

# Blackwinged Stilt

## Rooipootelsie

### *Himantopus himantopus*

The Blackwinged Stilt is a cosmopolitan species: the nominate race occurs in Africa, southern Europe and Asia, and eastwards to India; another four races occur in Australasia, North and South America, and Hawaii (Hayman *et al.* 1986). It occurs over most of Africa apart from areas without suitable surface waters, such as forests, mountains and deserts. Within southern Africa it is widely but locally distributed, avoiding only areas lacking suitable surface water. The highest reporting rates were in the western Cape Province, Free State and northeastern Botswana, with locally high rates in Namibia, Transvaal, northeastern KwaZulu-Natal and Zimbabwe.

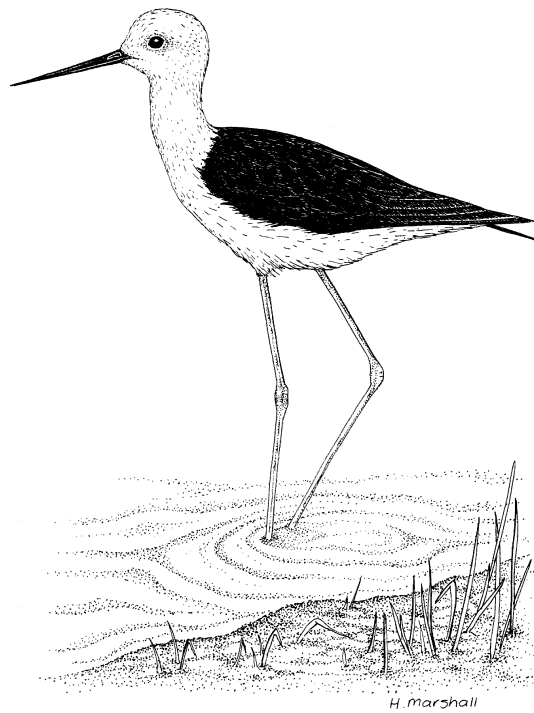
With a species so widely dispersed and which normally occurs in small numbers, it is difficult to estimate total population size. During midsummer surveys of Namibian and South African coastal wetlands, 2800 stilts were counted (Summers *et al.* 1987a). Because numbers in the interior are larger, a tentative estimate of the population size is 10 000–20 000 birds. The higher reporting rates compared to Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* probably result from less flocking.

The adult stilt is unmistakable, but care needs to be taken with newly fledged young which can be confused with the Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*.

**Habitat:** Typically a bird of extensive open, shallow waters, it is also found at coastal lagoons, saltpans and other forms of evaporation ponds. However, it may occur at virtually any body of water when in transit. Especially favoured are sewage ponds and other industrial waste disposal ponds with concentrations of suitable chemicals creating alkaline conditions.

**Movements:** In southern Africa it is locally common but highly nomadic (Maclean 1993b). Further north, in Zambia, it is essentially a breeding migrant, leaving during the period of peak flooding (Tree 1969); in Zimbabwe it occurs on passage (Tree 1993c). Censuses in Zimbabwe suggest that most leave during the flood period, so that considerable numbers must move westwards or southwards into the lower-rainfall areas of Botswana and South Africa. The model for Zone 5, where reporting rates drop by March to about half their October peak, supports this, even though reporting rates are relatively insensitive to partial migration. Knowledge of stilt migration in Africa remains incomplete.

**Breeding:** It is an opportunistic breeder in southern Africa. It usually forms colonies of a few pairs, occasionally colonies of hundreds of pairs, and sometimes nests solitarily. Nests are invariably sited on the edges of ephemeral wetlands; losses through flooding and through too rapid drying out of the breeding site are major hazards, and breeding success tends to be low. The models for most Zones show breeding in all months of the year. There is, however, a distinct peak after the winter rains in the western Cape Province (Zone 4), while in northern Namibia and northwestern Botswana (Zone 1), the tendency is for late-summer and winter breeding before the



ephemeral waters dry out. In Zimbabwe, breeding is mainly from May onwards whenever suitable habitat becomes available, with a distinct peak August–September (Irwin 1981) when receding waters are still close to vegetation cover in which the young can hide.

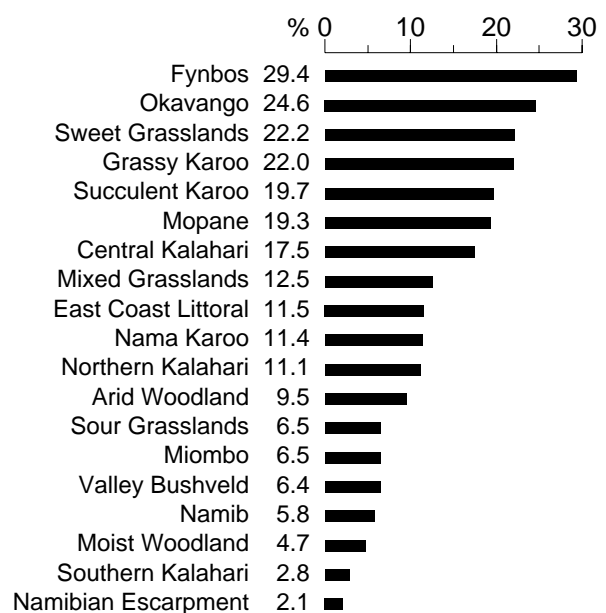
**Historical distribution and conservation:** In southern Africa it was originally confined to riparian floodplains, pan systems and coastal lagoons. At the beginning of the 20th century it was described by Stark & Sclater (1906) to be 'not a very common bird', known from 'isolated localities'. The creation of artificial waterbodies has enabled the Blackwinged Stilt to expand and fill in its distribution considerably. This has been striking in Zimbabwe where it was considered to be mainly a bird of the sandbanks of the middle Zambezi River (Irwin 1981). Over the past two decades it has increased from an occasional

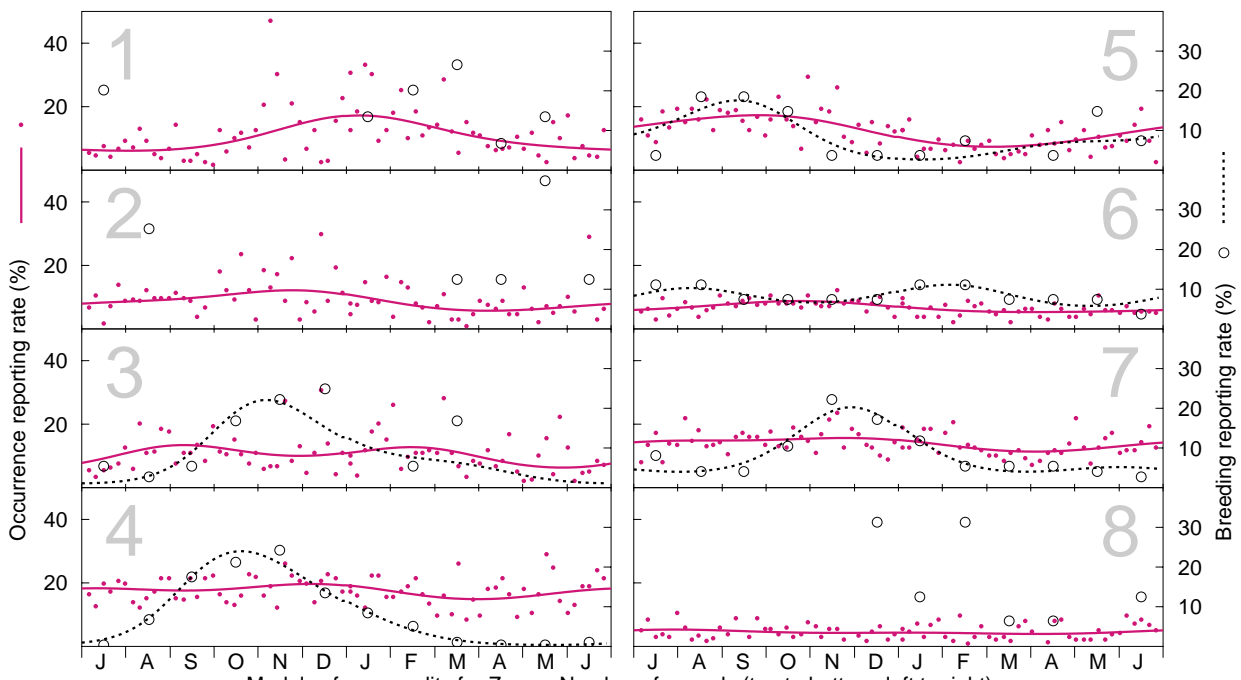
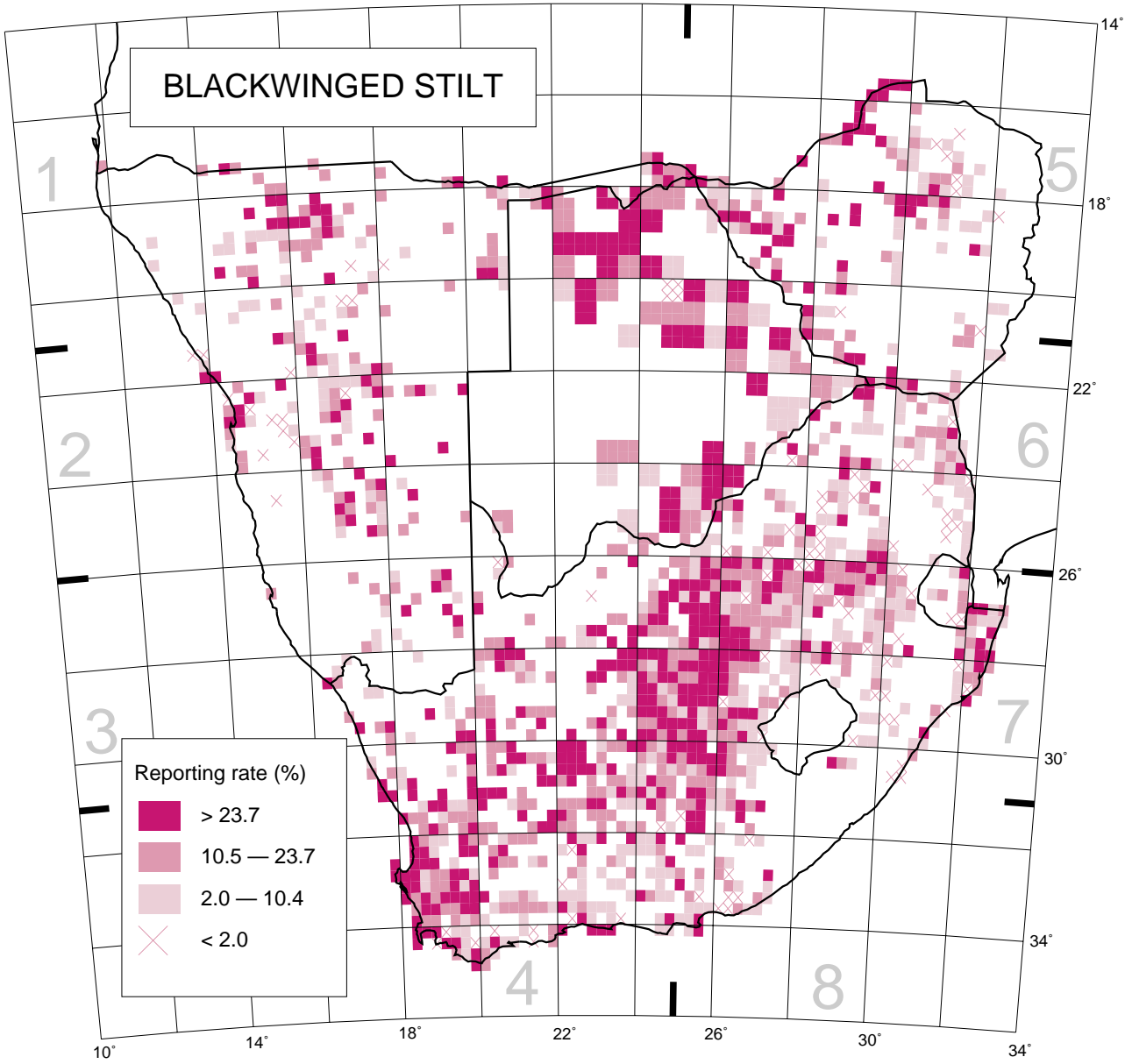
visitor on the central plateau to a fairly common breeding and passage visitor with a concentration exceeding 1000 birds (Tree 1974, 1993c). Numbers must also have increased in Botswana where, in a survey of 1730 km of shoreline of a variety of wetlands, it was encountered about 30 times more commonly on man-made (0.4 km/bird) than on natural (12.6 km/bird) wetlands (M. Herremans unpubl. data). The rich feeding conditions created by eutrophic waters suits it. The Blackwinged Stilt is not of conservation concern in southern Africa.

A.J. Tree

Recorded in 1617 grid cells, 35.6%  
Total number of records: 19 484  
Mean reporting rate for range: 18.9%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 321, 298, 564, 1521, 1092, 762, 2718, 245; Breeding: 15, 8, 36, 194, 27, 27, 76, 16.