

## Red-chested Cuckoo

### Piet-my-vrou

#### *Cuculus solitarius*

This Afrotropical species occurs throughout the forests and wooded savannas of sub-Saharan Africa (Fry *et al.* 1988). The Red-chested Cuckoo is a breeding intra-African migrant to southern Africa, largely confined to the area east of 25°E and extending westwards in the Okavango and Caprivi regions, and along the coast of the southern Cape Province. There are vagrant records from the dry interior and from central Namibia.

Adults are rarely seen, and the species is mostly identified by its persistent territorial call. Occurrence outside the peak breeding period is likely to have been under-reported.

**Habitat:** It occurs in a range of forest and well-wooded habitats: riparian growth, thickets and evergreen forest (Fry *et al.* 1988). Its distribution follows that of wooded habitats; it enters arid, savanna, Karoo and grassland regions where there are trees around habitation (Rowan 1983). Reporting rates were highest in the Eastern Zimbabwe Highlands, while in Afromontane Forest the reporting rate was nearly three times that in the East Coast Littoral. It is sparse on the coast of KwaZulu-Natal (Cyrus & Robson 1980) and the eastern Cape Province, suggesting that its original affinity was with Afromontane Forest rather than East Coast Littoral forest.

It also has high reporting rates in Miombo and Moist Woodland. The relatively high reporting rates in vegetation types lacking indigenous forest or woodland, such as Sour, Alpine and Mixed Grasslands, indicate the extent to which modified habitats, i.e. tree plantations, are suitable.

**Movements:** The wintering grounds of birds breeding in southern Africa are unknown (Rowan 1983). Rowan (1983) stated that calling starts first in the southwestern Cape Province, in mid-September, then in the eastern Cape Province in late September and in KwaZulu-Natal and the Transvaal in early October. However, the seasonality analysis indicates that the main period of arrival of the Red-chested Cuckoo is fast and synchronous throughout the region, starting early September and with most birds arriving around mid-October. The end of calling does not coincide with departure of adults; inconspicuous individuals are encountered following the cessation of calling, and departure dates should not be inferred

from the timing of decrease in reporting rates (e.g. Parker 1994).

**Breeding:** It is a brood parasite whose hosts are primarily robins (see below). The breeding season peaks earlier (from October) in the winter-rainfall area (Zone 4), and later, November–December, in all other Zones (Winterbottom 1968a; Irwin 1981; Rowan 1983; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Atlas breeding records tend to peak late in the season, but show the earlier breeding in Zone 4. Many breeding records were made after adults had stopped calling. This anomaly results from a bias in the breeding data towards the recording of young which become conspicuous with their hosts immediately after fledging.

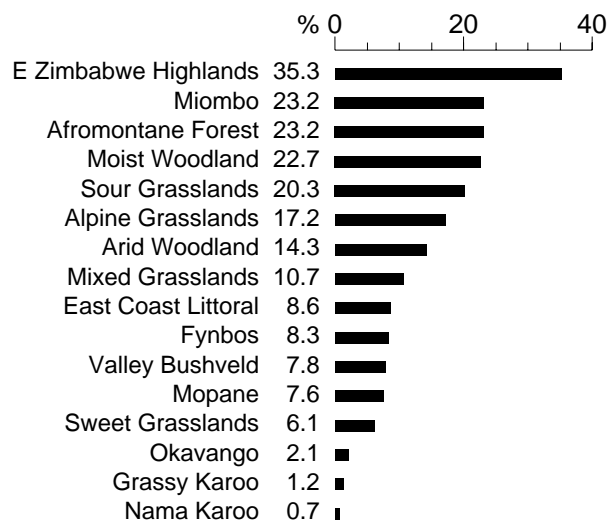
**Interspecific relationships:** In South Africa its distribution follows that of one of its main hosts, the Cape Robin *Cossypha caffra* (Payne & Payne 1967; Oatley 1970b), but it does not extend as far inland in the Cape Province, nor to the same altitudes. Elsewhere in southern Africa, the distribution of the cuckoo follows that of a composite of frequently used hosts (Payne & Payne 1967), such as the Whitethroated Robin *C. humeralis* (Swaziland, eastern and western Transvaal, eastern Botswana), Heuglin's Robin *C. heuglini* (northern Zimbabwe and Okavango) and perhaps also the Boulder Chat *Pinarornis plumosus*. In localities where the main hosts are absent or uncommon, other robins are exploited, but because of matching egg coloration (Oatley 1970b) these could be separate cuckoo gentes altogether.

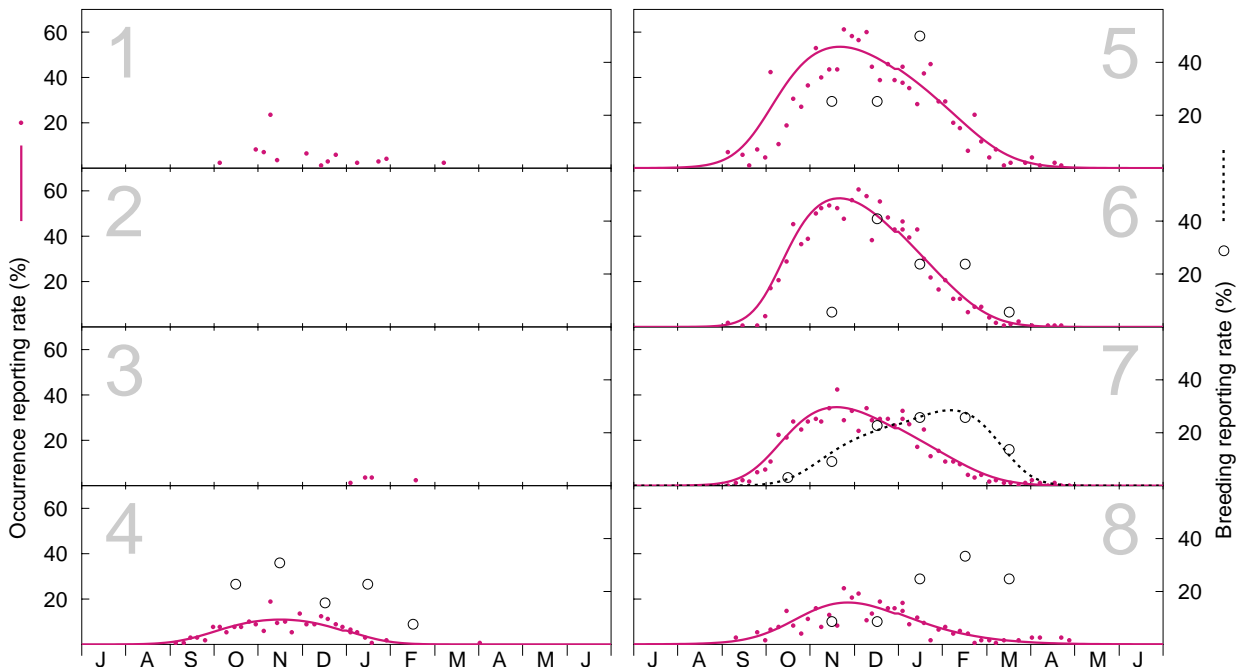
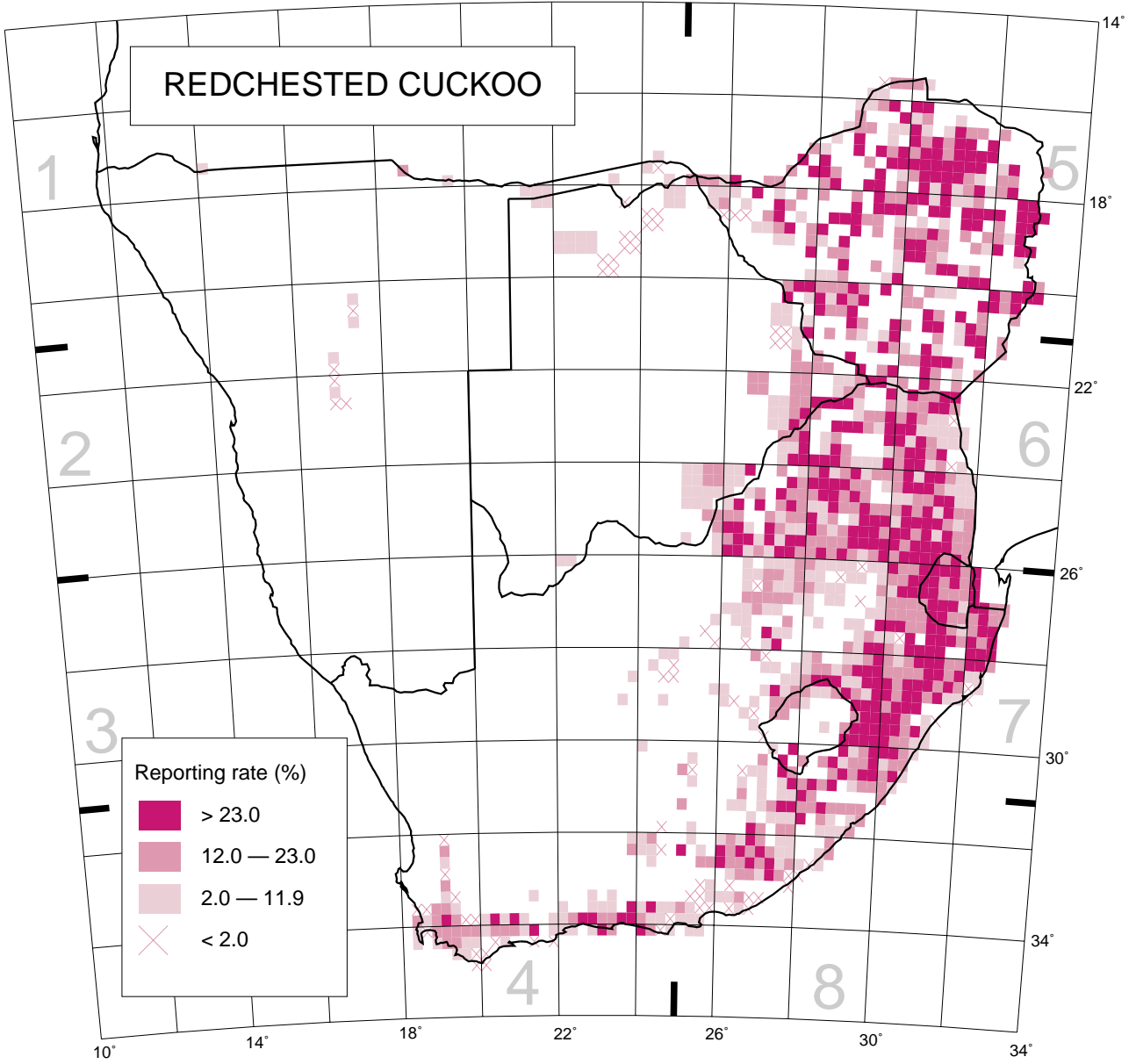
**Historical distribution and conservation:** It has probably greatly expanded its distribution by following one of its main brood hosts, the Cape Robin, into wooded habitats created by humans. In 1940 the cuckoo was found only in 'forests and thickly wooded kloofs' while the robin had 'quite adapted itself to . . . towns, where it occurs commonly in gardens where shrubberies afford it retreat' (Roberts 1940). It appears to have expanded westwards; Rowan (1983) reported it to be largely confined to the area east of 27°E, while the distribution map shows the boundary nearer 25°E. The Red-chested Cuckoo is not threatened, and has colonized man-made habitats.

*C.J. Vernon and M. Herremans*

Recorded in 1238 grid cells, 27.3%  
Total number of records: 16 511  
Mean reporting rate for range: 16.0%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 19, 0, 4, 241, 1497, 1791, 2037, 292; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 13, 4, 17, 66, 12.