Little Bee-eater

Kleinbyvreter

Merops pusillus

The Little Bee-eater was reported from far northern Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, the Transvaal, Swaziland and KwaZulu-Natal. To the north of the atlas region, it occurs through most of sub-Saharan Africa with the exception of the Congo River basin (Fry *et al.* 1988).

It was estimated to occur at a density of 1 pair/50 ha in broadleaved woodland at Nylsvlei (2428AD) in the Transvaal (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The total population is estimated to be around 85 million birds (Fry *et al.* 1988). Two subspecies have been described in the region; a boundary between them across the western Transvaal and through the Limpopo River catchment to western Zimbabwe appears unlikely (cf. Clancey 1980b).

It is usually encountered in pairs, but also in the company of fledged young after breeding; it roosts in groups of up to 10 birds (Fry 1984). It is conspicuous by virtue of its striking coloration and its habits of perching and foraging in the open. It is unlikely that it was overlooked in any areas where it occurs regularly, but it is occasionally confused with the Swallowtailed Bee-eater *M. hirundineus.*

Habitat: It ranges from semi-arid to high-rainfall regions and from sea-level in KwaZulu-Natal to altitudes of above 2000 m in eastern Zimbabwe, but it is absent from the higher parts of the Drakensberg escarpment. Reporting rates indicate that it occurs at the highest densities in the Okavango Delta and the Limpopo River valley. It requires open space for foraging, with low bushes or reeds for perching and low sandbanks or Aardvark *Orycteropus afer* burrows for nesting. It is quick to move into recently burnt or cleared areas with new grass emerging, and marshes that are drying out (Fry *et al.* 1992). It is seldom if ever found far from water. The vegetation analysis shows that these conditions are most often encountered in the Okavango and also reflects a preference for savanna and light woodland over forested areas and treeless grasslands.

Movements: Although seasonal fluctuations in numbers have been reported from many parts of its range, these have been regarded as indicative of localized movements (Fry 1984) and the species is generally considered to be resident (e.g. Fry *et al.* 1988; Maclean 1993b). However, the models indicate a winter increase in reporting rates in Zimbabwe and the Transvaal (Zones 5 and 6), and a corresponding decrease to the west (Zone 1). A partial migration out of the drier west in winter, as suggested by Irwin (1981), seems a possible explanation. However, the model for Zone 1 is based on widely scattered reporting rates and is thus not particularly persuasive, while the much more definite fluctuations in Zones 5 and 6 could be the result of relatively local concentrations near permanent wetlands in winter, resulting in greater conspicuousness and hence higher reporting rates in that season.

Breeding: The models show that breeding is concentrated during early summer, as reported elsewhere in Africa (Fry 1984). Breeding in early summer probably reduces the risk of nests becoming flooded during heavy rains later in the season. Egglaying has previously been reported September–February, mostly September–November (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Skinner 1996a; Brown & Clinning in press).
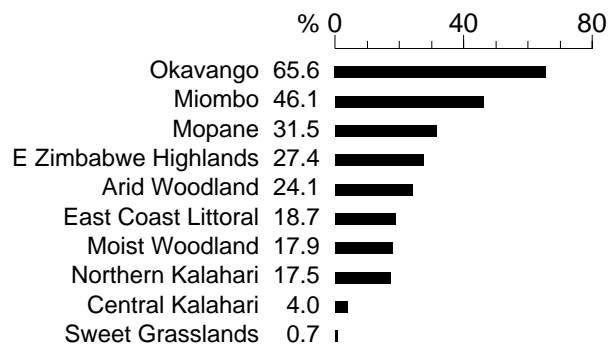
Interspecific relationships: It is one of several host species of the brood parasitic Greater Honeyguide *Indicator indicator* (Fry *et al.* 1988). Although their ranges overlap widely, it tends to be replaced by the Swallowtailed Bee-eater *M. hirundineus* in drier habitats and the more arid parts of the region.
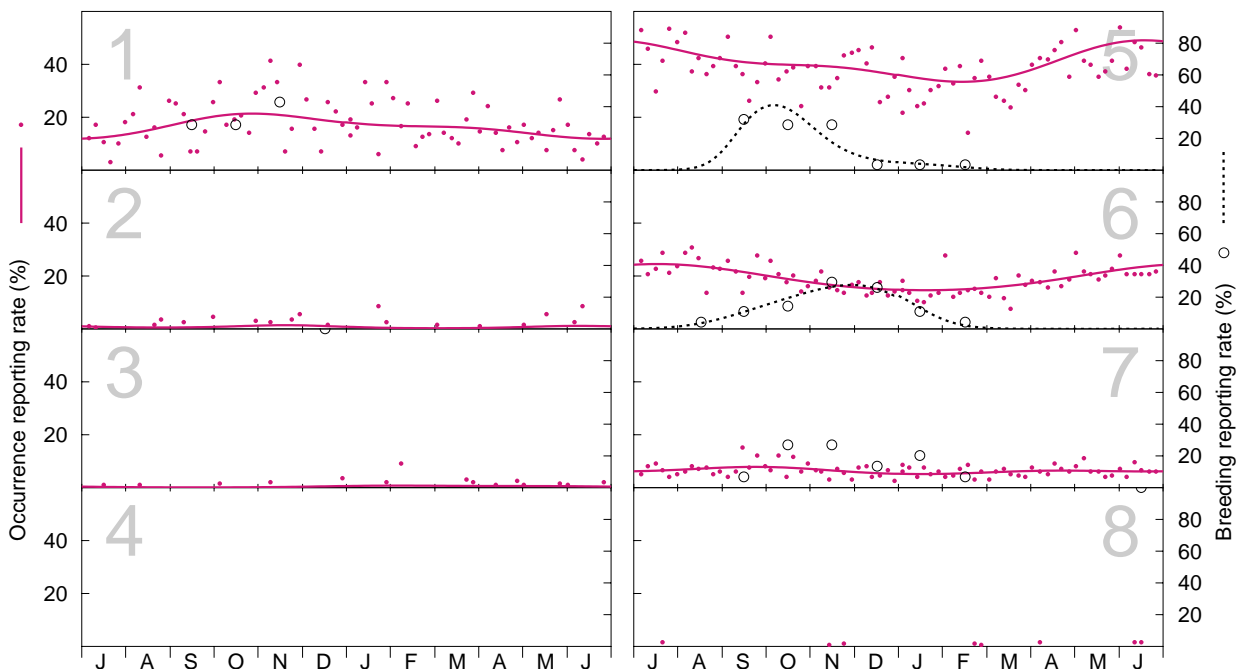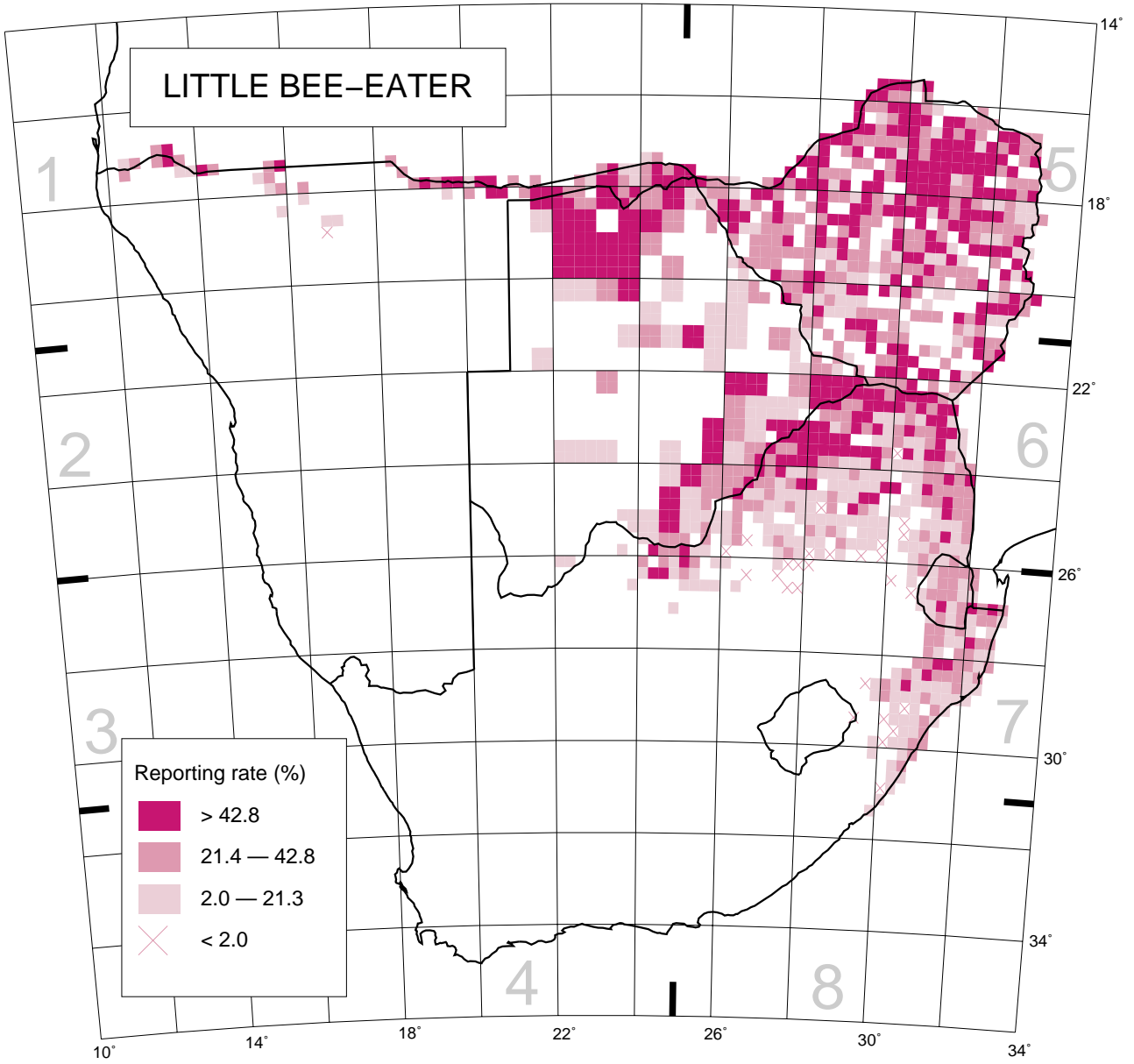
Historical distribution and conservation: The present distribution probably differs little from that of the past. However, the Little Bee-eater may have benefited from human activities owing to its ability to exploit earthworks for nesting sites.

V. Parker

Recorded in 1254 grid cells, 27.6%
Total number of records: 15 057
Mean reporting rate for range: 25.4%

Reporting rates for vegetation types

	% 0	40	80
Okavango	65.6		
Miombo	46.1		
Mopane	31.5		
E Zimbabwe Highlands	27.4		
Arid Woodland	24.1		
East Coast Littoral	18.7		
Moist Woodland	17.9		
Northern Kalahari	17.5		
Central Kalahari	4.0		
Sweet Grasslands	0.7		

LITTLE BEE-EATER

Reporting rate (%)
> 42.8
21.4 — 42.8
2.0 — 21.3
< 2.0

Occurrence reporting rate (%)

Breeding reporting rate (%)

Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 532, 26, 24, 0, 3561, 2176, 1245, 8;   Breeding: 7, 0, 1, 0, 31, 27, 15, 1.