

## Whiskered Tern Witbaardmeerswael

### *Chlidonias hybrida*

On a global scale, the Whiskered Tern has a fragmented breeding distribution spanning the Old World: southern Europe, southern Asia, Australia, and eastern and southern Africa, including Madagascar (Langrand 1990; Malling Olsen & Larsson 1995). Birds from the nominate race, which breeds in the Palearctic, migrate to Africa, but remain north of the equator (Mees 1977; Urban *et al.* 1986).

On a local scale, the distribution of *C. h. sclateri*, the race occurring in southern Africa (Clancey *et al.* 1991), is also fragmented. There are high reporting rates in the Okavango basin, Makgadikgadi Pans and northwestern Zimbabwe. A second core area is in the southern Transvaal and northern Free State, where the distribution coincides closely with that of endorheic pans (Allan *et al.* 1995c). Along the coast it occurs in northern KwaZulu-Natal and northwards into coastal Mozambique; it occurs at low reporting rates, but near-continuously, along the coastal plains of the southern and southwestern Cape Province, with a small area of concentration in the Koue Bokkeveld (3219D, 3319A), an area with many vleis and farm dams.

It is in breeding plumage in summer, November–April (Penry 1994), but as early as September in some years. When in nonbreeding plumage, it can easily be confused with the Whitewinged Tern *C. leucopterus*, which occurs in the same habitat. The Whiskered Tern was possibly under-reported, particularly in winter.

**Habitat:** It occurs at a wide variety of inland wetlands. It usually feeds over open water, but also over marshes and reedbeds, and occasionally over dry ground to exploit termite emergences (M.H. pers. obs). In the southwestern Cape Province there are two records of it hunting over Arum Lily *Zantedeschia aethiopica* clumps, and dropping down to take Arum Lily Frogs *Hyperolius horstockii* from the flowers (Steyn 1966; Craig 1974). In the Transvaal and Free State it breeds mainly at endorheic pans in years with good rainfall (Tarboton *et al.* 1975, 1987b; Allan 1988b). Breeding sites have an abundance of floating aquatic vegetation which helps protect nests from being swamped in strong winds; adults may bring food to chicks from nearby waterbodies with open water (e.g. Tarboton *et al.* 1975).

**Movements:** It has complex movements which are poorly understood. In the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4) it is clearly a breeding summer visitor, and there are few records of birds overwintering. The same applies to the South African highveld and most of Namibia and Zimbabwe. The seasonal maps suggest that it remains numerous throughout the year in tropical regions such as the lowlands of KwaZulu-Natal, western Zimbabwe, the Okavango Delta, Chobe and Zambezi

rivers, but the models also indicate higher reporting rates in these areas in summer. The permanent wetlands of the Okavango Delta and the adjacent rivers are not major dry-season refuges; most birds seem to move to the tropics beyond the region. There is no evidence of breeding in Zambia where records are largely May–November (Benson *et al.* 1971). Movements to the African mainland are possible by birds from Madagascar where breeding is October–November (Milon 1947; Langrand 1990).

**Breeding:** The small number of breeding records partly reflects the generally dry years of the atlas period. Except perhaps for the arid Zones 2 and 3, the Whiskered Tern breeds throughout southern Africa. In the summer-rainfall area it breeds in summer; in Zimbabwe, the Transvaal, Botswana and Namibia egg-laying spans October–April, with a peak in late summer, January–March (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Brown & Clinning in press; N.J. Skinner *in litt.*). In the winter-rainfall area (Zone 4), egg-laying is earlier, peaking October–November (Winterbottom 1968a; Schmidt & Schmidt 1988, 1989). The atlas data have a broader time span because records of adults feeding fledged young were included.

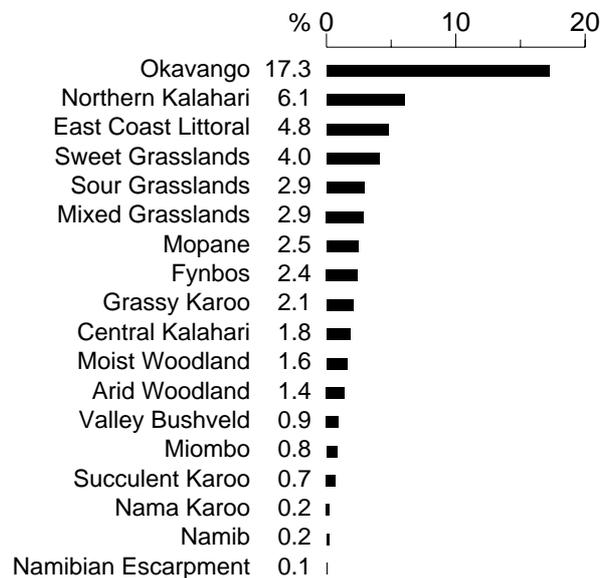
**Historical distribution and conservation:** The overall distribution remains consistent with that described by Stark & Sclater (1906), although they thought it to be a widespread but rare nonbreeding visitor from the Palearctic. Breeding in southern Africa had first been recorded in the southwestern Cape Province in 1827–29 and in the Transvaal in 1901 (Payn 1908; Roberts 1936). It has possibly increased in numbers during the 20th century; this could be attributable to the creation of suitable artificial wetlands providing drought refuges between years of above average rainfall with more widespread breeding.

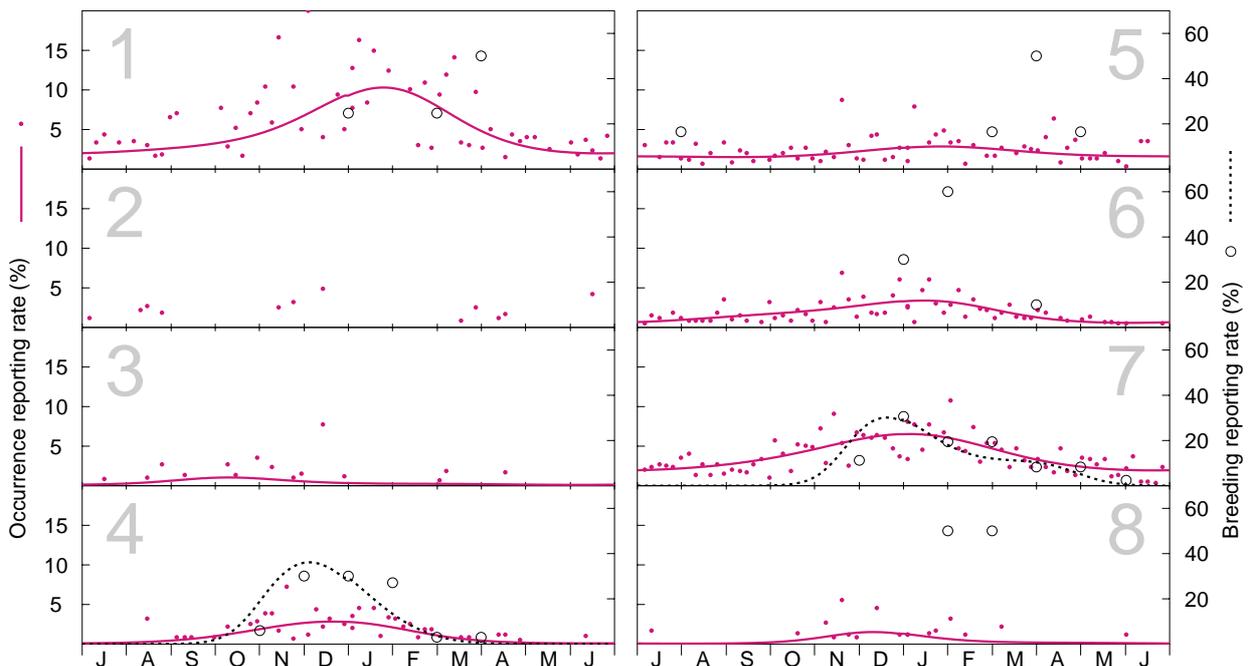
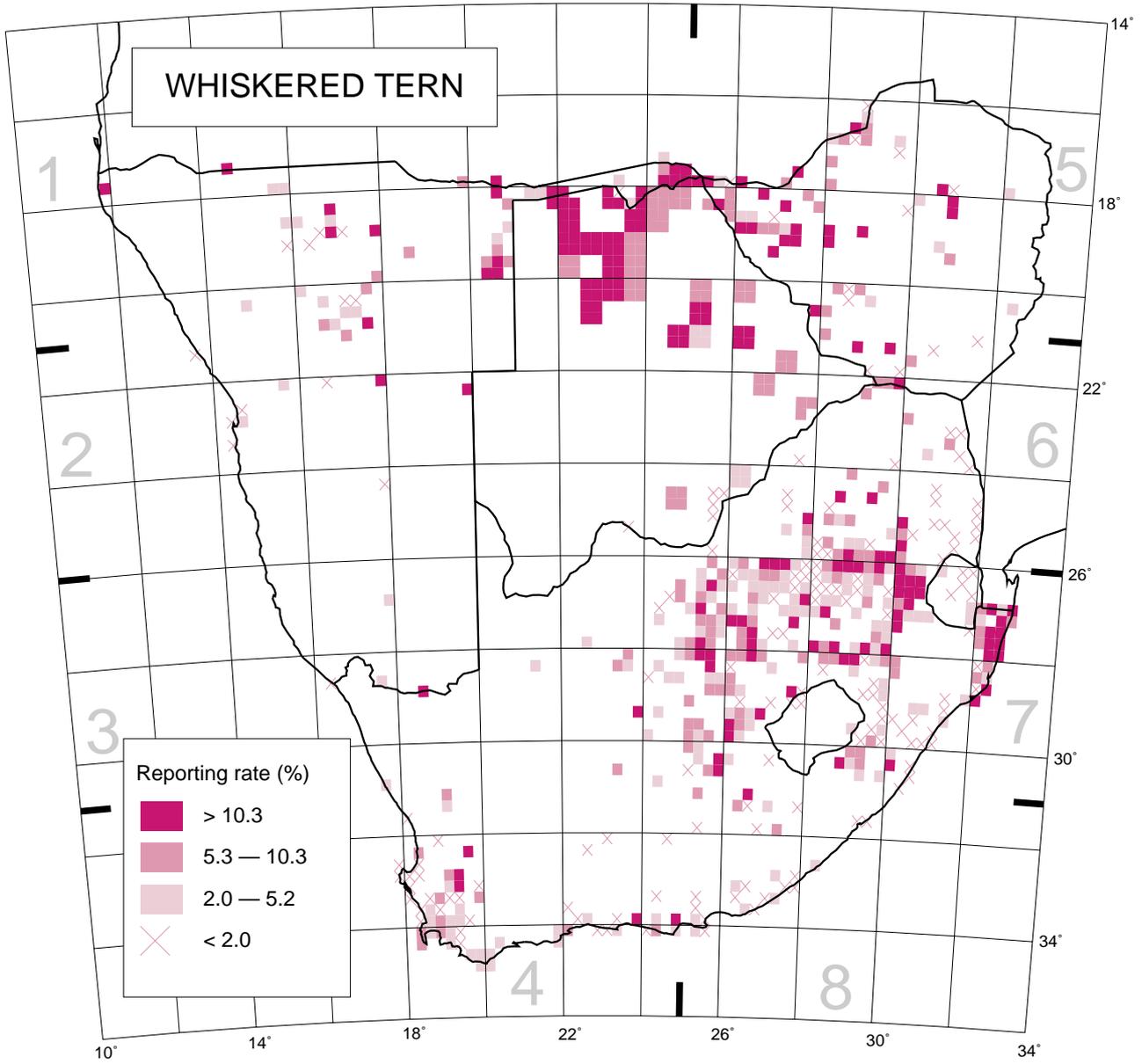
The local race of the Whiskered Tern is not threatened at present, but its total population appears to be relatively small and should therefore be monitored.

L.G. Underhill and M. Herremans

Recorded in 679 grid cells, 15.0%  
Total number of records: 3303  
Mean reporting rate for range: 4.5%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 143, 13, 21, 88, 172, 199, 751, 24; Breeding: 4, 0, 0, 33, 6, 10, 36, 2.