

Greyheaded Gull

Gryskopmeeu

Larus cirrocephalus

The Greyheaded Gull is widely but patchily distributed in South America, sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar (Harrison 1983b). Within southern Africa it is chiefly found in the wetter areas. It wanders freely into drier areas, but this is dependent on the availability of open water, and there are large areas in southern Namibia, southwestern Botswana and mountainous Lesotho where it does not occur.

It is closely related to Hartlaub's Gull *L. hartlaubii* and less closely to many other members of the blackheaded gull complex, the subgenus *Hydrocoloeus*.

It is a gregarious species and, except on the west coast, is rarely found singly. Because of its similarity to Hartlaub's Gull, especially in nonbreeding plumage when it loses much of its grey head, it may be overlooked among flocks of that species; this problem is most acute on the west coast.

Habitat: It is associated with shallow, open water, and often with people's rubbish on which it feeds extensively.

Movements: It disperses widely after breeding. Ringing of nestlings on the eastern Witwatersrand (2628B) has produced recoveries from all coasts of southern Africa (including Mozambique), as well as inland, and even from southwestern Angola (Brooke 1981b). Away from the major breeding sites it may be assumed that it is essentially a wanderer; there is little evidence for regular migration, except perhaps partially between the eastern Witwatersrand and coastal KwaZulu-Natal (Cyrus & Robson 1980) which cannot be shown by the seasonality analysis. Its dispersive behaviour allows it to breed at temporarily suitable sites, often in semi-arid country, as well as to make use of new permanent sites as they become available.

Breeding: The season is predominantly in winter and spring (Maclean 1993b), with egg-laying in the Transvaal mainly May–June (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). At coastal breeding sites a winter breeding season also prevails (Dean 1971; J. Cooper *in litt.*).

Interspecific relationships: Isolated birds on the west coast sometimes form mixed pairs with Hartlaub's Gulls,

and apparently can produce young to the flying stage (Zoutendyk & Feely 1953; Sinclair 1977; Williams 1989). It is not known if hybrids are fertile.

Historical distribution and conservation:

It has greatly increased in numbers in southern Africa during the 20th century. Only two breeding sites were reported in the 19th century in South Africa; now over 70 sites are known in southern Africa, mostly used by small numbers of birds (J. Cooper *in litt.*). Lake St Lucia did not contain breeding sites in the 1890s (Woodward & Woodward 1900), and breeding there seems to have started in the 1920s (Cottrell 1929). Breeding on the eastern Witwatersrand was not noted in the 1930s (Roberts 1940), whereas by the late 1940s it was regarded as commonplace, at least by local birders (Anon. 1949).

A substantial minority (40%) of breeding sites lie in conserved areas, including the Lake St Lucia complex, one of the important breeding areas (J. Cooper *in litt.*). Hybridization with

Hartlaub's Gull is unlikely to affect its genetic integrity, even if fertile young are produced.

Like most gulls, the Greyheaded Gull will prey on eggs, and it has been suggested that its numbers should be controlled on the Witwatersrand in the interests of successful breeding by scarcer species (Hoppé 1989; Newey 1990). Gull predation on breeding birds leading to a management decision to reduce gull numbers has occurred in many parts of the world; for example, in the Camargue, France, predation by the Blackheaded Gull *L. ridibundus* depressed the breeding populations of other waterbirds (Blondel 1991).

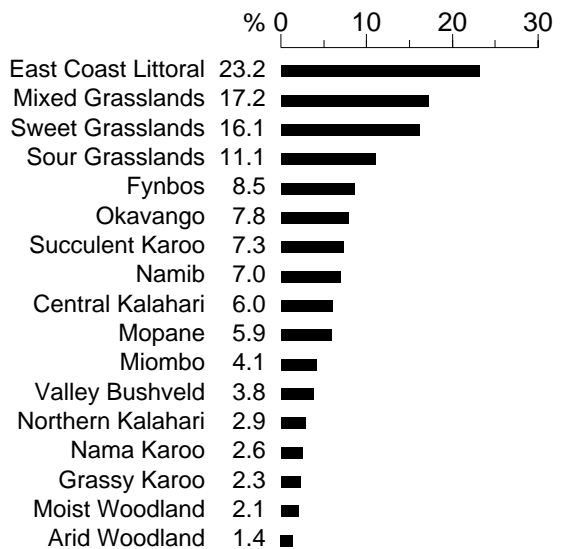
R.K. Brooke

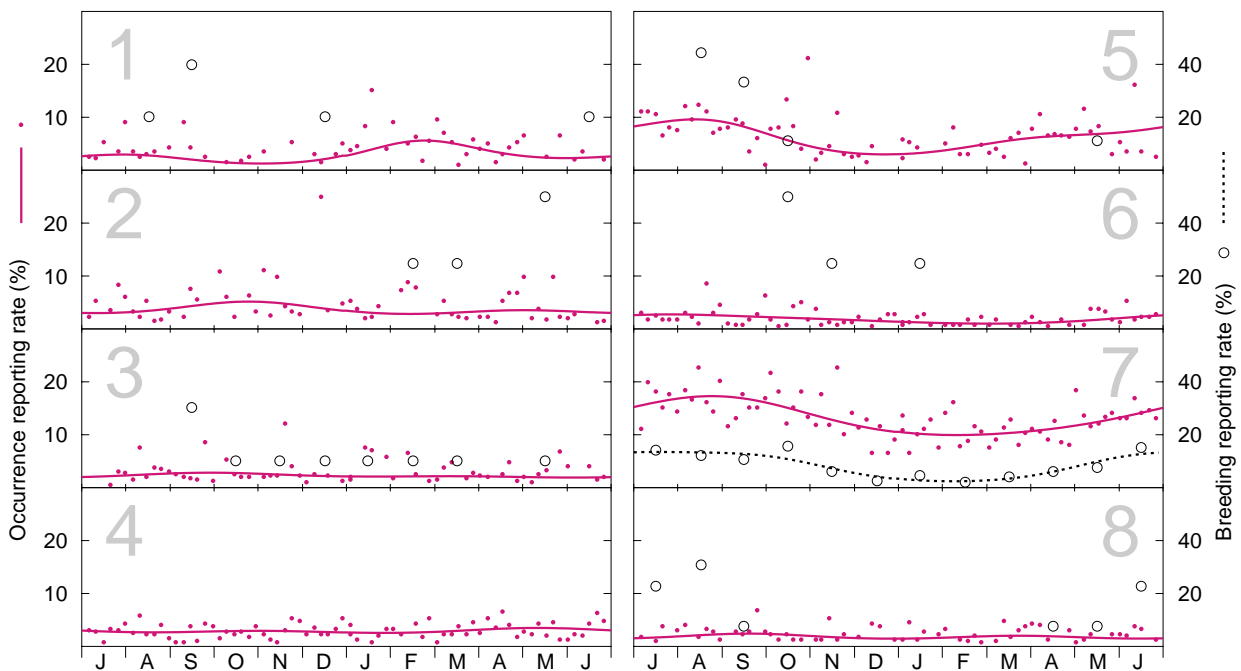
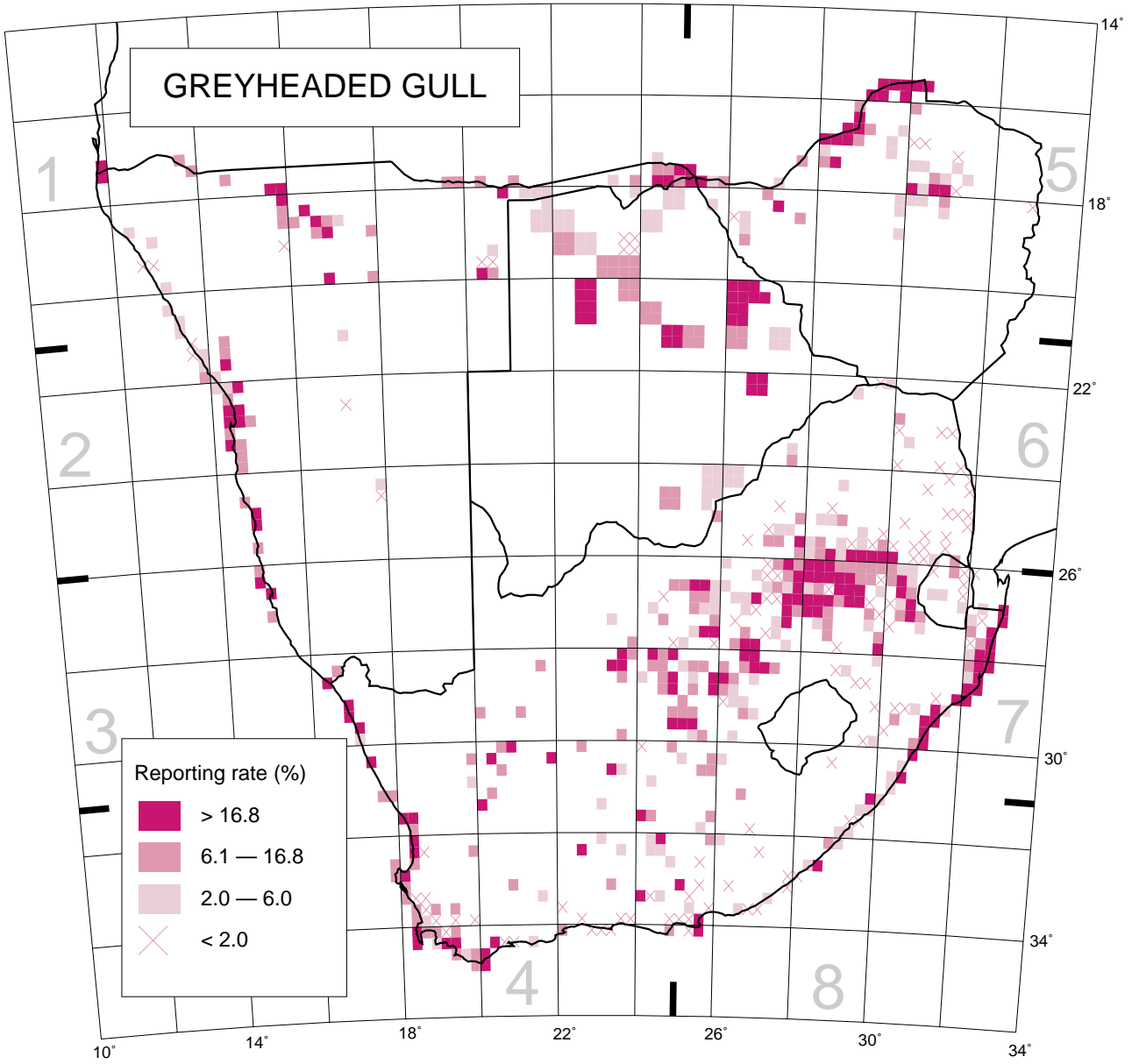
Recorded in 672 grid cells, 14.8%

Total number of records: 12 140

Mean reporting rate for range: 16.4%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 96, 127, 125, 256, 545, 206, 2557, 101; Breeding: 5, 4, 10, 0, 9, 4, 199, 13.