; Irwin 1981). Under flood conditions, young birds may disperse widely, while adults may simply retreat to nearby clearings in woodlands on higher ground (Ginn *et al.* 1989). There are reports from West Africa of it migrating in large flocks (Bannerman 1951), although this has not been recorded in southern Africa where the need for extensive movement is limited.

Breeding: It lays its eggs on sandbanks July–November, with a September peak (Irwin 1981). These exposed sites are prone to flooding, thus breeding is timed to occur at low water before summer rains swell the rivers (Urban *et al.* 1986).

Interspecific relationships: It is known to be highly territorial (Reynolds 1968). Nonbreeders tend to gather in large flocks on sandbars away from breeding areas where they feed singly or in scattered parties (Ginn *et al.* 1989). It shares a breeding niche with the African Skimmer *Rynchops flavirostris*, Egyptian Plover *Pluvianus aegyptius* (extralimital), White-fronted Plover *Charadrius marginatus*, and occasionally the Rock Pratincole *Glareola nuchalis*. However, no interspecific interactions have been recorded. It is likely to compete with the Egyptian Plover for invertebrates on the shoreline.

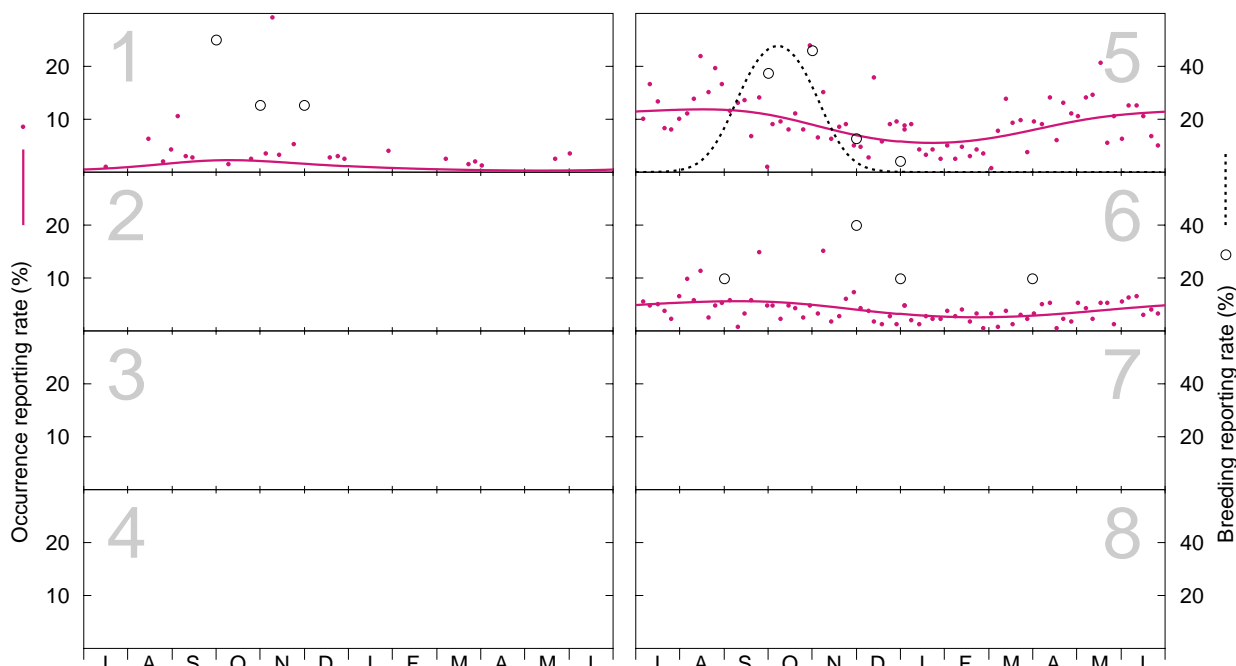
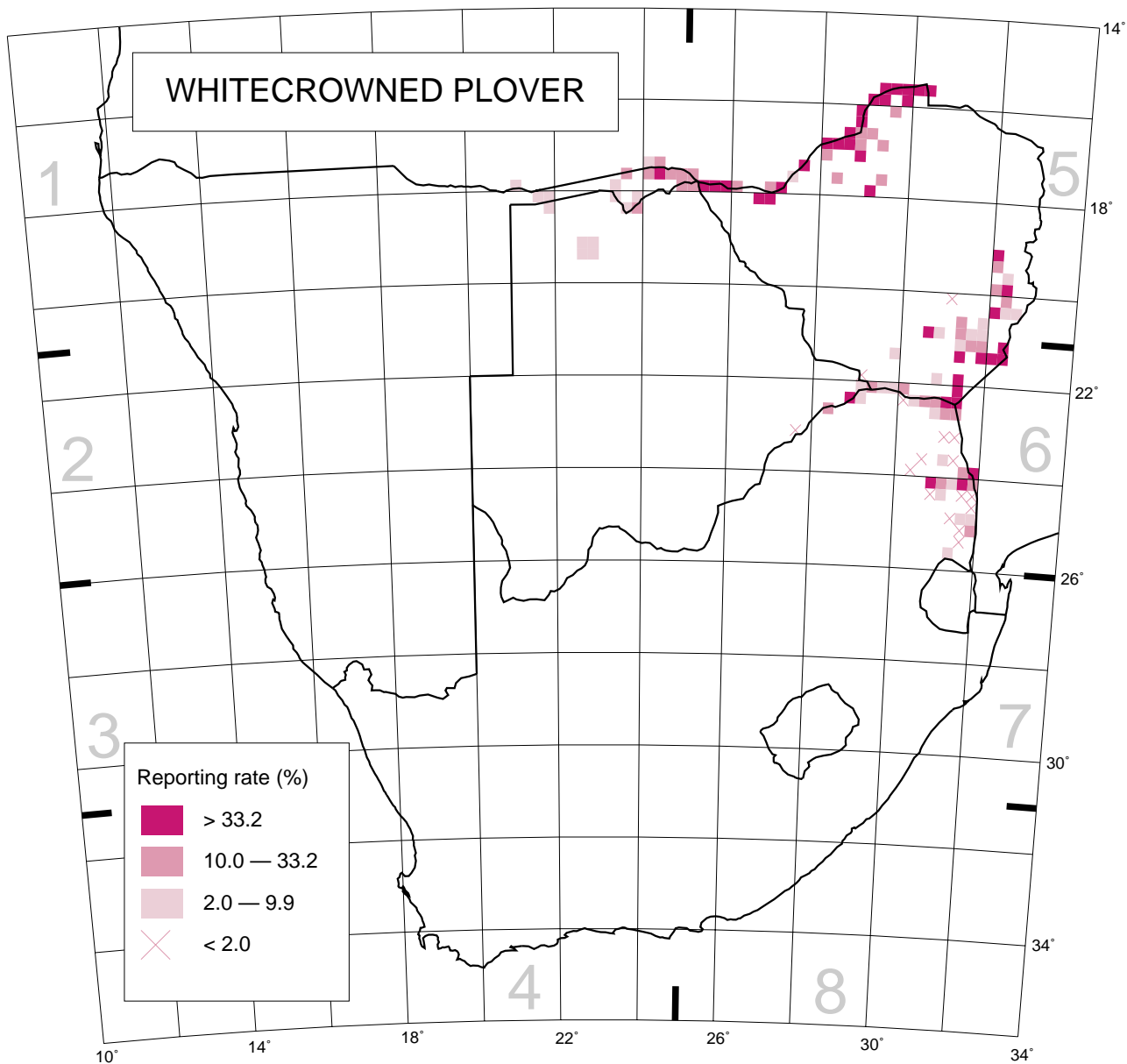
Historical distribution and conservation:

Its distribution is not known to have changed much, although there is an old record from the Vaal River, perhaps of a vagrant (Brooke 1984b), where it does not currently occur. Kemp (1980) found that it no longer breeds in former breeding sites along the Limpopo River west of the Kruger Park.

It is considered 'rare' in South Africa (Brooke 1984b). It breeds in the Kruger National Park, although there are only about 90 breeding pairs there (Tarboton & Nel 1980). It is considered common on the larger rivers of tropical Africa (Johnsgard 1981). Few data are available on densities but these are typically low as a result of the poor productivity of typical habitat (Maclean 1990), and the species' territorial behaviour. Because the White-crowned Plover is dependent on a very specific habitat type, and one that has been degraded in many areas (Kemp 1980), it and its riverine habitat require conservation attention.

D. Ward

Recorded in 131 grid cells, 2.9%
Total number of records: 1701
Mean reporting rate for range: 22.2%



Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 32, 0, 0, 0, 801, 467, 0, 0; Breeding: 4, 0, 0, 0, 24, 5, 0, 0.