

Swallowtailed Bee-eater

Swaelstertbyvreter

Merops hirundineus

This Afrotropical species has northern tropical and southern African populations, each consisting of two subspecies (Fry 1984). One of the southern subspecies, *M. h. furcatus* is found on the coastal plains of Tanzania and in Mozambique north of the Limpopo River (V. Parker *in litt.*) and inland to Malawi, the Northern Province of Zambia and southeastern Zimbabwe (Clancey 1980b; Harwin & Rockingham-Gill 1981). The nominate race occurs to the west, predominantly in woodlands on Kalahari sands. In the southern, most arid fringe of the range, it is strongly associated with a band of riparian woodland along the Orange River.

Vagrant records in the distribution map are from the south and east coast, near Port Elizabeth (3325DB) and East London (3227DD), and in northern KwaZulu-Natal (2732CA), while others are mapped in Ginn *et al.* (1989). Vagrants of this highly mobile species can appear anywhere in the region. It can only be confused with the Little Bee-eater *M. pusillus*. The Swallowtailed Bee-eater is rather shy and this, combined with its preference for woodland, makes it the least conspicuous of the southern African bee-eaters.

Habitat: It frequents well-developed woodland (Fry *et al.* 1992). Atlas data indicate that it is most common in the Kalahari, Okavango, Namibian Escarpment, Mopane and Arid Woodland vegetation types. These data confirm Winterbottom's (1966a) statement that it is 'dominant in Kalahari woodland'. It occurs in a variety of woodland types, including riparian woodland, and this explains its presence in otherwise unsuitable biomes such as the Karoo and Sweet Grasslands.

Movement: It is subject to complex movements, the interpretation of which is hampered by low and uneven atlas coverage in the core areas in the arid southwest of its range. There is an influx during the breeding season in spring and summer (September–April) in the arid west (Zones 1–3), while it is primarily a dry-season visitor in Zimbabwe (Zone 5) (Vernon 1968; Harwin & Rockingham-Gill 1981). The seasonal maps

show a shift out of the core area in the dry southwest (central Namibia and western and southern Botswana), to moister woodlands in northern Namibia, northern Botswana and northwestern Zimbabwe during the dry winter months, and movements continue also beyond the region into Zambia (Taylor 1979). Some birds move southeast, to the northern Cape Province, Free State and western Transvaal, where it is mainly an uncommon dry-season visitor (Earlé & Grobler 1987; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The arid nature of the core breeding range, the directions and partial nature of the movements suggest that movements may be variable in extent and could be more pronounced during drought. In Zimbabwe the nominate race is found in winter throughout the country (Harwin & Rockingham-Gill 1981); the eastern subspecies *furcatus* occurs in the west during the winter dry season, but is the less common of the two subspecies at that time (Vernon 1968; Irwin 1981).

Breeding: Unlike the larger bee-eaters, it is a solitary breeder (Fry *et al.* 1992), and it probably breeds throughout its range. Breeding starts September–October in Zones 1 and 5, and October–November in Zones further south. Most breeding is in spring and early summer, and there are no egg-laying records after February (Irwin 1981; Skinner 1996a; Brown & Clinning *in press*).

Interspecific relationships: Its range overlaps with six other bee-eaters in the region. Together with the European Bee-eater *M. apiaster*, it prefers dry woodland; it forages mostly within the canopy, whereas the European Bee-eater forages above the trees. It could also be in competition with the Little Bee-eater (Irwin 1981), but in Zimbabwe it is said to be associated with tall woodland where it feeds in the canopy at a height of 10–20 m, while the Little Bee-eater is said to occur in shrubby growth in more open country where it forages lower down (Harwin & Rockingham-Gill 1981).

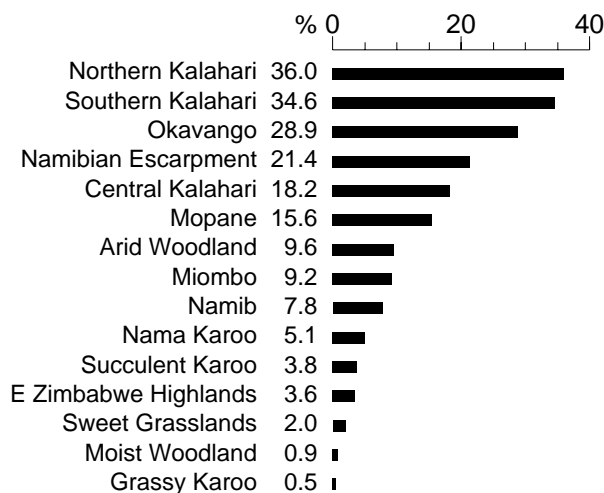
It is a host of the Greater Honeyguide *Indicator indicator* (Harwin & Rockingham-Gill 1981).

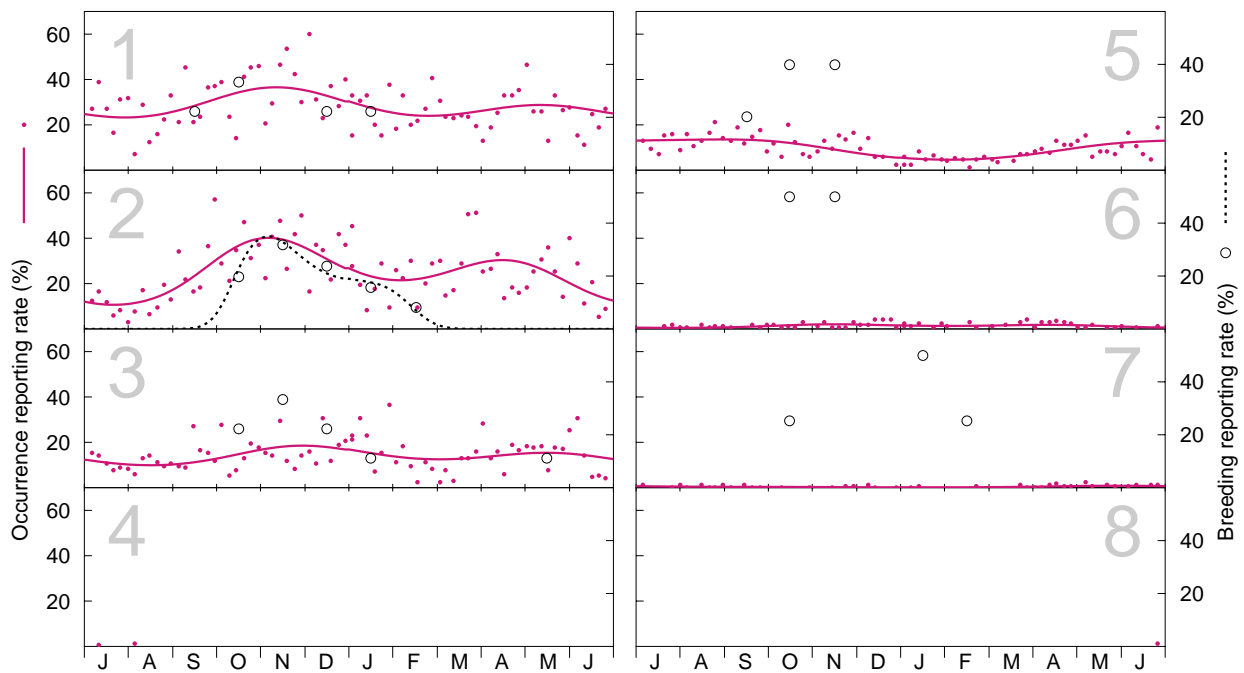
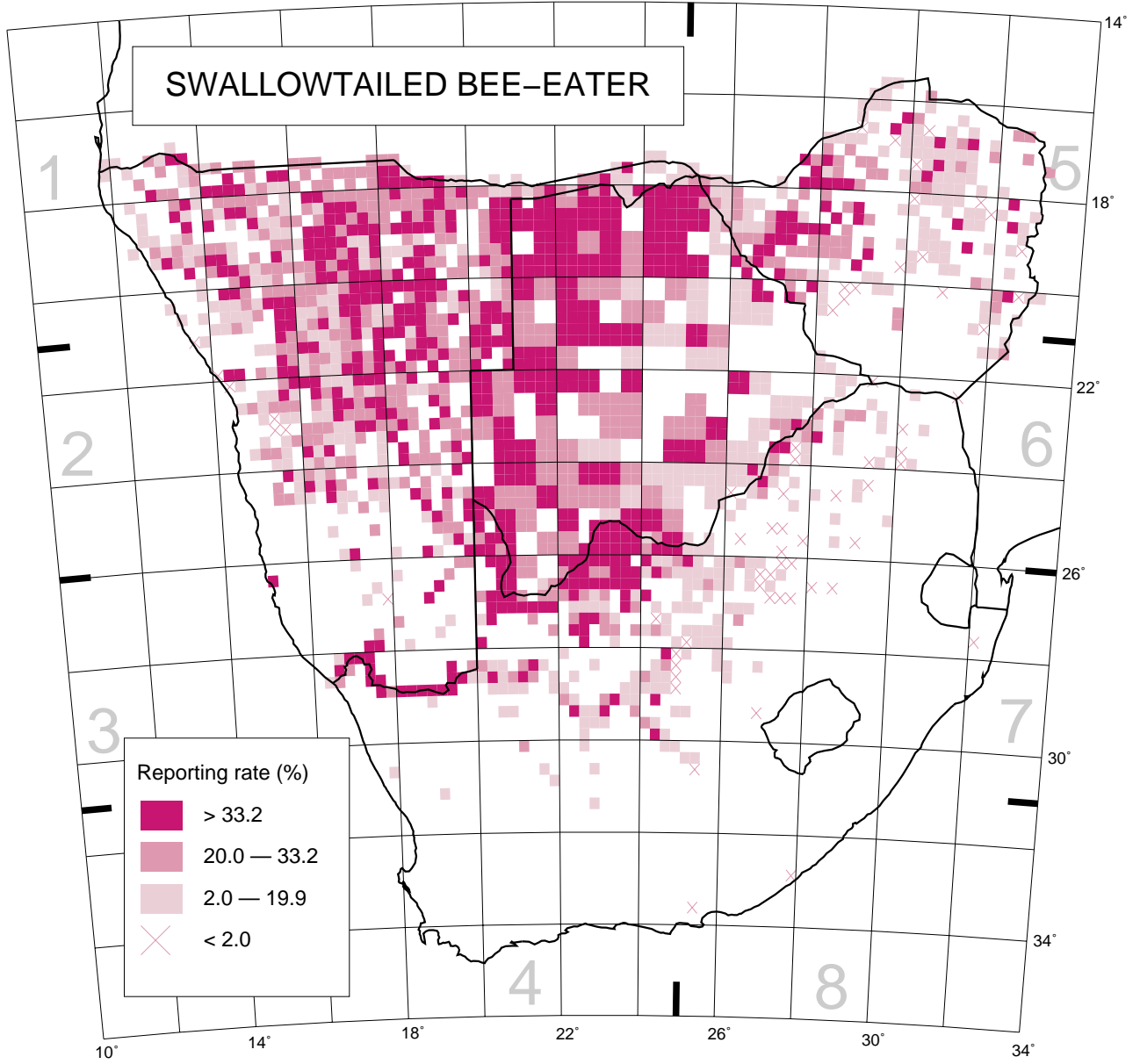
Historical distribution and conservation: As a result of its wide range and catholic habitat choice, it is not of current conservation concern.

M. Herremans and K.N. Barnes

Recorded in 1833 grid cells, 40.4%
Total number of records: 7870
Mean reporting rate for range: 19.0%

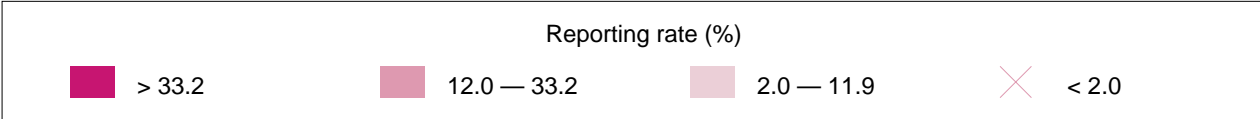
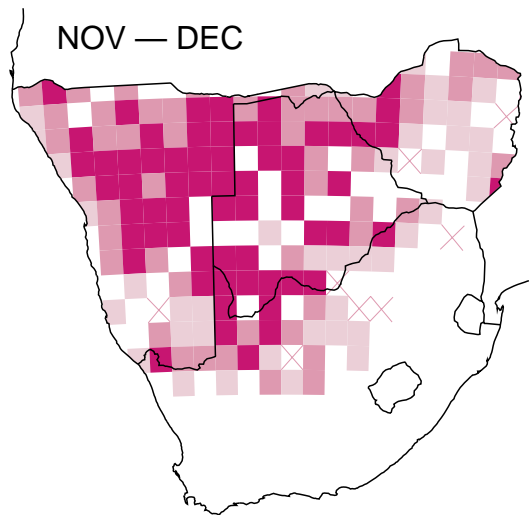
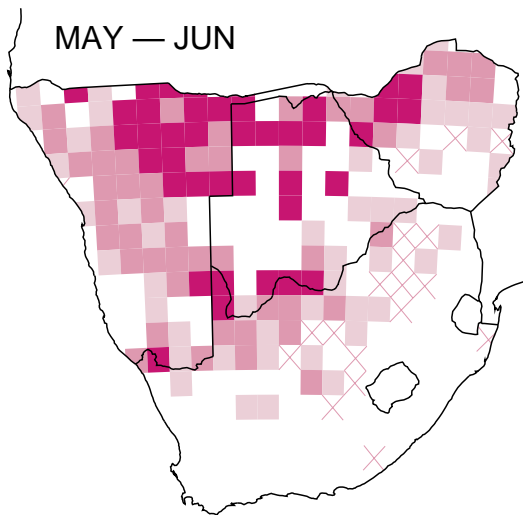
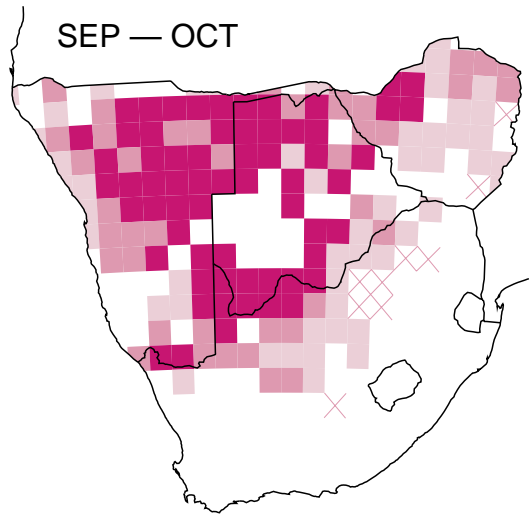
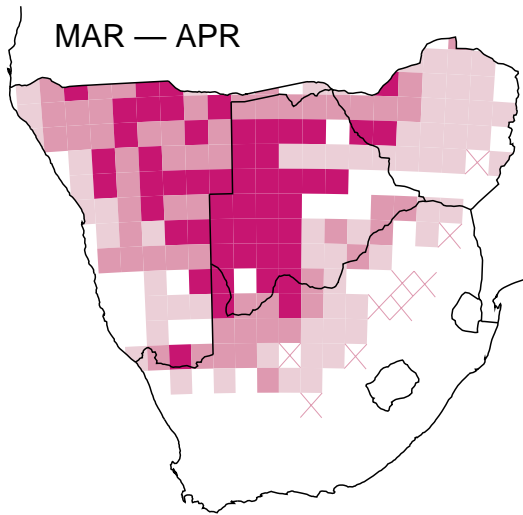
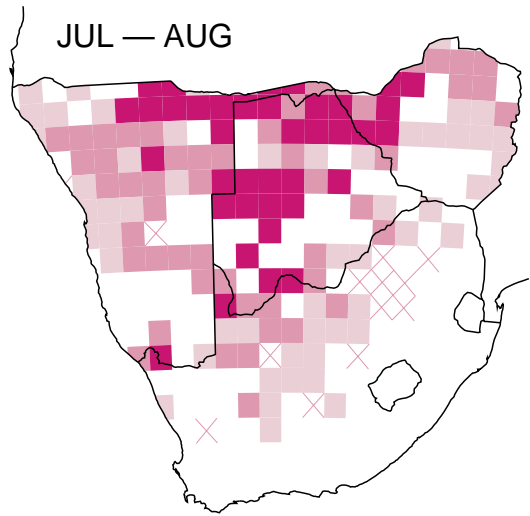
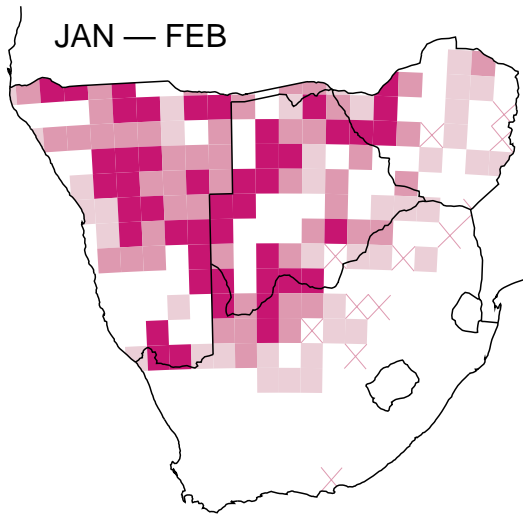
Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 923, 855, 758, 2, 860, 151, 80, 1; Breeding: 9, 25, 9, 0, 5, 2, 4, 0.

SWALLOWTAILED BEE-EATER



Seasonal distribution maps; one-degree grid.