

## Marsh Owl

### Vlei-uil

#### *Asio capensis*

The atlas data show the Marsh Owl to have a fragmented distribution. It is common in grasslands in the central and southern Transvaal, the Free State, KwaZulu-Natal and the eastern Cape Province, on the Mashonaland plateau of Zimbabwe, and in the Makgadikgadi lacustrine depression in northeastern Botswana. Elsewhere, it occurs in small isolated areas, for example in Etosha and southern Owambo, the southwestern Cape Province and in floodplains on the Namibian coast. North of the atlas region, it occurs in south-central and northeastern Africa, and in West Africa. Isolated populations exist in Morocco and Madagascar (Fry *et al.* 1988).

It is often found roosting communally in substantial numbers of 20–50 birds. An exceptionally large number were found on the Springbok Flats (2429C) where a density of 1 owl/35 ha was estimated in a 69 km<sup>2</sup> area. Excluding unsuitable micro-habitats in this area, the density was about 1 owl/10 ha (Mendelsohn 1989a). It is more readily reported than most other owls because of frequent day-time activity (see below) and the fact that it is often flushed from roosts on the ground.

**Habitat:** Open grasslands, marshlands and short scrub with high rodent populations are preferred; these habitats provide food and cover for roosting and nesting. In terms of vegetation types, the great majority of atlas records were from grasslands. The balance of records were from a variety of vegetation types in which isolated populations are associated with the presence of suitable habitat.

**Movements:** The models reveal substantial fluctuations of reporting rates in the Transvaal, Free State and KwaZulu-Natal grasslands, reports being about four times higher in midwinter than in summer. Reporting rates do not change sufficiently in any other areas to suggest a migration into these grasslands from elsewhere. While movements into this part

of southern Africa from outside the region or from Mozambique may occur, an equally plausible explanation is that reporting rates reflect changes in crepuscular activity. Marsh Owls often hunt at dusk, or even during daylight, when they are much more likely to be seen and reported than at night. On the Springbok Flats, they appeared to hunt more often during daylight in the winter than at other times (pers. obs.). This, however, begs the question as to why the same pattern is not apparent in the other Zones. Perhaps their prey have more diurnal movement in winter and this is peculiar to the central South African plateau.

They are generally thought to be nomadic (Steyn 1982b) since numbers fluctuate erratically, probably in response to changes in the availability of prey and ground cover for roosting and nesting; the extent of these movements remains unknown. Fluctuations in numbers in response to droughts and pluvials have been observed in Zimbabwe (A.J. Tree pers. comm.).

**Breeding:** Nesting occurs primarily in the dry season. The majority of eggs are laid March–April in Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981), in the same months and August–September in the Transvaal (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Mendelsohn 1989a), and March–May in KwaZulu-Natal (Dean 1971). It has, however, been found breeding in all months of the year (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Mendelsohn 1989a; Maclean 1993b).

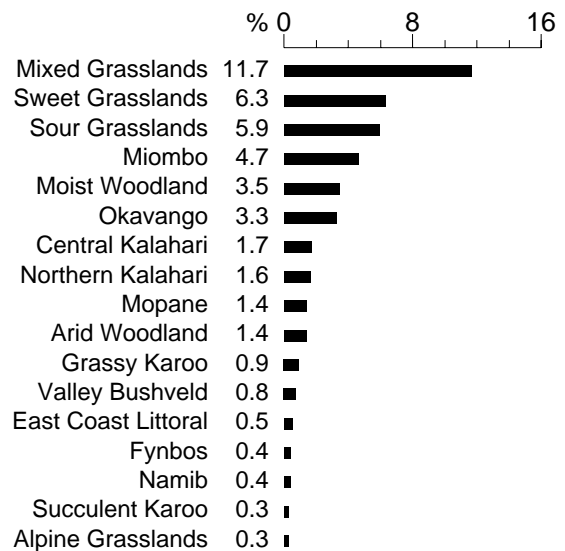
**Interspecific relationships:** Where prey is abundant, the Marsh Owl coexists with other owls and rodent specialists (Mendelsohn 1989a).

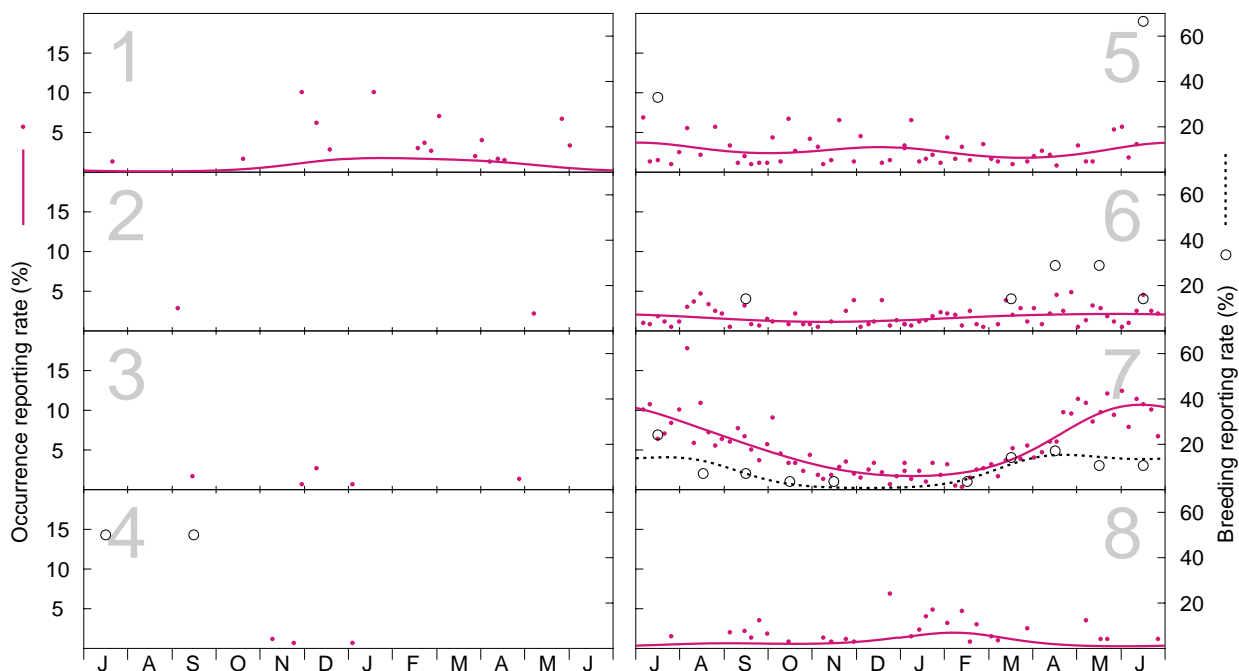
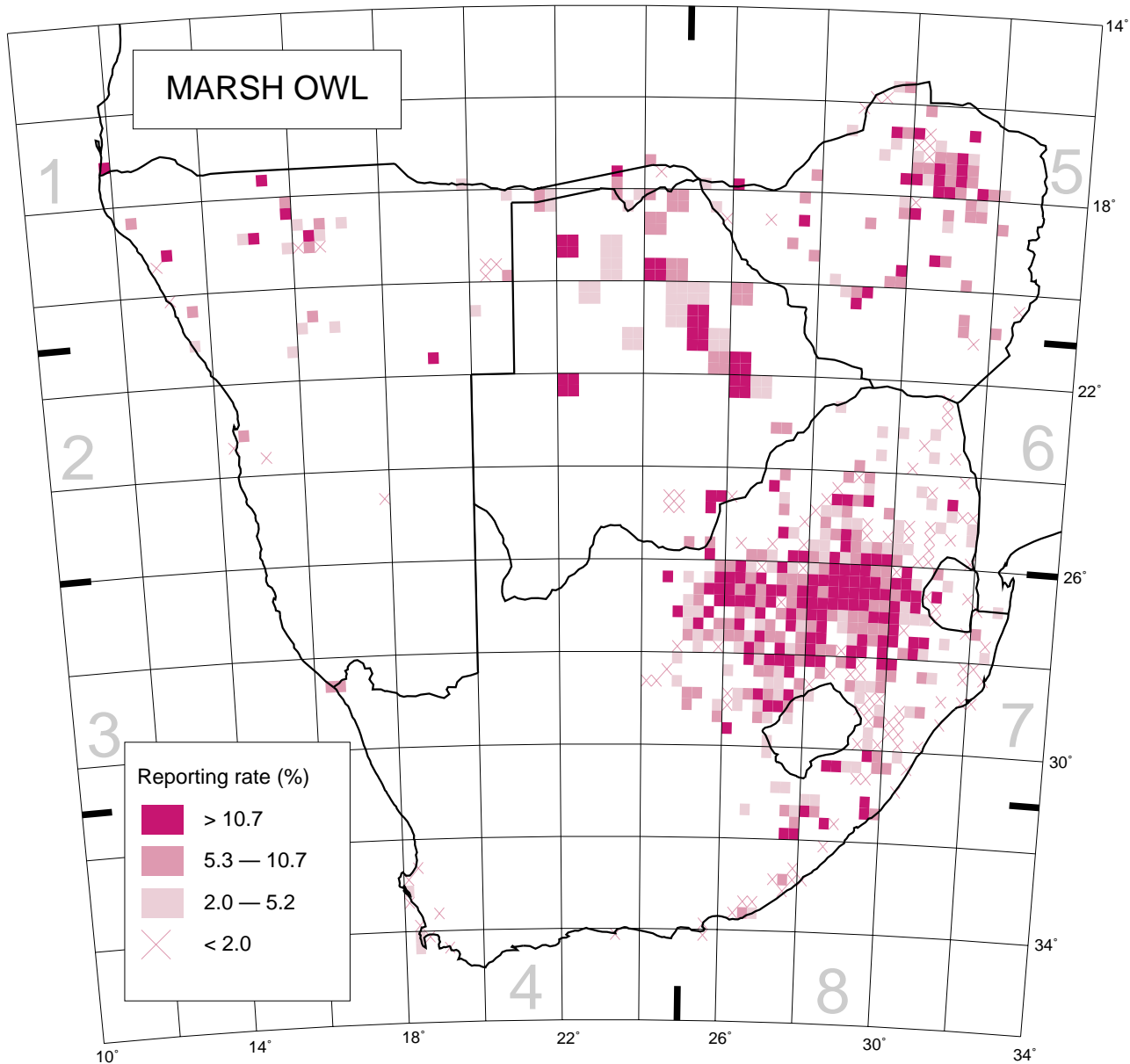
**Historical distribution and conservation:** Its preferred habitats are vulnerable to agriculture through overgrazing, clearing for cultivation, drainage of marshes and afforestation. On the other hand, prey is probably more abundant where rodent populations have benefited from the production of cereal crops. The Marsh Owl is believed to have decreased in the southwestern Cape Province through wetland degradation (Hockey *et al.* 1989). In Zimbabwe, many fall victim to road traffic at night (A.J. Tree pers. comm.).

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Recorded in 646 grid cells, 14.2%  
Total number of records: 4485  
Mean reporting rate for range: 6.8%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 27, 2, 5, 3, 236, 191, 1070, 45; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 2, 3, 7, 29, 0.