



Bearded Woodpecker

Baardspeg

Thripias namaquus

The Bearded Woodpecker is the largest arboreal African woodpecker, and is a widespread Afrotropical endemic, extending from the northern savanna belt southwards into southern Africa. In the western half of southern Africa it ranges as far south as the availability of large trees permits; consequently it is absent from the Karoo, southern Kalahari and fynbos regions, and in the Namib it is restricted to riverbeds which support tall trees. A further reflection of its need for tall trees is its absence from the Orange River. The smaller Cardinal *Dendropicos fuscescens* and Goldtailed *Campepthera abingoni* Woodpeckers both follow the riparian habitat into semi-desert country along this river, whereas this larger species does not. On the eastern side of the subcontinent it largely reaches its southern limit where the savanna meets the grassland biome at about 26°S. There is a narrow southward extension of its range into KwaZulu-Natal through eastern Swaziland and, presumably, southern Mozambique. It extends even further south, albeit highly locally, through the Transkei to the eastern Cape Province, where it reaches its western limit at Cradock (3225BA) (Skead 1967b; Collett 1982; Quickelberge 1989). The extent to which these southernmost populations are isolated from one another and from northern populations is unknown. Quickelberge (1989) reported it to be 'not uncommon' along the Kei River (3228C).

It is usually encountered singly or in pairs. Densities in the range of 1 pair/100–600 ha have been observed in mature broadleaved woodland in the northern Transvaal (pers. obs), indicating that it occurs at a much lower density than the three other savanna woodpeckers in this area. In Botswana, a similar range of densities was found in Kalahari woodlands (1 bird/>200 ha) and well-developed Arid Woodland (1 bird/45 ha), but higher densities were recorded in Okavango fringing woodland (1 bird/6 ha) and tall Mopane (1 bird/18 ha), making the Bearded Woodpecker as common as other savanna woodpeckers in some types of tall woodland (M. Herremans unpubl. data).

The four savanna woodpecker species are superficially very alike in appearance and coloration and therefore misidentifications would have occurred, but probably somewhat less frequently in the case of the Bearded Woodpecker which is noticeably larger and has similar bold facial markings in both the male and female. It also has distinctive drumming behaviour which renders it conspicuous, and this may account for its comparatively high reporting rates.

Habitat: Reporting rates were highest in the more arid savanna types, i.e. Okavango, Mopane, Miombo, Arid Woodland and Northern Kalahari vegetation types. It is restricted to savanna and woodland, and characteristically found in areas with tall trees in open, park-like settings. Any broad-leaved woodland in which there are tall trees, especially dead trees, is optimum habitat for this woodpecker. It does not occur in Afromontane or lowland forest, nor is it found in commercial monocultures of alien trees.

Movements: It is resident and sedentary throughout its southern African range. Rises evident in some of the models during the winter months probably reflect increased drumming and vocal activity at the onset of the breeding season.

Breeding: Most atlas records occurred June–December, with breeding apparently extending for a longer period in Zimbabwe (Zone 5) than in the Transvaal (Zone 6). Egg-laying in Zimbabwe spans June–November (Irwin 1981), and in the Transvaal May–August (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), confirming this trend. Breeding is biased towards winter and early spring compared to spring/summer breeding in the other species.

Interspecific relationships: It shares the savanna biome with three other woodpecker species; all four occur side by side in places without evidence of competitive exclusion.

Historical distribution and conservation: Although past distribution of the Bearded Woodpecker has not been documented, it is unlikely that the overall distribution has altered. However, it has probably been affected by loss of habitat more than any other southern African woodpecker. It has become scarce or absent in areas where large rural settlements rely on dead wood for fuel and where bush has been cleared for agriculture (pers. obs). The large blank 'holes' in savanna areas in the Transvaal probably reflect this decline. The status of the eastern Cape Province and Transkei populations requires investigation and monitoring.

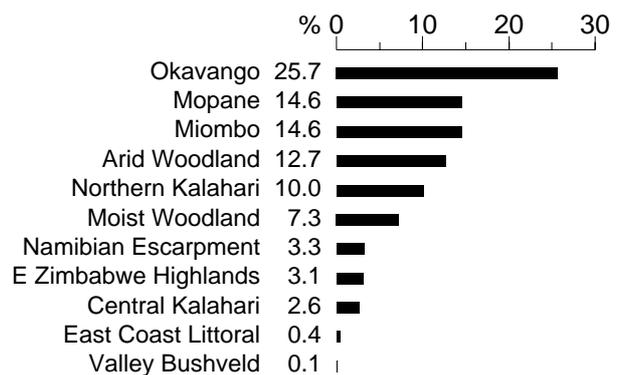
W.R. Tarboton

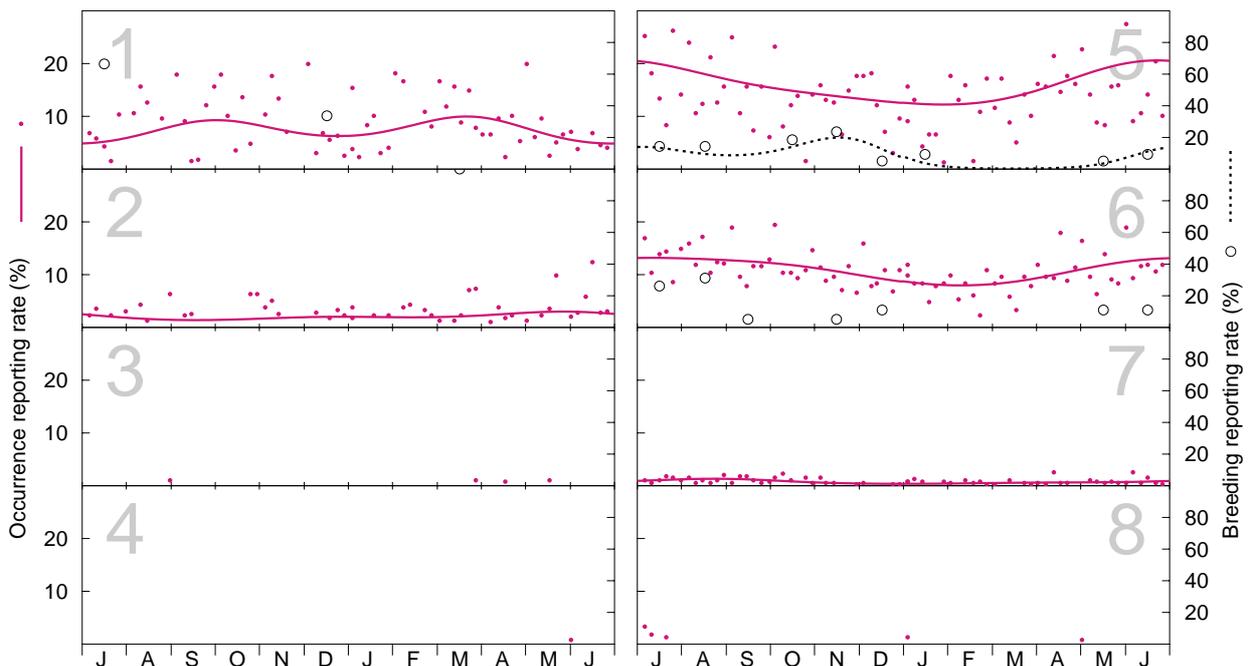
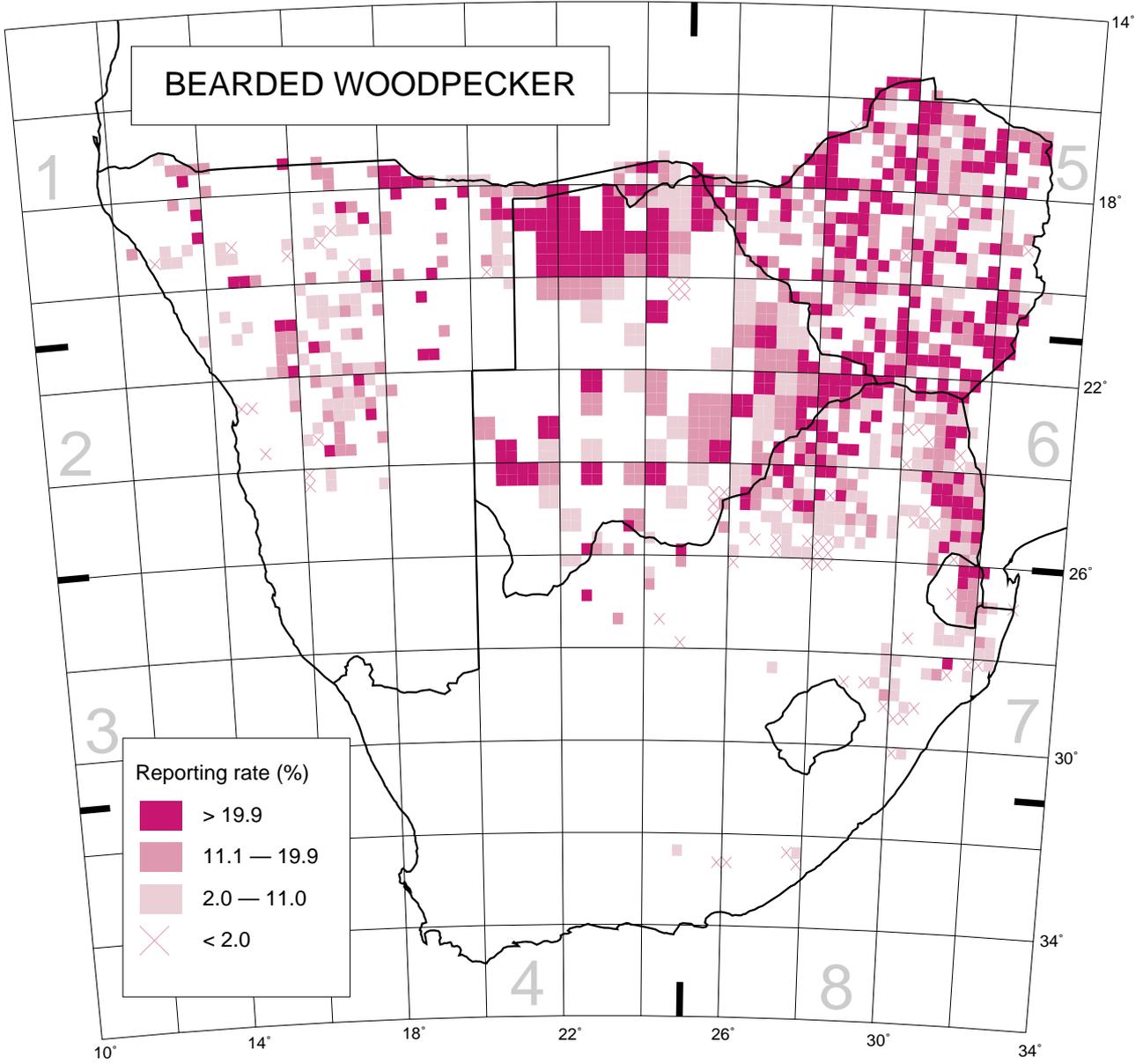
Recorded in 1166 grid cells, 25.7%

Total number of records: 5979

Mean reporting rate for range: 11.7%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 251, 77, 4, 1, 1390, 1235, 142, 6; Breeding: 3, 1, 0, 0, 21, 19, 0, 0.