

African Cuckoo

Afrikaanse Koekoek

Cuculus gularis

The African Cuckoo is an intra-African migrant. In the Transvaal, and presumably throughout its range, the numbers vary from year to year (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). In South Africa, south of 26°S, it may only be a nonbreeding visitor (Clancey 1964b), except for the stronghold in the far east and Swaziland, where it does breed (Parker 1994). The African Cuckoo has a tropical distribution which extends south of the tropics in the eastern Transvaal, Mozambique, and northern KwaZulu-Natal (Rowan 1983). Nonbreeding birds from the northern savanna populations may also reach the region (Fry *et al.* 1988).

The African Cuckoo was previously considered to be a race of the European Cuckoo *C. canorus* by some authorities (Benson *et al.* 1971; Irwin 1981; Rowan 1983).

The distribution map shows that the African Cuckoo is virtually confined to north of 26°S (Zones 1, 2, 5 and 6). Except in the northeastern parts of Zone 7, records of the African Cuckoo further south should be treated with caution because of the potential for confusion with the European Cuckoo. As it breeds in the region, the African Cuckoo is vocal and can thus unequivocally be identified on call, while the European Cuckoo is silent. It is not possible to plot only those records which were identified on call. The plotted record in the southwestern Cape Province is one of several records in the region, including some of calling birds (Hockey *et al.* 1989).

Habitat: A variety of woodlands, both broadleaved and *Acacia* are preferred. Mopane is the most favoured habitat, followed in order by Miombo, Okavango and Arid

Woodland vegetation types. In Swaziland, it occurs in wattle stands (Parker 1994). Records of African Cuckoos in other than woodland habitats may be based on misidentifications or on nonbreeding visitors and vagrants.

Movements: It is a summer migrant which generally occurs in the region September–April. Birds start calling, presumably soon after they arrive, in Zimbabwe in late August or early September (Irwin 1981), and in late September in the Transvaal (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). It arrives in Botswana by late October (Herremans 1994d), while in Namibia it may only start calling in November (Rowan 1983). This indicates that the timing of arrival may depend upon the local availability of food (predominantly caterpillars) (Fry *et al.* 1988), or may be related to the timing of breeding of host species. It leaves March–April (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Herremans 1994d). Overwintering is occasionally recorded (e.g. Parker 1994).

The models confirm these patterns of timing. Arrival dates become progressively later southwards, while departure is synchronized throughout the region. The period of residency is shorter further south (Zone 6) where birds are present for *c.* 5 months compared with *c.* 6 months in Zone 5.

Breeding: The African Cuckoo is a brood parasite whose only host in southern Africa is the Forktailed Drongo *Dicrurus adsimilis* (Rowan 1983; Maclean 1993b). The breeding season is September–December, with a peak in October (Irwin 1981; Rowan 1983; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). This matches that of the host (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b) where the ranges overlap; but south of the range of the African Cuckoo, peak breeding of the Forktailed Drongo tends to be somewhat later (see text for latter species).

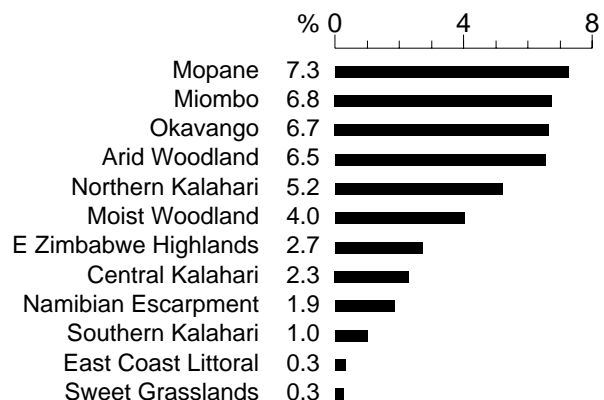
Interspecific relationships: The African Cuckoo's distribution pattern is similar to, but not as extensive as that of its host, the Forktailed Drongo, which is more widespread further south and in more arid areas of the region.

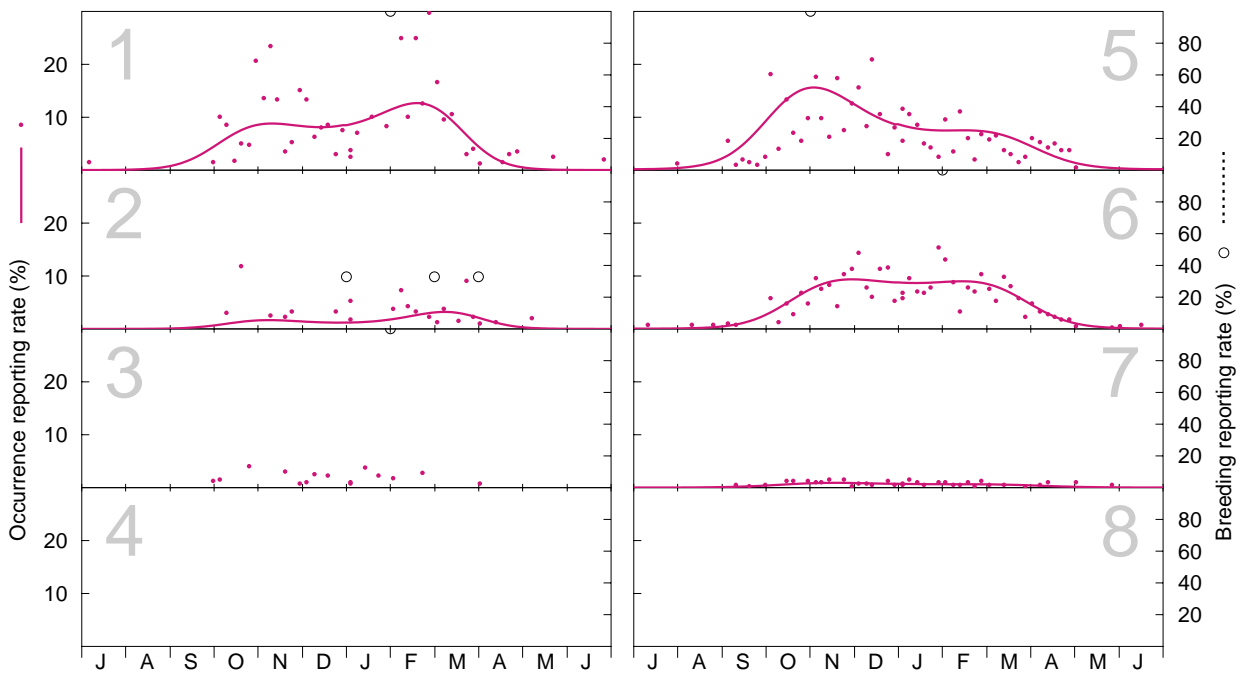
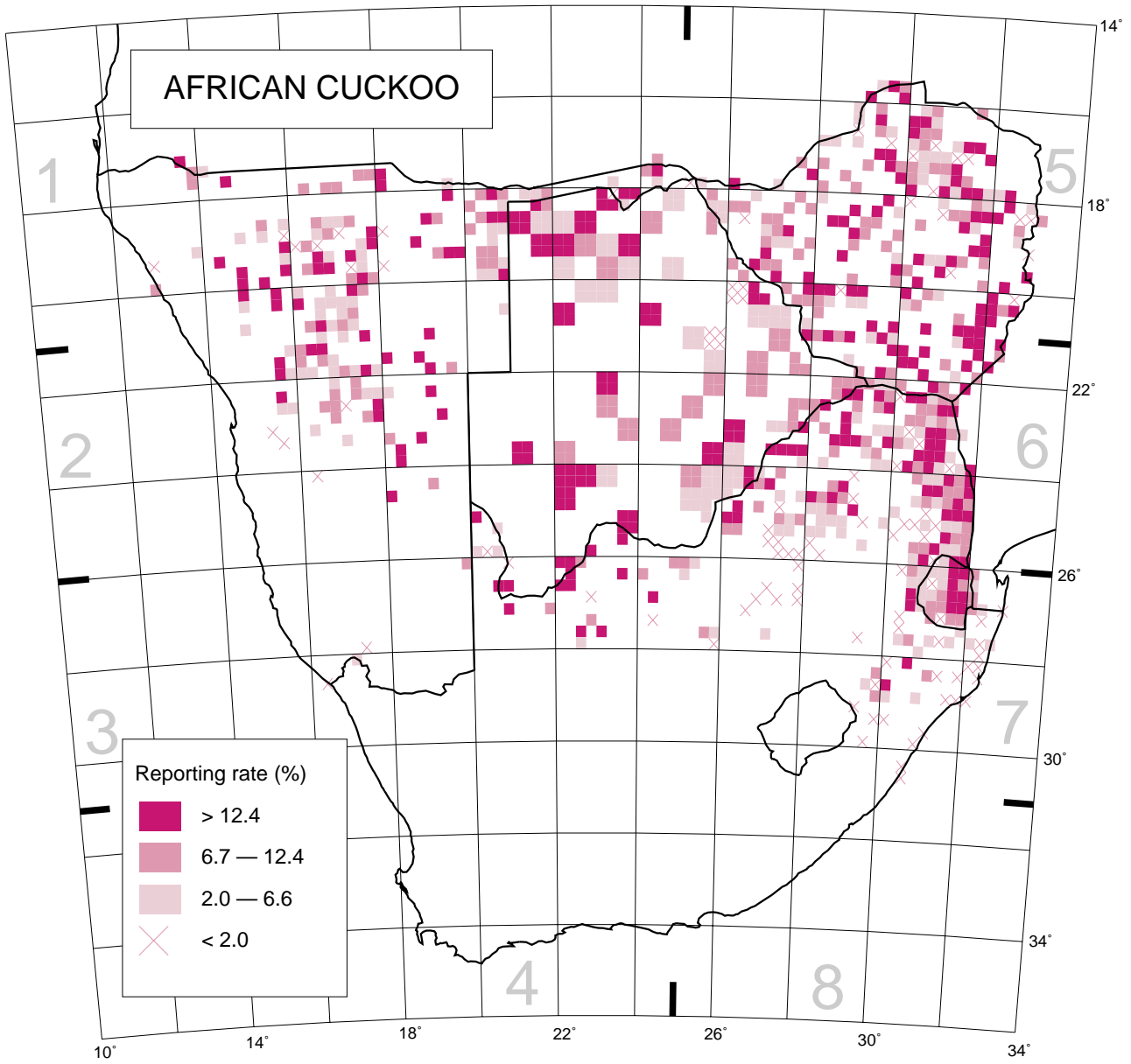
Historical distribution and conservation: There is no evidence for any change in distribution, except in western Swaziland, where occurrence in stands of alien wattles presumably indicates a range expansion (Parker 1994). The African Cuckoo is not considered threatened in southern Africa.

C.J. Vernon

Recorded in 911 grid cells, 20.1%
Total number of records: 3122
Mean reporting rate for range: 6.0%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 132, 37, 16, 0, 503, 494, 81, 0; Breeding: 1, 3, 1, 0, 2, 1, 0, 0.