

Avocet Bontelsie

Recurvirostra avoetta

The Avocets breeding across southern Europe and south-central Asia are migratory, many moving to Africa south of the Sahara, but there is no evidence that any Palearctic Avocets reach southern Africa (Brooke 1996). The species also breeds discontinuously in Africa at isolated sites along the Mediterranean Sea, the Great Rift Valley and in southern Africa, and shows nomadic movements from these breeding sites in response to rainfall and droughts.

The highest reporting rates in southern Africa were along a band stretching from the southern Transvaal panveld to the southwestern Cape Province, and in Namibia. In the coastal regions of South Africa and Namibia, a total population of 7500 was estimated by Summers *et al.* (1987a) with flocks of up to 1000 at Walvis Bay (2214CD) and Sandwich Harbour (2314AD) in Namibia, in the western and southern Cape Province, the eastern Cape Province near Port Elizabeth (3325DC), and in northern KwaZulu-Natal. At inland wetlands, large flocks congregate seasonally on some of the mine pans in the Free State such as at Welkom (2726DC), and on pans and lakes in northern Botswana. The total southern African population probably numbers 10 000–20 000 birds.

It is unlikely to have been overlooked or misidentified.

Habitat: It is typical of saline waters, preferring high salinities such as are found at the great saline pans of Etosha and Makgadikgadi, at coastal saltworks or on sewage water evaporation ponds as well as coastal lagoons. It rarely utilizes tidal estuaries as there are insufficient concentrations of favoured foods such as brine shrimp *Artemia* spp.

Movements: Movements are complex and the models, being based on presence/absence information accumulated over several years, are unable to clarify movements which are both partial and nomadic. It is likely that movements are mainly in response to rains and that many birds spend periods of drought at coastal localities. When breeding conditions become suitable, there is a general movement away from coastal refuges to breed at ephemeral wetlands across the Cape Province, Free State, Namibia and Botswana. The directions of movement are unknown, nor is it known if they are regular between fixed breeding and nonbreeding areas. There are three records of ringed Avocets moving from the southwestern Cape Province into the Karoo: an adult ringed at Rondevlei (3418AB) in February 1958 was recovered near Pearston (3225CA) 638 km to the east in November 1959, and

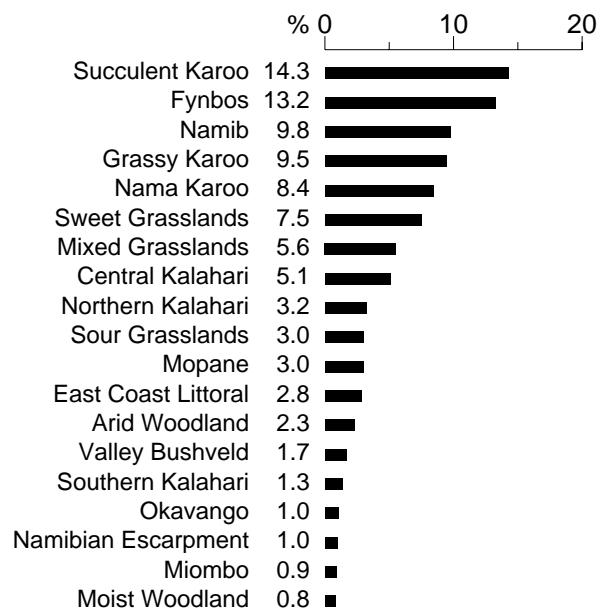
two adults ringed at Langebaan Lagoon (3318AA) in April 1983 and January 1985 were recovered near Calvinia (3120AC) 288 km to the northeast in November 1985, and at Geelvloer Pan (2920CA) 454 km to the north in September 1996, respectively (SAFRING). In Zimbabwe, it has recently become a nonbreeding dry-season visitor April–December, with small numbers overwintering in drought years, and occasionally breeding (pers. obs). To the north, Zambian records, mostly of singles or small flocks, are August–December; falling water-levels provide attractive habitat until water-levels rise during the summer rains (Tree 1969; Taylor 1979). Interchange with birds from East Africa is not suspected.

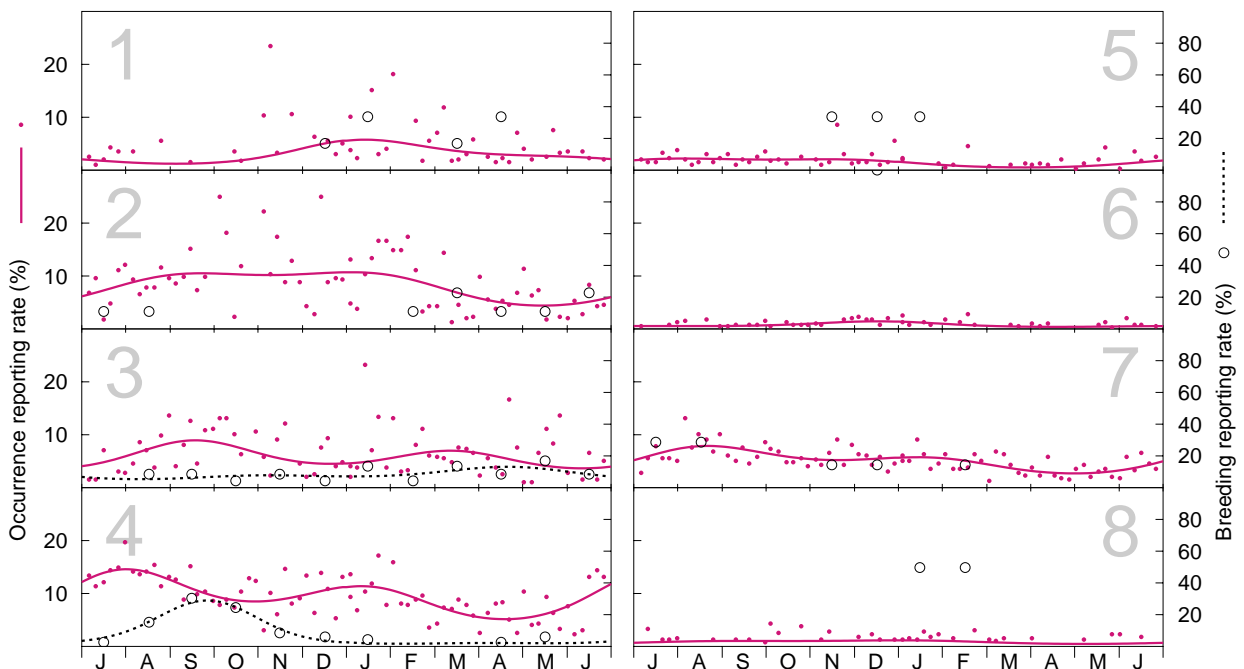
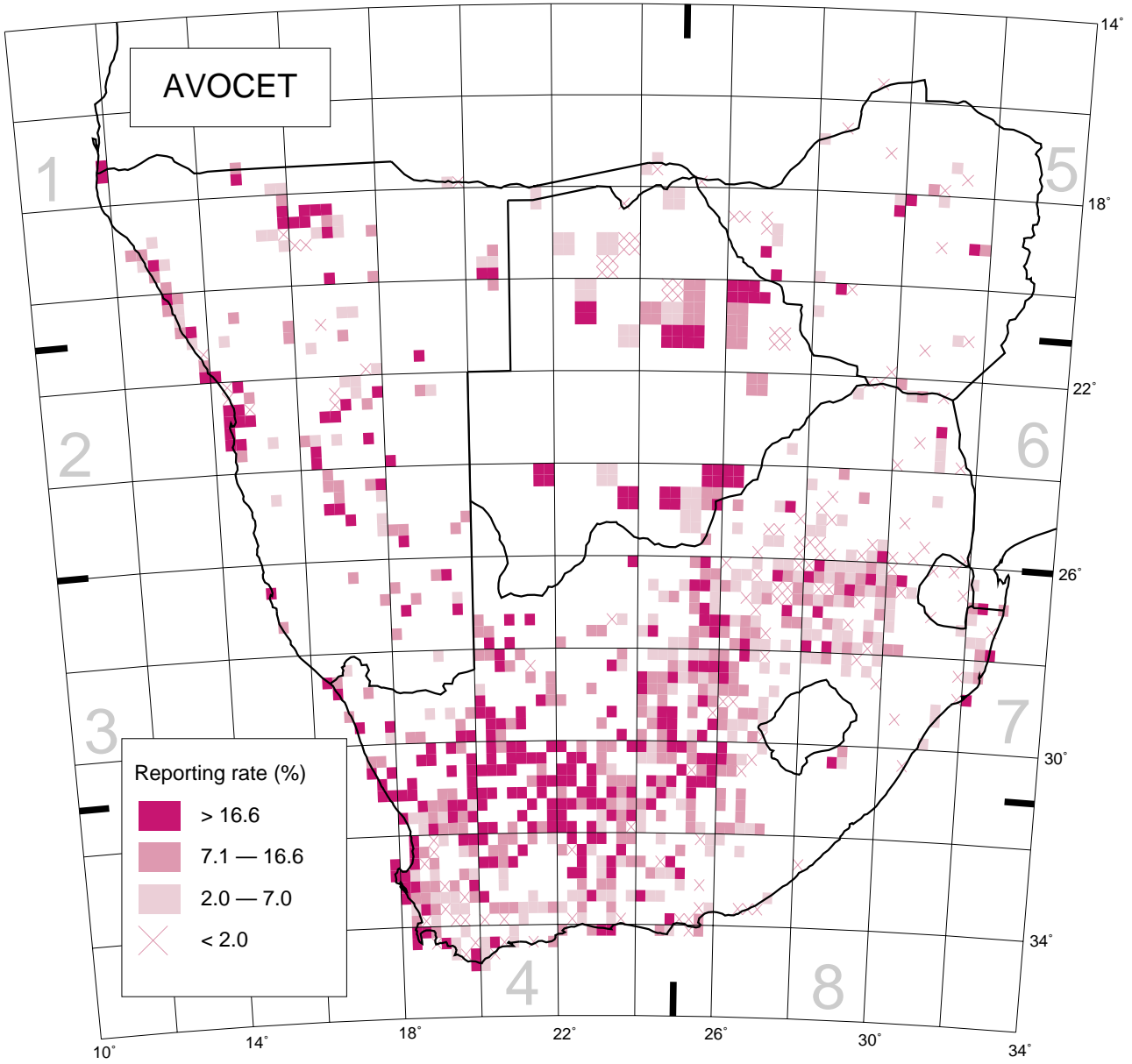
Breeding: It breeds opportunistically when ephemeral wetlands have receding waterlines. It usually breeds in colonies numbering tens of pairs, but single pairs and colonies of hundreds also occur (Urban *et al.* 1986). In the winter-rainfall area (Zone 4) where the seasonal timing of rainfall is predictable, the models show that most breeding takes place in spring when water-levels are receding. Further north, where there is more erratic summer rainfall, the breeding season shows less of a peak, but with a trend towards late summer (Brooke 1996). In Zimbabwe, breeding is purely opportunistic July–January (Tree 1992c). **Historical distribution and conservation:** It would originally have been confined to the natural pan systems of the interior, moving to coastal pans and lagoons as inland habitat dried out. The Avocet must have increased considerably in abundance during the 20th century due to the construction of permanent waterbodies, such as sewage works and saltworks which provide drought refuges. It has become a seasonal visitor to Zimbabwe since the early 1980s. Brooke (1996) considered that active management to conserve the Avocet in southern Africa was unnecessary because of the absence of widespread threats and because of its opportunistic breeding.

A.J. Tree

Recorded in 982 grid cells, 21.6%
Total number of records: 8162
Mean reporting rate for range: 11.2%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 93, 283, 326, 823, 131, 84, 1011, 47; Breeding: 6, 9, 23, 46, 3, 1, 7, 2.