

Whitefronted Bee-eater

Rooikeelbyvreter

Merops bullockoides

This common resident is widespread in wooded savannas in the southern Afrotropics (Fry *et al.* 1992; Maclean 1993b), ranging from Gabon to Angola on the Atlantic Ocean seaboard, across to the Indian Ocean between Tanzania and Durban (2931CC) (Fry *et al.* 1992). It occurs throughout the northern and central Transvaal, Swaziland and northern KwaZulu-Natal, but appears to avoid the escarpment. The atlas has revealed a relatively isolated population in the northwestern Cape Province and Free State which extends along the Vaal, Riet, Modder and Vet rivers. It is more widespread in Zimbabwe than the scattered records indicate (Irwin 1981). It is common in the Caprivi Strip in Namibia, and the adjacent Okavango and Chobe areas of Botswana. There are distinct centres of abundance in the Limpopo Valley and along rivers in the Caprivi, where ideal foraging and breeding habitat exists. There is a vagrant record from the eastern Cape Province.

It is distinctive and has a habit of hawking from exposed perches, normally near to water (Fry *et al.* 1992), making it conspicuous.

Habitat: It is typically associated with watercourses in woodland and wooded grassland (Harwin & Rockingham-Gill 1981; Irwin 1981; Fry *et al.* 1992). Primarily a species of broadleaved and mixed woodland, its affinity for wooded habitats is reflected in that the highest reporting rates were in Mopane, Moist and Arid Woodland and Okavango vegetation types. Its occurrence in the eastern highlands of Zimbabwe probably reflects its presence in low elevation woodlands because it is absent from montane forests. In the Free State and northern Cape Province it inhabits lightly wooded grasslands. It is sometimes associated with exotic trees, especially eucalypts, which attract bees (Parker 1994). It requires large sandbanks for nesting.

Movement: There is no evidence for any regular migratory movement. The seasonal variation in reporting rates is probably the result of dispersal from breeding sites during the dry season. Females remain in their nest holes for

as much as 94% of the time during the egg-laying period in a colony (Fry *et al.* 1992), and most activity is focused on the breeding colony; as a result, birds become less obvious in the surrounding habitat during the breeding season.

Birds from the tropical race *M. b. randorum* have been recorded from Bulawayo (2028BA) in June (Clancey 1980b; Irwin 1981), but the regular occurrence of nonbreeding visitors in the dry season, though congruent with the models for Zones 5–6, remains to be proven. The record in the eastern Cape Province illustrates that it can wander great distances.

Breeding: Breeding activity begins in August and reaches a peak September–November, confirming egg-laying data which span August–November (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Skinner 1996a; Brown & Clining in press). Data from Zone 1 are thin but suggest that, in northern Botswana and the Caprivi, a second period of breeding activity occurs April–June.

Interspecific relationships: The Red-throated Bee-eater *M. bullocki* is the counterpart of this species in the northern Afrotropics and they have at times been treated as conspecific. In its riparian habitat, the Whitefronted Bee-eater may compete with the Olive *M. superciliosus* and Bluecheeked *M. persicus* Bee-eaters, which all flock together near larger rivers and swamps when feeding on flying insects.

It is a host of the Greater Honeyguide *Indicator indicator* (Maclean 1993b).

Historical distribution and conservation: In some places it benefits from human activities by breeding in sand quarries and erosion gullies, and other artificial sandbanks (Parker 1994). Its range may be expanding along rivers and associated irrigation schemes into the Free State and the northern Cape Province, where it was historically absent. The Whitefronted Bee-eater is not threatened and is widespread and common.

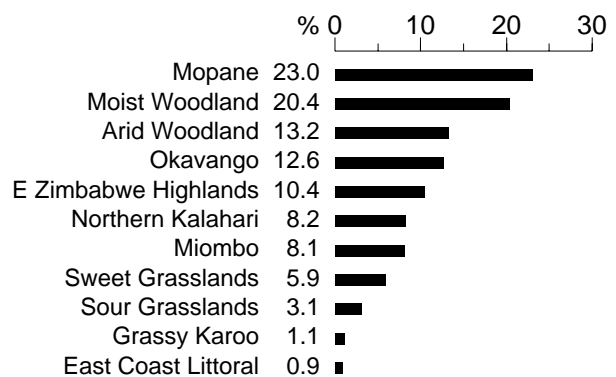
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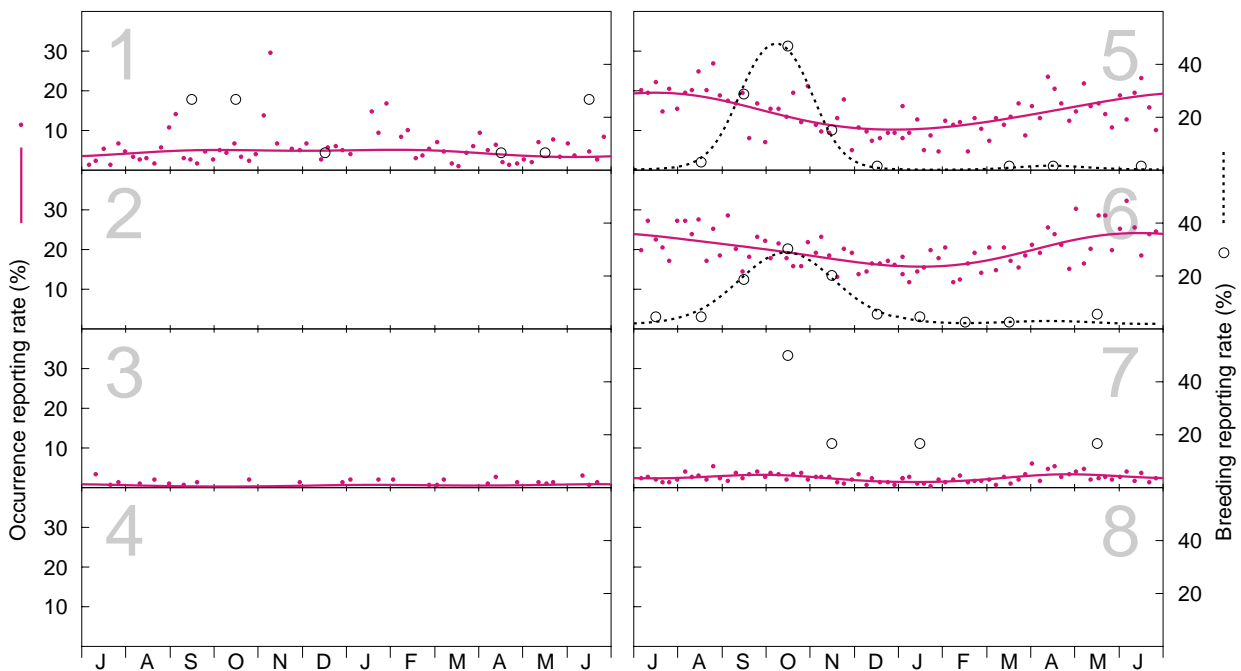
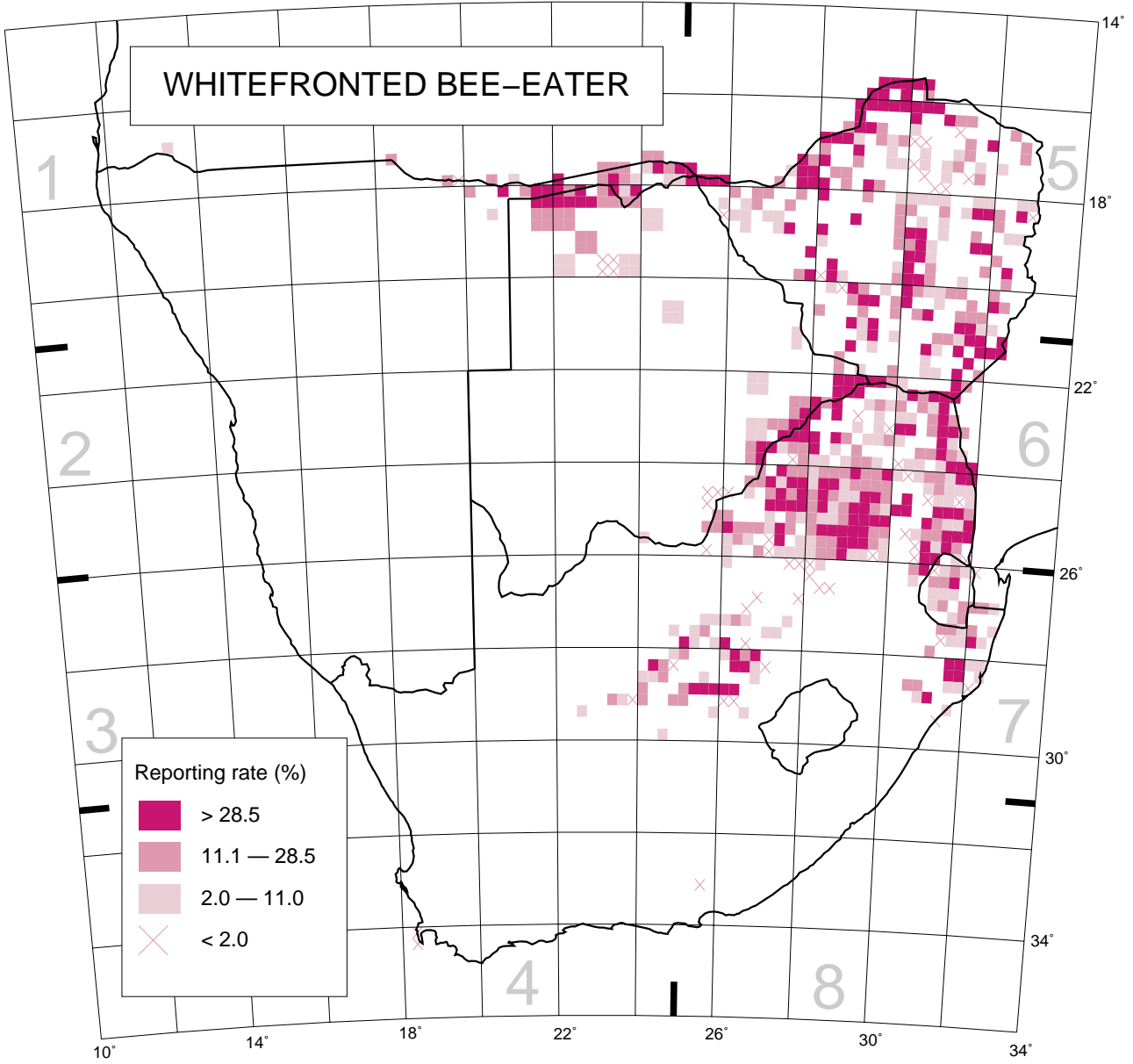
Recorded in 686 grid cells, 15.1%

Total number of records: 8083

Mean reporting rate for range: 17.3%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 145, 0, 32, 0, 1288, 2271, 489, 0; Breeding: 15, 0, 0, 0, 66, 69, 6, 0.