

## Greybacked Finchlark

### Grysruglewerik

*Eremopterix verticalis*

The Greybacked Finchlark is near-endemic to southern Africa. It also occurs west of the Zambezi River in Zambia, and northward along the coastal plain from Cabinda to Benguela in Angola. It is distributed over the western parts of southern Africa, and is widespread and common in the Cape Province, western and northern Free State, southwestern and northwestern Transvaal, and over most of Botswana and Namibia, but there were few records from Zimbabwe where it is mainly irruptive (Irwin 1981). Although not recorded from Lesotho during the atlas period, there are historical records (Bonde 1993).

There are three curious gaps in the data: in southern Namibia, in the northeastern Cape Province, and in the southern Karoo. The gap in Namibia may have been caused by poor coverage. The gap in the northeastern Cape Province corresponds with the Ghaap Plateau, which was well covered, and indicates an avoidance of this area. The gap in the southern Karoo corresponds with the mountainous regions of the escarpment where the species is absent or local, compared with the level plains of the Great Karoo to the south and Bushmanland to the north. It appears to be sporadic in the eastern and northeastern parts of its distribution (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

This species is gregarious, even when breeding (Keith *et al.* 1992; Maclean 1993b); it is usually found in small groups but flocks may number in the hundreds.

The Greybacked Finchlark is the only finchlark in southern Africa with a grey back and a strongly patterned black-and-white head in the male. Confusion is possible between the female Greybacked, Blackeared *E. australis* and Chestnut-backed *E. leucotis* Finchlarks, but the Greybacked has a grey-brown back and a black belly. The atlas data are comprehensive and appear to be reliable.

**Habitat:** It is present in a wide range of semi-arid to arid vegetation types, sparsely grassed plains on sands and gravels, annual and perennial grasslands with scattered shrubs and trees, dry pans and bare, poorly drained flats, burnt grassland, croplands after harvest, fallow fields and succulent and non-succulent dwarf shrublands. Reporting rates were generally high for this species; it was most often reported from the Southern Kalahari.

**Movements:** The models show marked seasonal changes in reporting rates. In central Namibia (Zone 2) and northwestern

South Africa (Zone 3), reporting rates peaked in late summer, the period when rainfall is most likely in these regions, and there was a sharp dip in reporting rates in midwinter. In southwestern South Africa (Zone 4), reporting rates peaked in early summer, but again there was a clear midwinter trough in reporting rates. In northern Namibia (Zone 1) reporting rates remained fairly constant throughout the year.

There is a tendency for peaks in reporting rate in the models to correspond with breeding peaks, suggesting that increased conspicuousness due to breeding displays and songs may have been at least partly responsible for the variations in reporting rates. Following good rainfall and grass growth, Greybacked Finchlarks form flocks consisting of hundreds to thousands of birds. Such flocks are conspicuous as they fly up in response to disturbance. After breeding, flocks tend to break up into smaller, less conspicuous groups.

It is possible that there are movements on an east–west axis between the Kalahari and Karoo–Namib regions, but the configuration of the Zones does not allow examination of this. Large concentrations occurred at the periphery of the Kalahari during drought (Brewster 1991, 1996). Analysis of movements is also complicated by high variability of rainfall from year to year within the range of this species.

**Breeding:** It breeds opportunistically after rain (Maclean 1993b) and breeding was recorded in virtually every month of the year. Records from Zone 4, with winter rain, show a spring peak. Records from Zones 1 and 2, with late-summer rains, show a late-summer peak. The model for Zone 3, which straddles winter rainfall and late-summer-rainfall areas, shows bimodality.

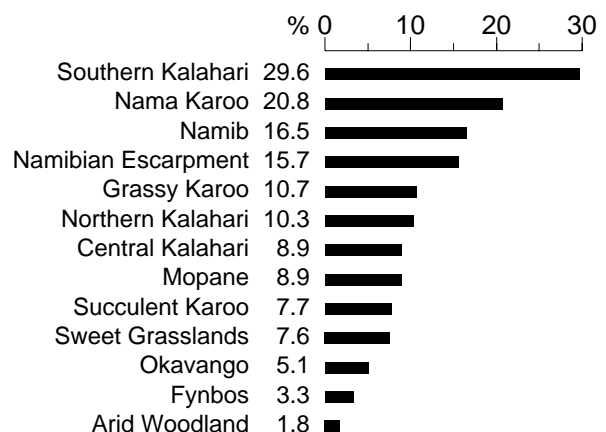
**Interspecific relationships:** The Greybacked Finchlark regularly occurs in mixed flocks with Chestnutbacked Finchlark (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Brewster 1996), and occurs in mixed flocks with Stark's Lark *Eremalauda starki* and Blackeared Finchlark in the northern Karoo (pers. obs).

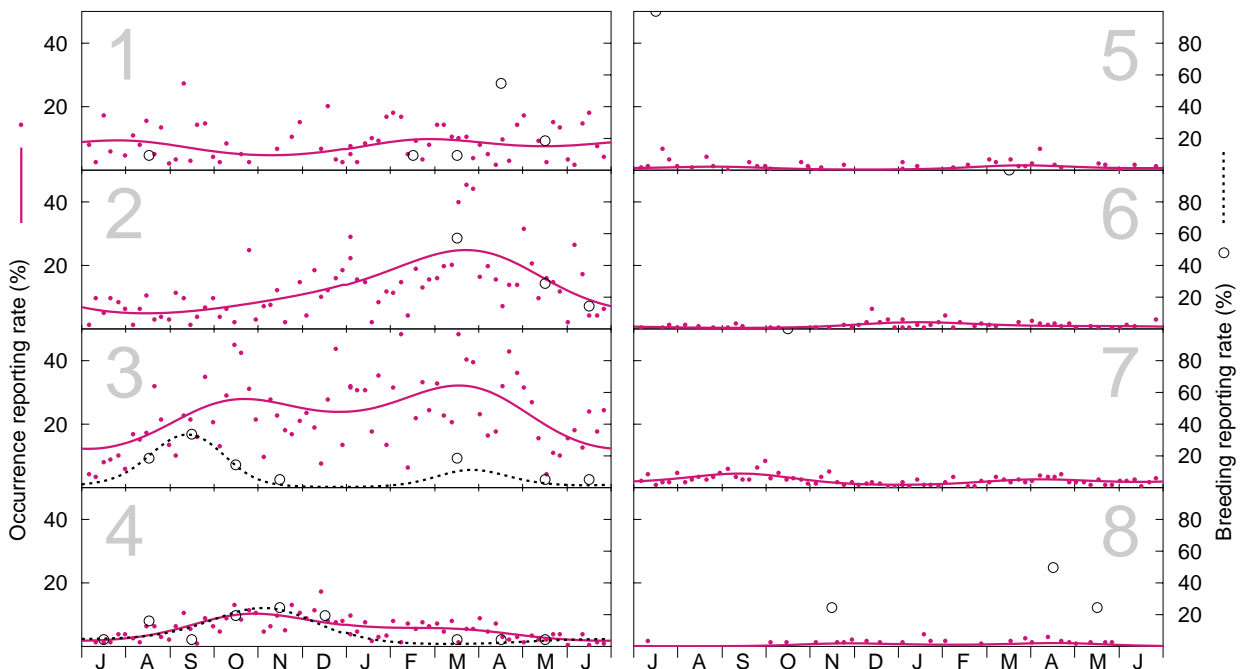
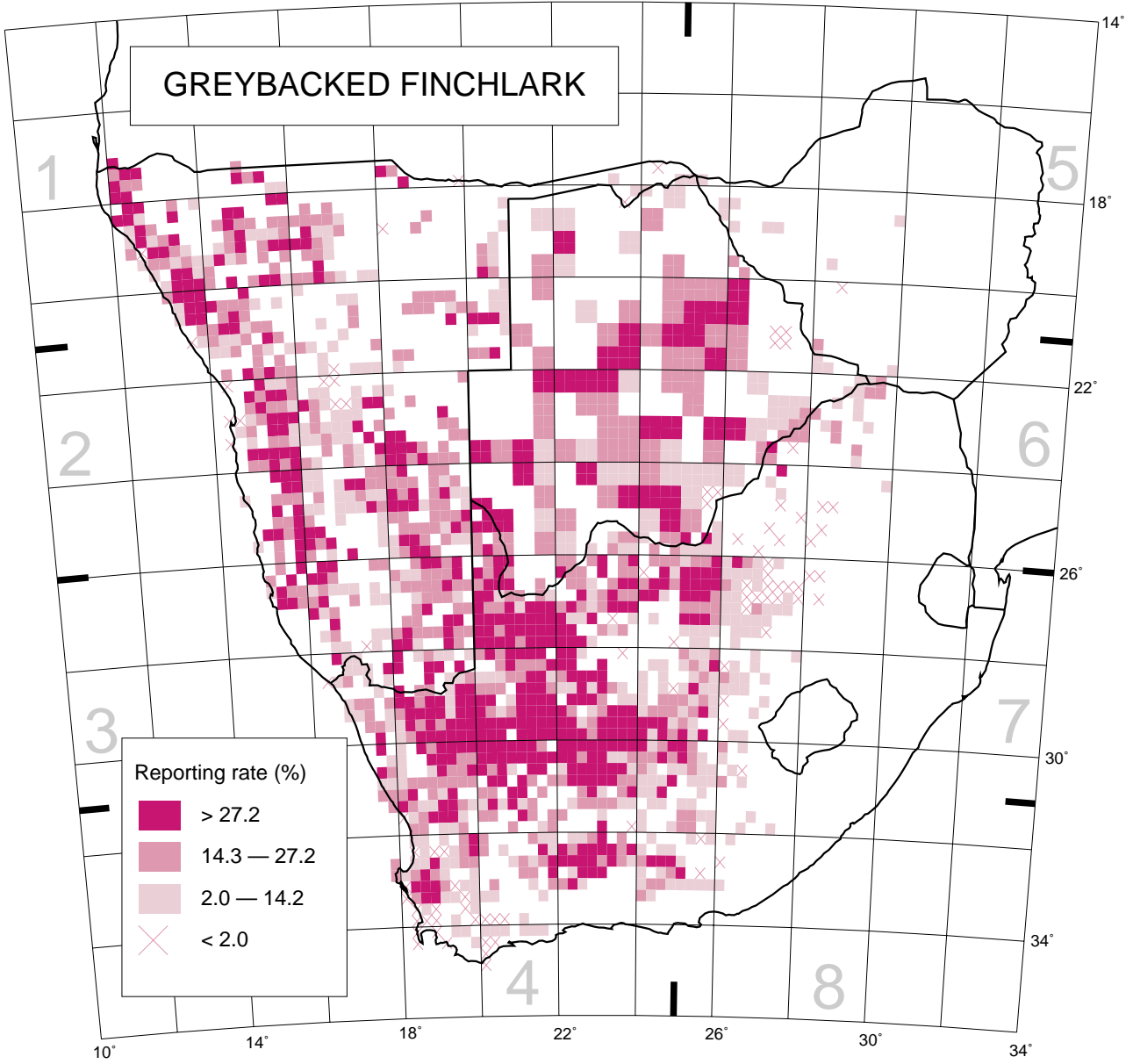
**Historical distribution and conservation:** There is no evidence of changes in the distribution of this species in the recent past. The Greybacked Finchlark is a common and widespread species in the arid and semi-arid regions of southern Africa and is not threatened.

W.R.J. Dean

Recorded in 1798 grid cells, 39.6%  
Total number of records: 6804  
Mean reporting rate for range: 13.1%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 259, 496, 1264, 476, 69, 116, 447, 30; Breeding: 11, 7, 21, 25, 1, 1, 1, 4.