

Melodious Lark

Spotlewerik

Mirafra cheniana

This southern African endemic species has a highly fragmented range in the eastern Cape Province, the Free State, northwestern KwaZulu-Natal, and the southcentral and southwestern Transvaal in South Africa. It also occurs in central and southwestern Zimbabwe at a few suitable localities where it is recorded irregularly (e.g. Irwin 1981; Masterson & Parks 1993). It may occur in southeastern Botswana but is certainly not as widespread in Botswana as generally shown in the fieldguides. A specimen record from near Lake Ngami (2022B) is in error (Hustler 1994) and there is only one accepted sighting for the country from cell 2525B (Hunter 1989b).

It is usually found solitarily or in pairs and is localized to suitable habitat, where it may be common (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

This lark can be easily confused with the Monotonous Lark *M. passerina*, but the two occupy different habitats and that species has a white belly and flanks. The Melodious Lark sings from a perch, or more commonly in flight, and the distinctive song, a good field character, consists mainly of imitations of the calls of other birds. Other field characters are the short, heavy, conical bill, a patch of rufous on the wing that shows in flight, and rather heavily streaked upperparts. The short, dark tail with white outer retrices and the buff flanks are distinctive. It is easily overlooked when silent. Maclean (1993b) noted that the Melodious Lark could also be confused with the Shorttailed Pipit *Anthus brachyurus*, which may occupy similar habitat.

Habitat: The Melodious Lark inhabits relatively dry grasslands dominated by Rooigras *Themeda triandra* but it sometimes also occurs in planted *Eragrostis* pastures and fallow fields. Vernon (1983c) pointed out that its habitat is usually at 550–1750 m, with a mean annual rainfall between 400 and 800 mm. The Melodious Lark generally avoids the hard, wiry grasses of the alpine and sour grasslands (Vernon 1983c). Reporting rates show that it is most often recorded in grassy Karoo, and sweet and mixed grasslands.

Movements: There is no evidence of any regular seasonal movements in this species. The models show fewer sightings in the winter months, but this is probably due to birds being overlooked when not singing. However, the numbers of Melodious Larks in any area may vary from year to year (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), implying movements in response to environmental conditions.

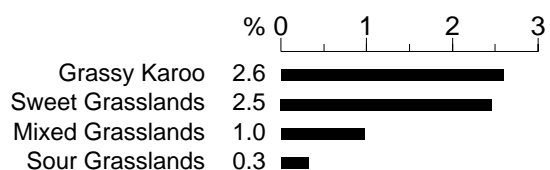
Breeding: Tarboton *et al.* (1987b) reported breeding November–February in the Transvaal. Breeding occurs in Zimbabwe September–March (Irwin 1981; Masterson & Parks 1993).

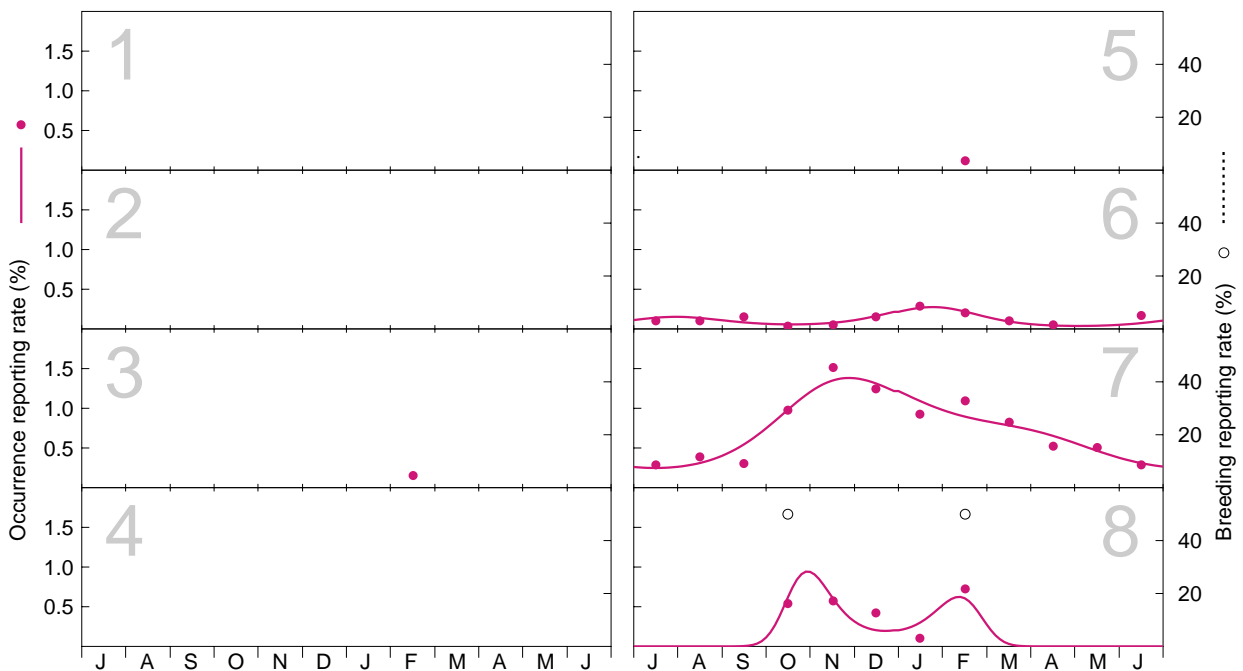
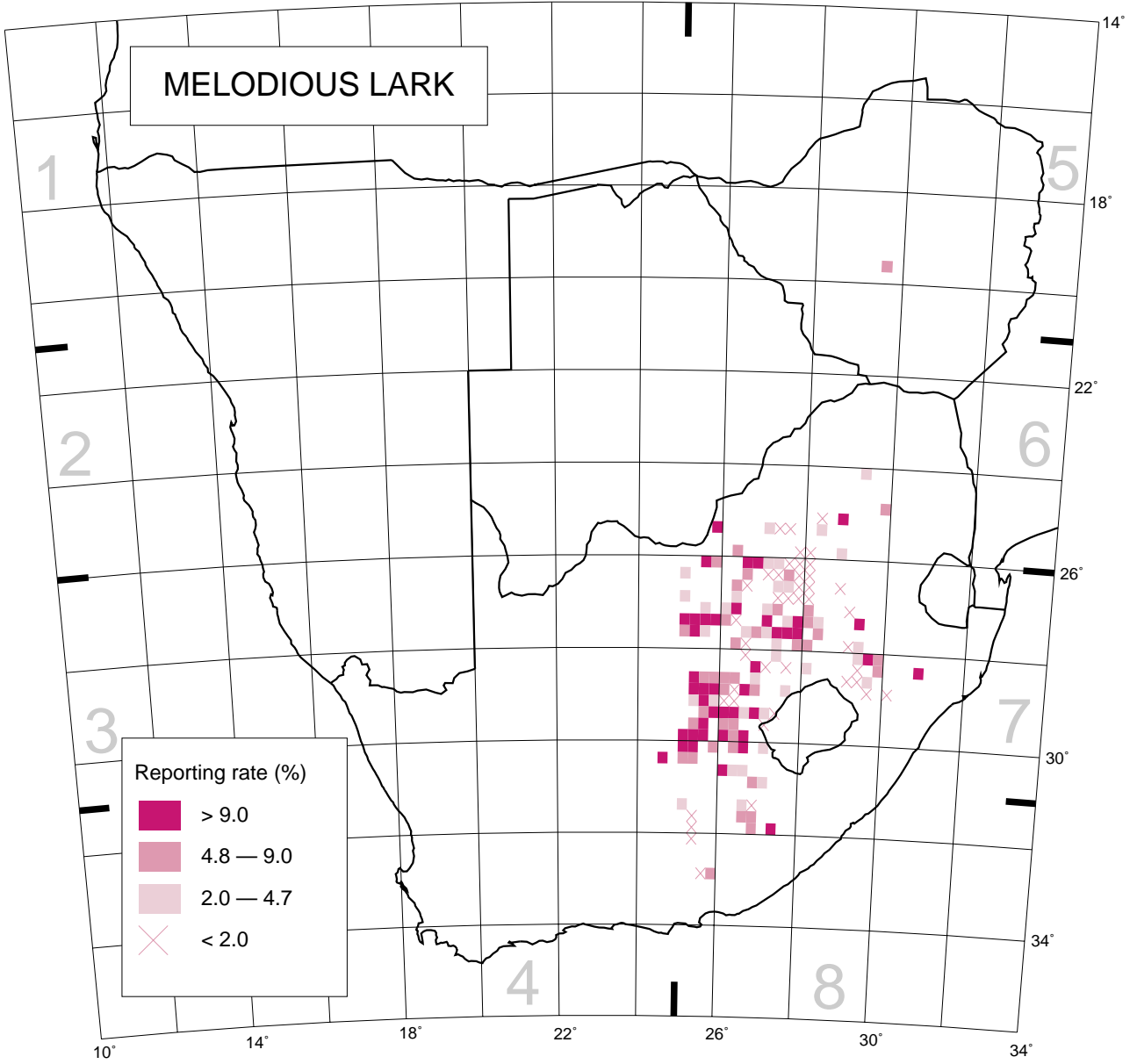
Historical distribution and conservation: There is evidence that the Melodious Lark was formerly distributed over a larger geographical area in southern Africa than it occupies presently (Vernon 1983c; Maclean 1993b). For example, there are no recent records of this species at its type locality at Kuruman (2723AD) in the northern Cape Province, or at Matatiele (3028BD) in KwaZulu-Natal where it was common in the early 1900s. Overgrazing leading to changes in plant species composition, and crop farming have transformed the habitat of this lark in many grassland areas. The spread of the urban industrial complex of the Witwatersrand in the southern Transvaal has impacted on grasslands where it formerly occurred. It is not included in the South African Red Data book (Brooke 1984b) but the South African grassland biome is poorly conserved (Siegfried 1989) and this species is probably of conservation concern. Its distribution and status require monitoring.

W.R.J. Dean

Recorded in 160 grid cells, 3.5%
Total number of records: 429
Mean reporting rate for range: 2.6%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 0, 0, 1, 0, 1, 28, 331, 24; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 2.