



Whitefaced Owl

Witwanguil

Otus leucotis

The Whitefaced Owl is fairly widely distributed in southern Africa and the atlas data show it to be present throughout Zimbabwe, Botswana, and the northern parts of Namibia and the Transvaal. There are peripheral populations extending south into eastern Swaziland, KwaZulu-Natal and the northern Cape Province. An isolated population seems to exist in southern KwaZulu-Natal, while scattered records in the Free State and central Cape Province may represent a sparsely distributed extension of the range or periodic incursions by nomadic birds. During the atlas period it was recorded, and may be resident, in thick bush along the Orange River in the northern Cape Province (D.G. Allan pers. comm.).

Beyond southern Africa, it occurs north to the Sahara in suitable habitat. Birds north of the equator belong to the nominate race and have a different call from *O. l. granti*, which occurs in the southern half of Africa (Van der Weyden 1973).

Unlike some other owls, it is seldom active during the day, hence most atlas records were of birds seen or heard calling at night, or found at daytime roost sites. It seems to be less vocal than most other owls, so it was probably under-recorded. On the Springbok Flats (2429C), an estimated 20 pairs were resident in a 69 km² study area (Mendelsohn 1989a). This density was greater than that of Blackshouldered Kites *Elanus caeruleus*, a species considered to be common in that area. In the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park (2520), adjacent pairs were spaced at intervals of about 4.5 km in tall woodland along the Nossob River (Herholdt 1992).

Habitat: Reporting rates were highest in a range of woodland vegetation types, especially the Kalahari and other arid woodlands. Moist habitats are avoided, as are open areas lacking suitable trees for roosting and nesting, and perches for hunting, although it is occasionally found roosting in stands of alien trees in open grassland (D.G. Allan pers. comm.). In Harare (1731CC), it has adapted to some suburban areas (A.J. Tree pers. comm.).

Movements: No information is available to suggest regular movements; however, nomadic movements in response to fluctuations in prey availability, especially rodent plagues, are suspected (Fry *et al.* 1988). Slight fluctuations in atlas reporting rates probably reflect seasonal calling activity rather than movements. On the Springbok Flats, pairs remain at the same roost and nest sites throughout the year (Mendelsohn 1989a).

Breeding: Eggs are usually laid September–November in Namibia (Brown & Clinning in press) and August–October in Zimbabwe and the Transvaal (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b); however, eggs have also been found May–February. One pair bred three times in one year and twice in another year in the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, and owls in this area bred most frequently in early winter and early summer (Herholdt 1992). Most atlas breeding records were September–January in the western half of the subcontinent and May–December in the eastern half.

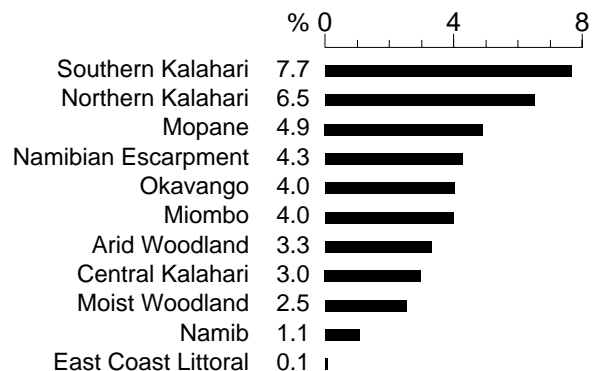
Interspecific relationships: It uses the old nests of small raptors and crows, and other suitable platforms of sticks for breeding. An absence of such nests in some areas may limit distribution, although it will also nest in cavities in trees. Several cases of predation by the Pale Chanting Goshawk *Melierax canorus* have been reported (Herholdt 1992).

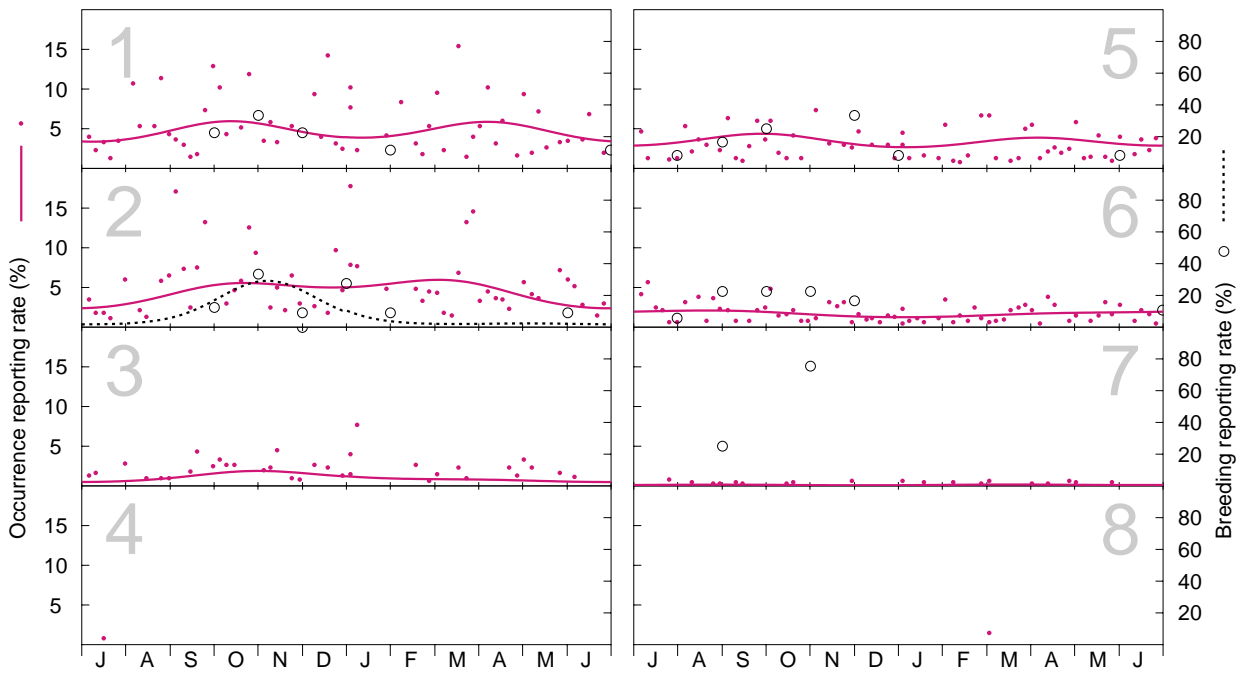
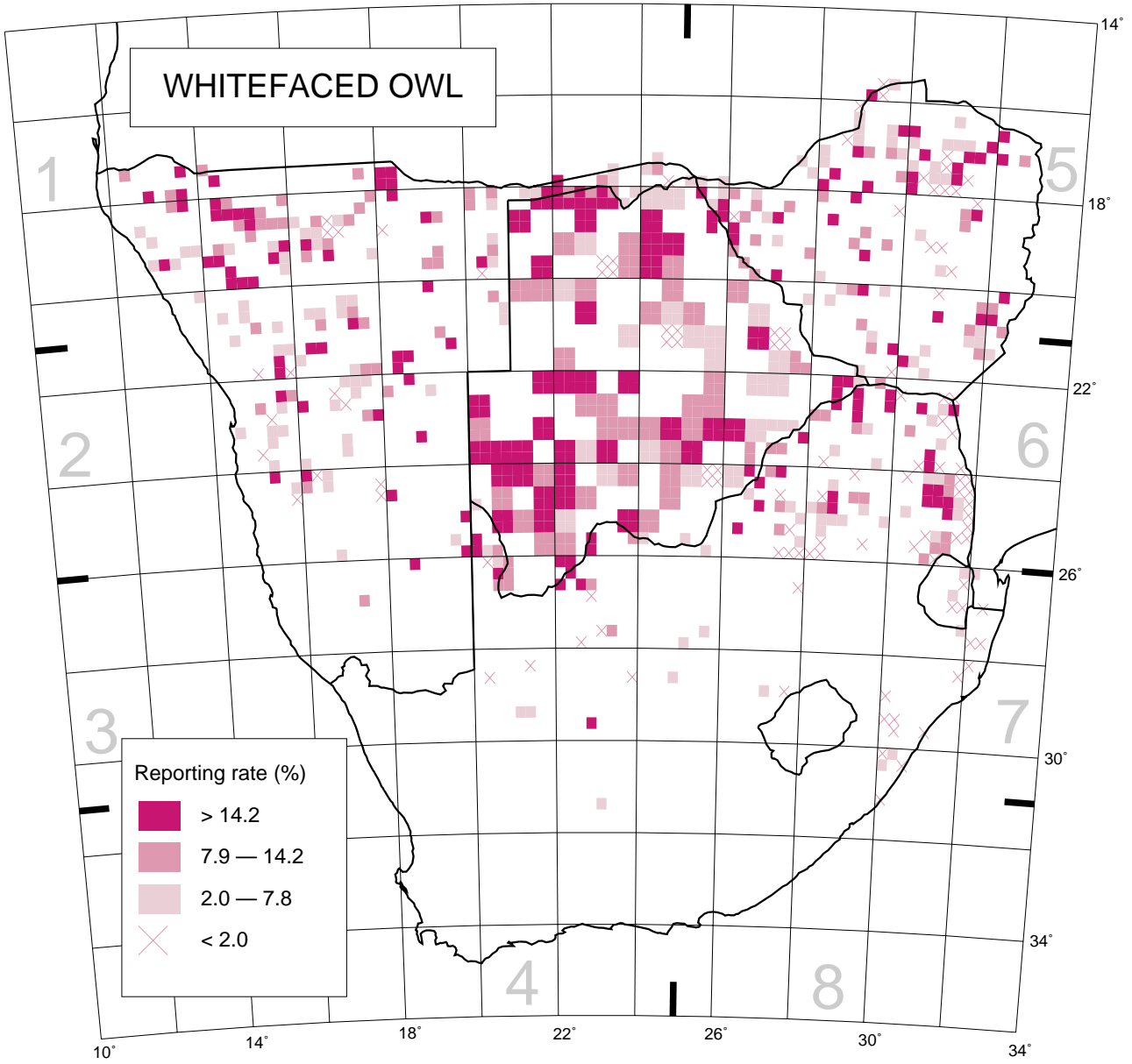
Historical distribution and conservation: Populations probably have not changed substantially in the recent past. The Whitefaced Owl is unlikely to suffer from human activities in the near future, since it is widespread in drier habitats which are largely intact or under extensive grazing which does not seem to affect this species.

J.M. Mendelsohn

Recorded in 849 grid cells, 18.7%
Total number of records: 2218
Mean reporting rate for range: 5.6%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 159, 158, 53, 1, 303, 194, 25, 1; Breeding: 9, 33, 1, 0, 12, 18, 4, 0.