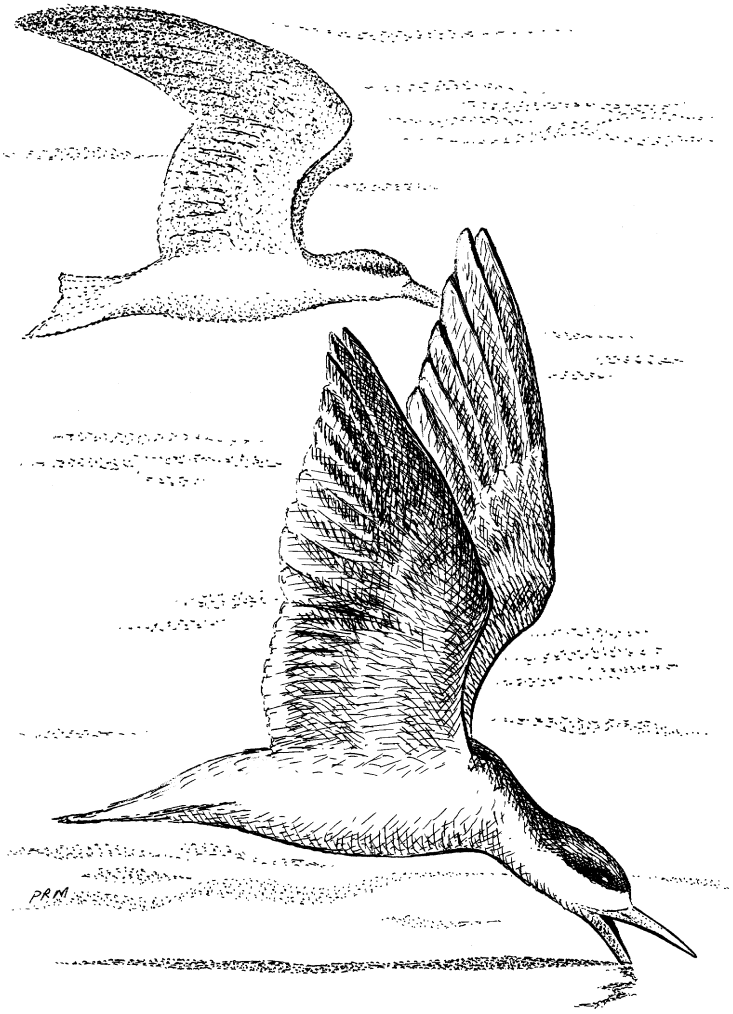


African Skimmer

Waterploeër

Rynchops flavirostris

This unusual African species occurs only peripherally in southern Africa. It occurs northwards to Egypt, where it is now only an occasional visitor, and westwards to West Africa (Cramp *et al.* 1985). During the atlas period in southern Africa, the African Skimmer was found mainly along the Zambezi, Chobe and Okavango rivers, the Okavango Delta and dams in the Hwange National Park. It has become a regular visitor to some dams on the Mashonaland plateau of Zimbabwe, and it occurs in small numbers in the southeastern lowveld on the Save and Runde rivers. Surprisingly, it is a rare visitor to Lake Kariba, despite having bred along this section of the Zambezi River prior to its impoundment (Irwin 1981; Coppinger *et al.* 1988). There are occasional records of vagrants further south, e.g. in the Transvaal.

It breeds in small colonies and is mostly encountered in flocks (Coppinger *et al.* 1988; Pollard 1989; Maclean 1993b; Randall 1994a; Vial 1995). The only species with which it could be confused is the Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*, and then only at long range and in poor light.

Habitat: It is typically found along lowveld rivers on bare, open sandbanks. It breeds on freshly emerged sandbanks with no vegetation cover where the damp sand at the base of the nest helps to keep the eggs cool during the scorching pre-rains months. As a result of the enormous ecological changes that occurred along the middle Zambezi River after the construction of the Kariba Dam, many sandbanks are overgrown, and numbers of breeding birds have decreased considerably (Tree 1988c; Wood & Tree 1992). In part this may have displaced birds to highveld dams.

Movements: It is an intra-African migrant, arriving late April–May in Zimbabwe, the timing being dependent on the availability of suitable exposed sandbars (Tree 1969). Arrival in the Okavango Panhandle is in June (Vial 1995). Departure is dependent on the intensity of the early rains and concomitant flooding of sandbanks, and takes place late November–January or even early February with some birds remaining through the rains, particularly in drought years.

Breeding: The atlas data show breeding July–December. Egglaying is mostly August–October with few records for July (Irwin 1981; Coppinger *et al.* 1988; Vial 1995; N.J. Skinner *in litt*; Brown & Clinning in press). The most southerly breeding record during the atlas period was in the Gonarezhou National Park (2131CD) (Sharp 1988).

Interspecific relationships: It occurs in similar habitats and at the same time of year as the Caspian Tern, but is uncommon within the range of the latter.

Historical distribution and conservation: It was formerly much commoner and more widely distributed, breeding as far south as Lake St Lucia in northern KwaZulu-Natal (Clancey 1964b). Habitat destruction and/or alteration has led to a large decrease in the total population visiting southern Africa. The population on the middle Zambezi River, between Kariba and Mozambique, declined from 250 birds in 1987 to 36 in 1991 (Coppinger *et al.* 1988; Wood & Tree 1992). In the southeastern lowveld of Zimbabwe it has become a scarce and erratic visitor. Occurrence away from former strongholds

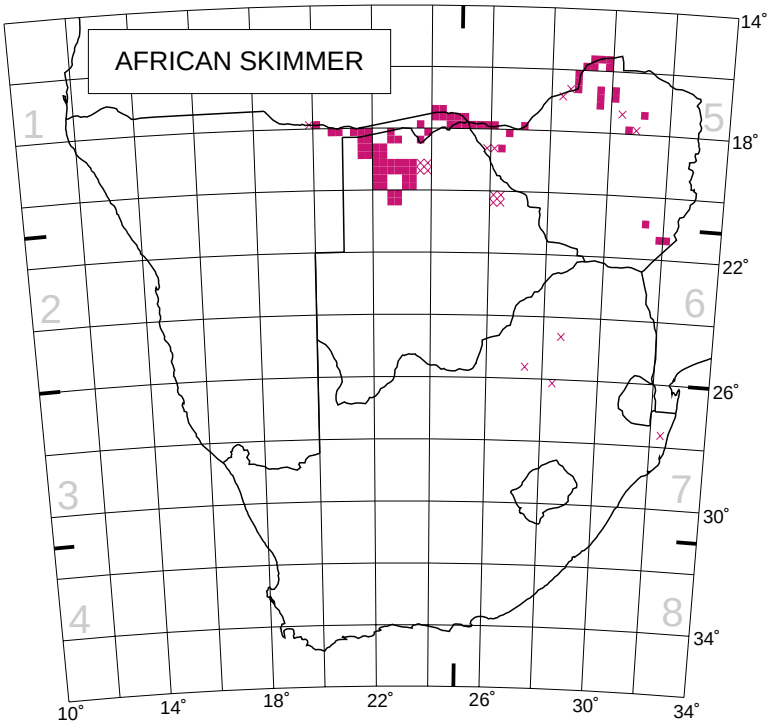
in Zimbabwe is more frequent, probably because of suspected displacement from the Zambezi River and the creation of large bodies of water such as the Manyame Lakes (1730DC,DD) near Harare where successful breeding has occurred (Couto & Couto 1994).

Although there are no historical data for the Okavango basin, the species is believed to have declined dramatically. Many of the breeding islands in the upper Panhandle section of the Okavango have become overgrown, probably as a result of poorer floods carrying less silt (Vial 1995). A maximum of 204 adult birds were recorded in the Panhandle between Mohembo and Ngarange channel during the 1994 breeding season (Vial 1995).

The African Skimmer is extinct as a breeding bird in South Africa; it last bred at Lake St Lucia (2832AD) in 1944 (Brooke 1984b).

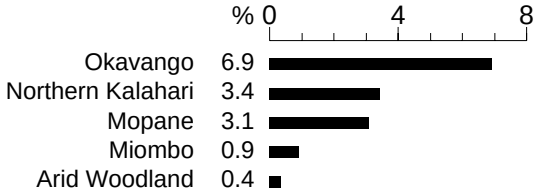
As a piscivore, it is prone to bio-accumulation of pesticides such as DDT, used in the control of Tsetse Flies and malaria-carrying mosquitoes, in the Zambezi drainage and the Okavango Delta (Davies 1980; Coppinger *et al.* 1988; Merron 1992). It is vulnerable to excessive disturbance by tourists (Ryan 1994) and to the growing pressures from fishermen and livestock along the Zambezi and Okavango rivers (Coppinger *et al.* 1988; Vial 1995). Breeding success is low; in two colonies in the Panhandle only 6% and 13% of eggs produced fledglings (Vial 1995). A management strategy is needed on the Zambezi and Okavango rivers; low, early exposed sandbanks surrounded by deep water should be identified and cleared of vegetation annually, providing habitat for roosting and especially breeding. In unprotected areas, education is needed to conserve the declining population from human disturbance and direct persecution. On the basis of the small population size, fragmentation of the range, the limited number of breeding sites and a continuing decline, the African Skimmer population in southern Africa would classify as 'endangered' under the new IUCN criteria (cf. Collar *et al.* 1994).

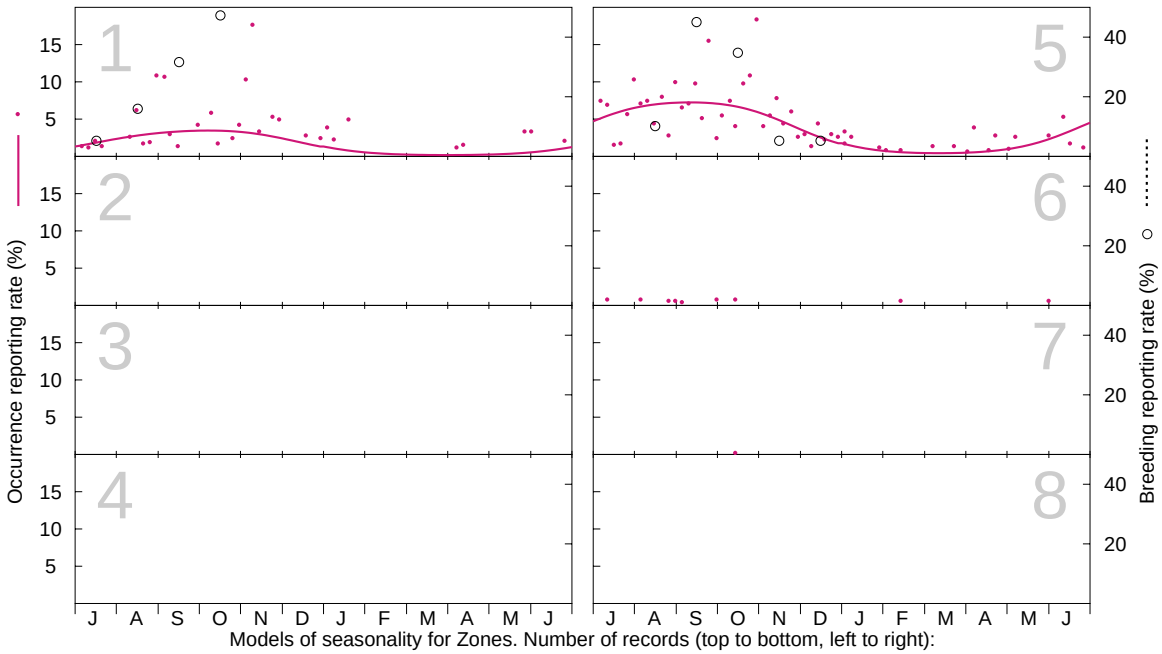
A.J. Tree



Recorded in 102 grid cells, 2.2%
Total number of records: 490
Mean reporting rate for range: 9.1%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 49, 0, 0, 0, 319, 10, 1, 0; Breeding: 19, 0, 0, 0, 20, 0, 0, 0.