

Mocking Chat

Dassievoël

Thamnolaea cinnamomeiventris

Because of the Mocking Chat's affinity for cliff faces, dongas or large boulders, its distribution is discontinuous in places (Skead 1967b), but it is nevertheless widespread in the eastern half of the Afrotropical region. The map reveals the rather patchy nature of its distribution in the eastern part of southern Africa. It is remarkably absent from the Transkei, Lesotho and a large part of western Zimbabwe.

Three races have been recognized in the southern sub-continent (Clancey 1952, 1962a); the map does not show their ranges to be distinct.

Habitat: It is normally found in the vicinity of rocky outcrops in wooded country, preferring relatively open, well-faulted rock-faces with scattered trees and shrubs, especially where large *Ficus* trees are present. Farkas (1961) believed that a large fig tree was a requisite for a Mocking Chat haunt, and noted that the dispersion of *Ficus ingens* influenced the distribution of Mocking Chats in the Magaliesberg range (2527C,D); he also predicted that Mocking Chats would not be found in areas above the altitudinal limits of *Ficus*. The high earthen sides of deeply incised erosion gullies wherein scattered trees have grown also provide suitable habitat, as do lightly wooded, boulder-strewn hillsides in some areas.

It habituates readily to human activity and is frequently found near farm homesteads and picnic spots where it can become quite confiding. One male that lived near a farmhouse in KwaZulu-Natal used to visit the verandah for scraps and is reputed to have survived for 21 years (pers. obs). Buildings and culverts may be frequented where they provide breeding sites for Lesser Striped Swallows *Hirundo abyssinica* whose nests it usurps, but it can build its own nest of twigs and leaves in a rock crevasse or hollow if no swallow nests are available.

Movements: Farkas (1961) observed that it was absent from breeding haunts in the Magaliesberg and other highveld localities from mid-May to early September. He attributed their absence during the winter months to the deciduous nature of the vegetation rather than to shortage

of food. Subsequently Farkas (1966a) noted that altitudinal migration in this species was widespread in the higher parts of its South African range. Maximum reporting rates obtained in winter and spring support the observation of altitudinal migration, as birds at lower altitudes are more readily reported.

Breeding: Atlas data indicate that breeding activity peaks in the summer months throughout the range (Zones 5 to 8), which agrees with the August–December breeding season with peak laying period September–November given in the literature (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Maclean 1993b). Farkas (1966a) stressed the importance of the first summer rains as a cue for nest refurbishing and egg-laying.

Interspecific relationships: It is often found in association with rock hyraxes *Procavia* spp., hence its Afrikaans name. Farkas (1961) often observed 'playful sham fights' between Mocking Chats and rock hyrax. The

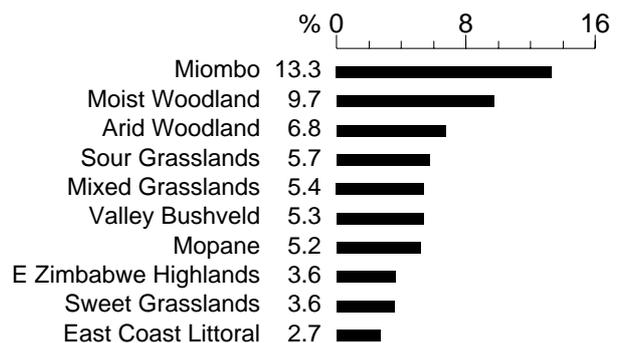
bird would run straight at the hyrax, stop immediately in front of it, then jump up into the air with a loud snap of its beak. The hyrax would often run away, but if it counter-attacked the bird would merely leap over its back and attack it from behind. It often shares habitat with Cape Rock Thrush *Monticola rupestris* but does not quarrel with it, though males of both species may sing simultaneously from the same rock. It prefers to take over the newly made nests of Lesser Striped Swallows to which it adds a thick lining of hyrax or antelope hair.

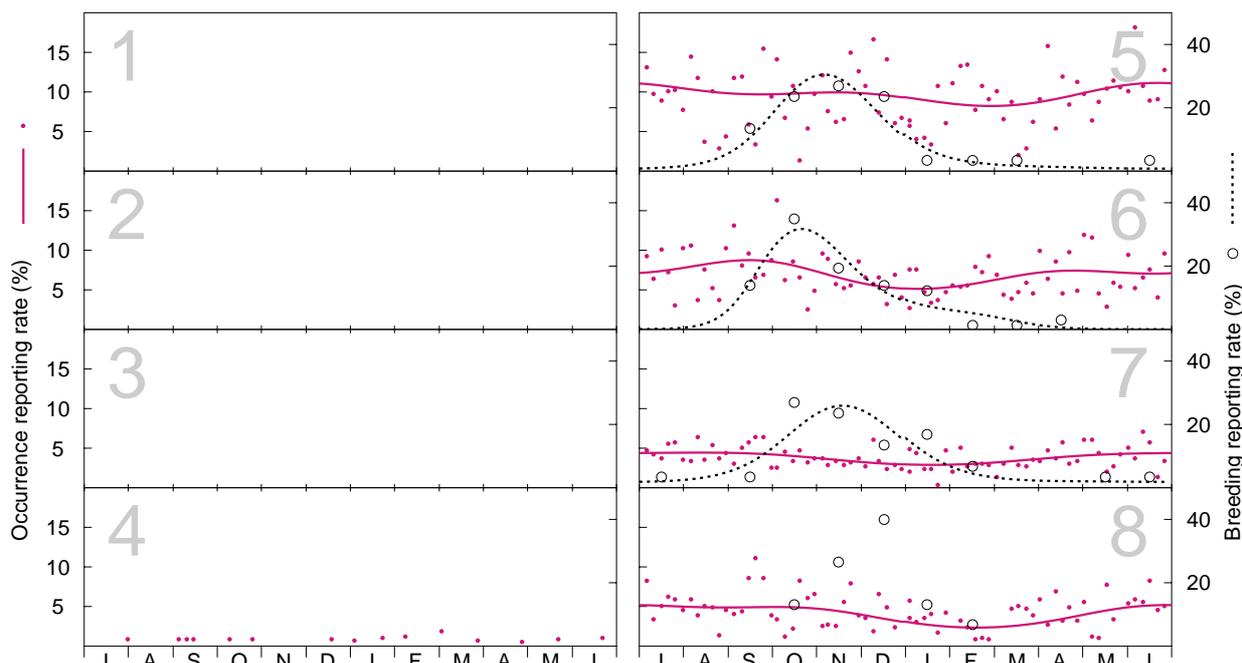
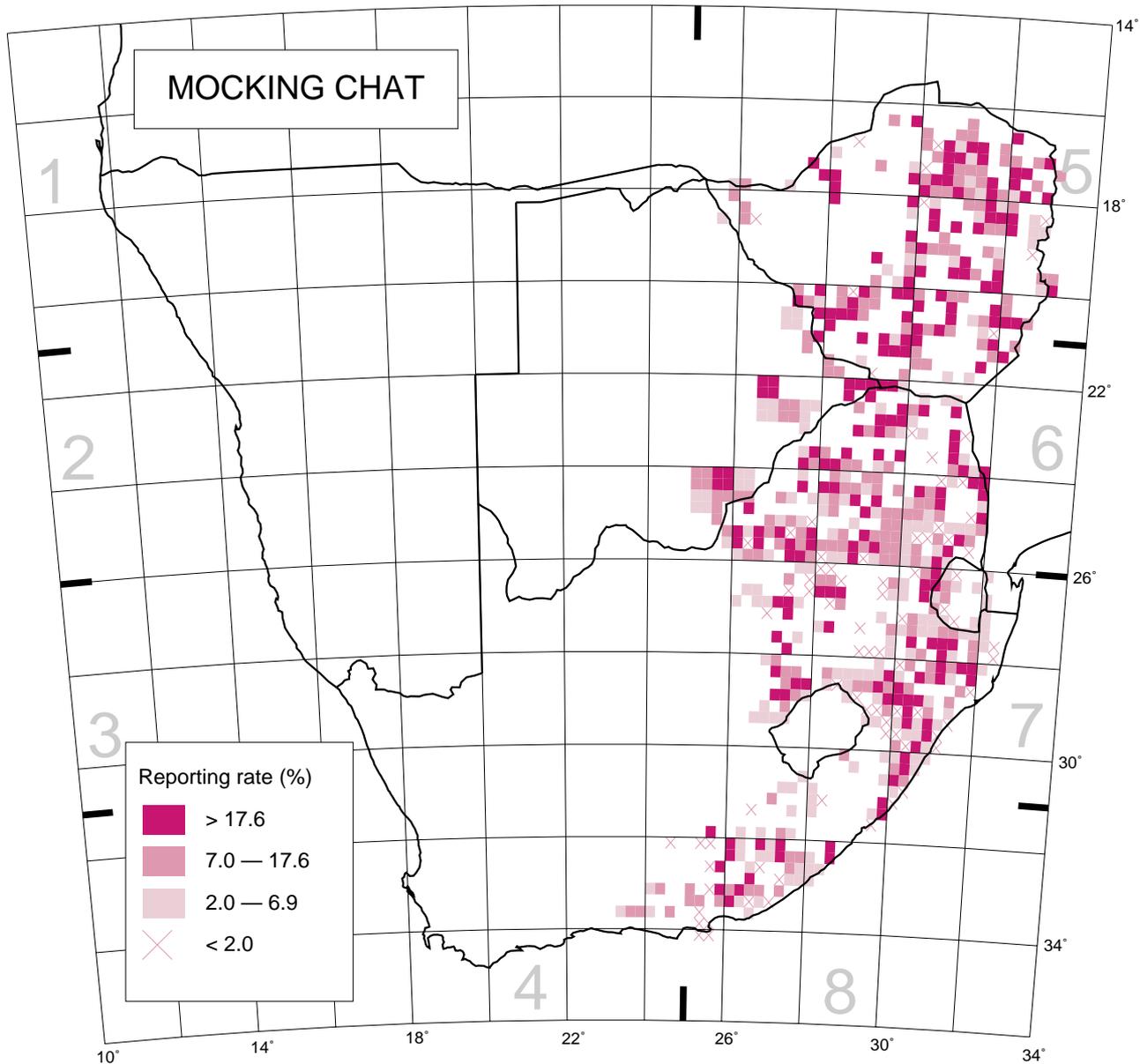
Historical distribution and conservation: No change in range or status has been recorded. The Mocking Chat's wide distribution in the eastern half of Africa and across the sub-Saharan northern savanna belt, marks it as a successful species, and the geomorphological nature of its habitat makes it unlikely that the agricultural or pastoral activities of humans will pose any serious threat.

T.B. Oatley

Recorded in 694 grid cells, 15.3%
Total number of records: 6175
Mean reporting rate for range: 9.9%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 0, 0, 0, 16, 848, 796, 740, 222; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 30, 72, 30, 15.