



## Arrowmarked Babbler

### Pylvlekkatlagter

#### *Turdoides jardineii*

The Arrowmarked Babbler is a common species throughout most of the northeastern quarter of southern Africa, from Caprivi and Okavango in the west, through northern Botswana to Zimbabwe, eastern Botswana, Transvaal, the lowlands and escarpment of Swaziland to northern KwaZulu-Natal and the Drakensberg foothills. There are a few records from the southern part of the central Kalahari. The ranges of the four subspecies recognized in the region (Clancey 1980b) appear continuous on the present map. Beyond southern Africa the range extends to Cabinda in the west and Kenya in the east (Maclean 1993b).

It is conspicuous, foraging noisily in groups of up to 10 (Maclean 1993b), and its incessant chatter is easily recognized. The atlas data are reliable and comprehensive.

**Habitat:** It is typically a species of thickets, or strips of denser vegetation along seasonal drainage lines in drier habitats. It was most frequently reported from Miombo and other broadleaved and mixed woodlands, but it is found in a variety of woodland types. Winterbottom (1971c) considered it to favour Mopane, without mentioning its preference for thickets. It is rare or absent from the arid woodlands of northern KwaZulu-Natal, a habitat favoured further north. The distribution and habitat choice in KwaZulu-Natal is peculiar: many other northeastern woodland species range into northern KwaZulu-Natal, but the Arrowmarked Babbler is the only one that 'leapfrogs' it, reappearing in the thornveld of western KwaZulu-Natal, and being common in alien scrub in the Drakensberg foot-

hills. The absence of this bird from the central Kalahari is probably a function of water availability; whether it is totally reliant on free-standing water is not known, but it certainly drinks (Skead 1975a). Lack of water also means absence of prime habitat, namely lush drainage-line vegetation with thickets.

**Movements:** There was no evidence of long-range seasonal movements anywhere within the range. Cooperative breeding is a part of its ecology (Vernon 1976b), and migration would not favour the long-term family integrity required for this. The apparent increase in abundance in midwinter (particularly in Zone 6) is probably a function of flock mobility. This could be expected to increase when the birds are not tied to a breeding site. In the course of these local movements the babblers are more likely to visit man-modified habitats, especially at the height of the dry season. Lower reporting rates in midsummer could also relate to quieter behaviour during post-breeding moult.

**Breeding:** In the eastern half of the range, breeding was recorded in every month but peaked October–November. This remarkable spread of breeding records is not entirely due to the prolonged period of parental care, as egg-laying data for Zimbabwe and the Transvaal also showed clutches to be initiated throughout the year (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

**Interspecific relationships:** It has an interesting relationship with the other four babblers of southern Africa. There is some range overlap, but the other four species inhabit the dry west and Kalahari proper, and are presumably independent of free water, except for Hartlaub's Babbler *T. hartlaubii* which favours riparian habitat.

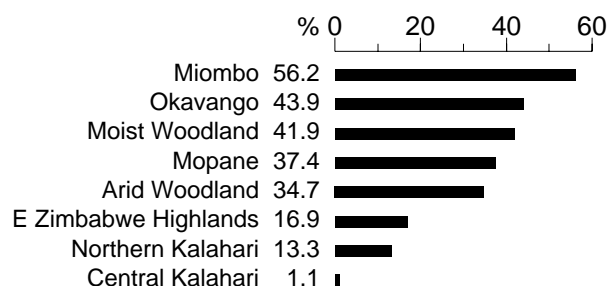
The Arrowmarked Babbler is almost the sole brood host of the Striped Cuckoo *Clamator levaillantii* (Steyn 1973) and the distributions of the two species are very similar, particularly in the Transvaal (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

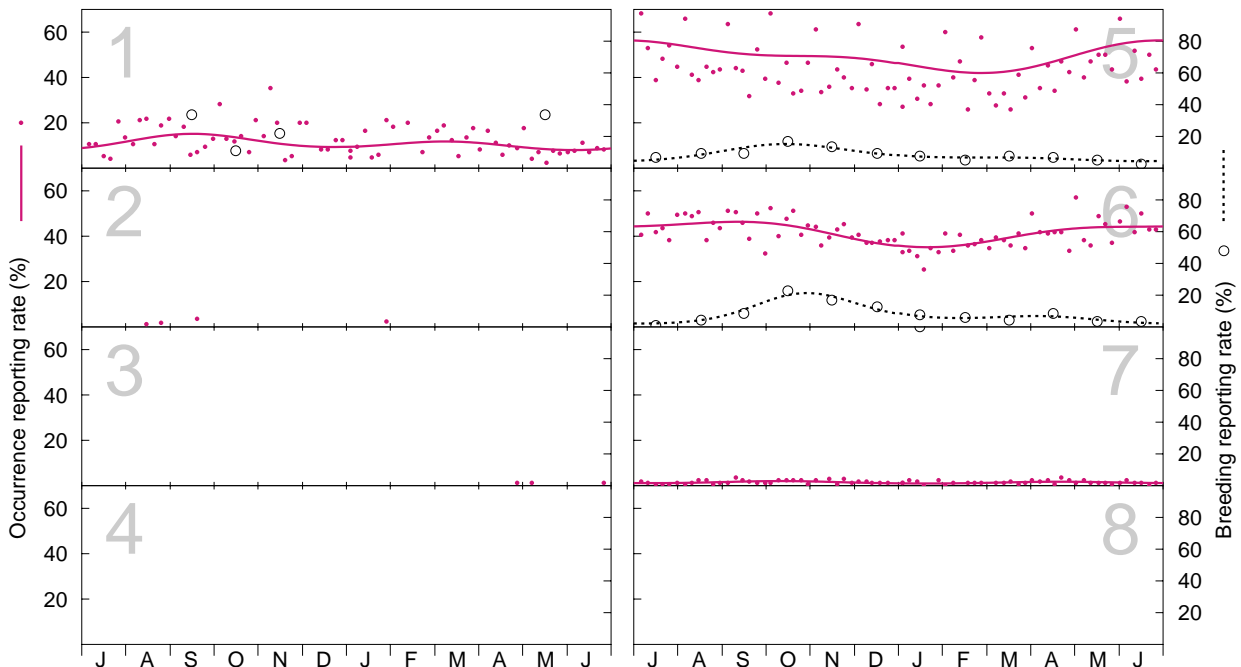
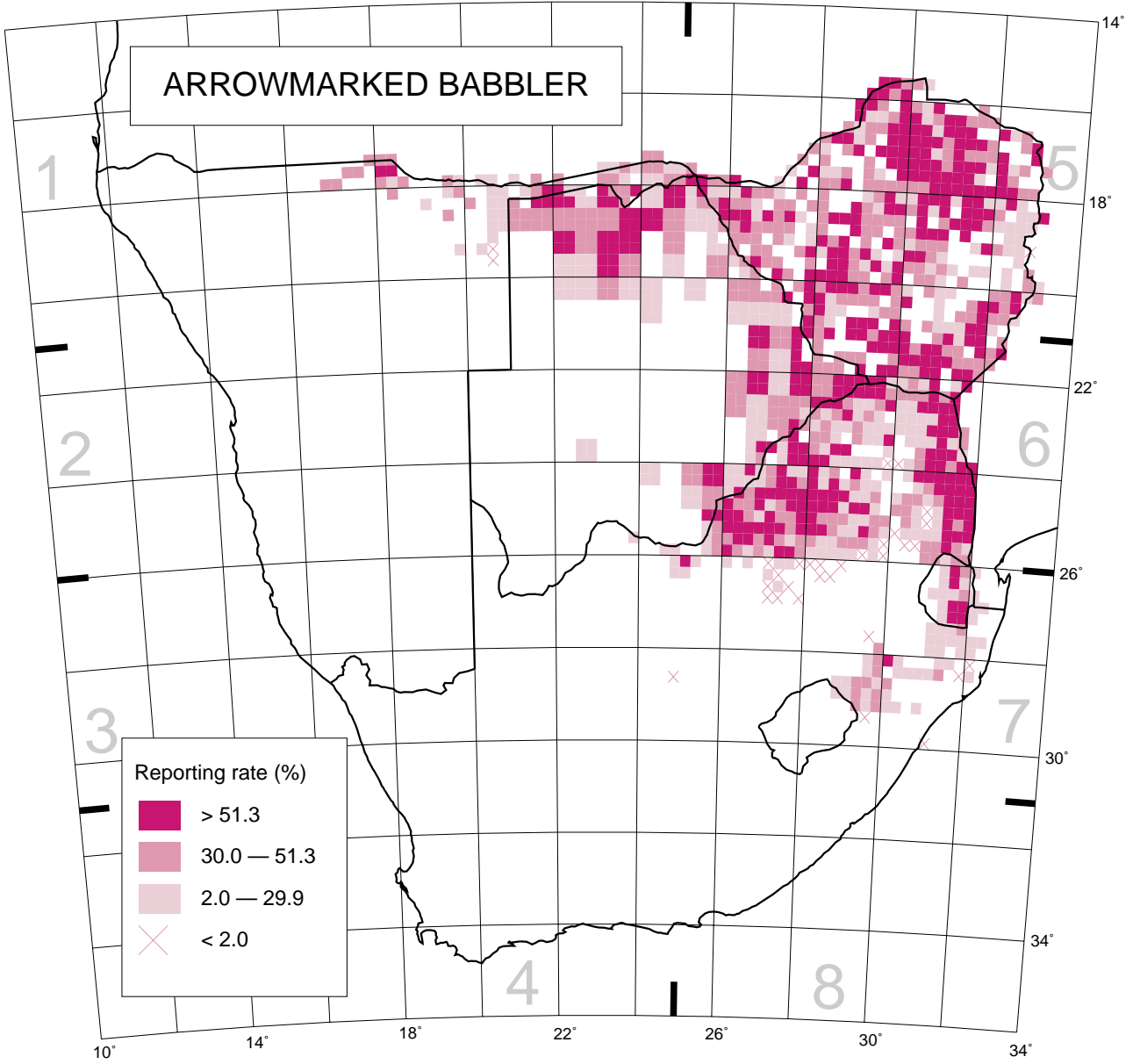
**Historical distribution and conservation:** The distribution is not known to have changed greatly. Its extension into western KwaZulu-Natal must be comparatively recent, or at least its expansion within that area must be so, as this is the only part of the range where significant use is made of alien vegetation. The latter was introduced after about 1870, most of it much later. However, range extension here has not continued subsequent to Cyrus & Robson's (1980) atlas. The Arrowmarked Babbler is not a conservation priority at present.

D.N. Johnson

Recorded in 1151 grid cells, 25.4%  
Total number of records: 19 066  
Mean reporting rate for range: 36.3%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 365, 5, 3, 0, 4308, 4761, 279, 0; Breeding: 9, 0, 0, 0, 106, 84, 1, 0.