

## Stonechat

### Gewone Bontrokkie

#### *Saxicola torquata*

As a breeding passerine the Stonechat's range probably covers a wider latitudinal span than any other, from inside the Arctic Circle to the tip of southern Africa. Its distribution covers large parts of the Palearctic region including much of North Africa outside of the Sahara Desert. It is found widely at higher altitudes – mainly above 1000 m (Keith *et al.* 1992) – but in South Africa and southern Mozambique it occurs down to sea-level. In the atlas region it is absent from most arid and semi-arid areas in the west but is common in the winter-rainfall areas of the western and southwestern Cape Province, and in the moist Okavango Delta and Caprivi Strip. In Zimbabwe it occurs predominantly on the central plateau and eastern highlands. The highest reporting rates came from the grassland biome of eastern and eastcentral South Africa. The 'bridge' between eastern and western parts of the range across the central Karoo calls for clarification, but no explanation is available at this time.

Five subspecies have been listed for the region (Clancey 1980b; Clancey *et al.* 1991): the wetland subspecies *S. t. stonei* in the Okavango and Caprivi is clearly separated (if its putative occurrence in the western Transvaal, northern Cape Province and eastern Botswana is disregarded), the remainder not so, except perhaps for *clanceyi* in the western Cape Province and *altivaga* from the northern Transvaal highlands to eastern Zimbabwe (Clancey 1988a).

The atlas data are comprehensive and accurate.

**Habitat:** Generally speaking it is a species of high-altitude grasslands, but in southern Africa it commonly occurs down to sea-level. It is always in relatively moist, open country with rank growth of grass and herbs and scattered shrubs, although the definition of 'moist' varies in different parts of the range. In the Okavango it is restricted to permanent swamp and wet floodplain (Brewster 1991). The vegetation analysis describes a strong linkage to the grassland biome. It occurs in Fynbos but is more common in agricultural areas in that biome. The association with Succulent Karoo – both in the south and in the west – is based not on the dominant vegetation but on unevenly distributed moist habitats and agriculture. Along the west coast the association is primarily with strandveld vegetation which is included in the Succulent Karoo category.

**Movements:** Although Palearctic populations are migratory, in Africa south of the equator it is a resident and local altitudinal migrant. The seasonal distribution maps clearly show a winter enlargement of the area of high reporting rate

surrounding the highlands of eastern South Africa, indicating movement to lower altitudes where the birds were readily observed in more accessible areas. Movement apparently takes place both to the west and to the east of the Stormsberg–Drakensberg–Transvaal escarpment ridge. To the west it is primarily a winter visitor to eastern Botswana (Herremans 1994d). A study of altitudinal movement in KwaZulu-Natal – an area with a steep altitudinal gradient – used atlas data and showed that a winter drop in reporting rates at high altitude was matched by a concomitant increase in reporting rates at lower altitudes (Harrison & Navarro 1992). In the Katse Basin, Lesotho, Tarboton *et al.* (1993) found that the Stonechat was virtually absent above 2400 m in June, but only about 40% less common in the fields at 2000–2400 m in that month, than in summer.

Southeastern Zimbabwe also shows evidence of winter increases in reporting rate. Birds from South Africa and Lesotho are said to reach southern Mozambique and eastern Zimbabwe respectively (Keith *et al.* 1992). In the lowveld of Swaziland, the adjoining Lebombo range and southern Mozambique, it occurs only as a nonbreeding winter visitor (Clancey 1971c; Parker 1994).

**Breeding:** It is a spring/summer breeder with a peak in October in most areas, but later (October–December) in Zones 6 and 7 where severe winter conditions at high altitudes presumably are responsible for a later season. There were no breeding records from the Okavango where it could breed in late winter during peak floods, in line with the seasonality of other birds dependent on swamp habitat.

**Interspecific relationships:** Brood parasitism by the Redchested Cuckoo *Cuculus solitarius* has been recorded (Rowan 1983).

**Historical distribution and conservation:** It is well adapted to situations where irrigation promotes rank growth and has probably expanded its range into farming areas, but it may be negatively affected by overgrazing (A.J. Tree pers comm.). The Stonechat is not under threat.

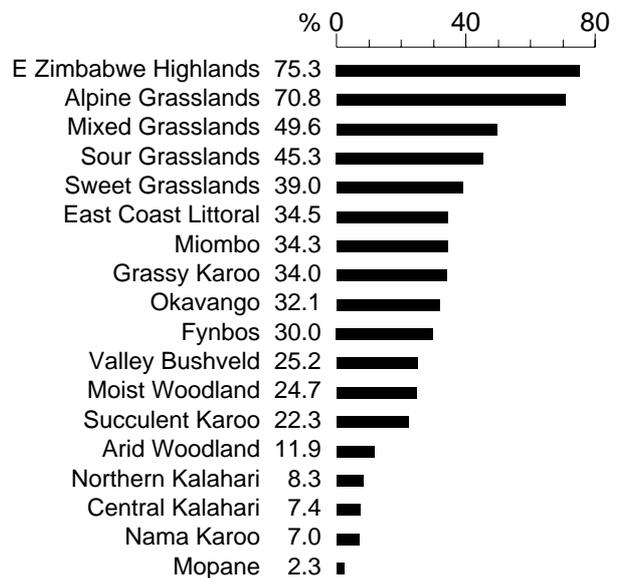
J.A. Harrison

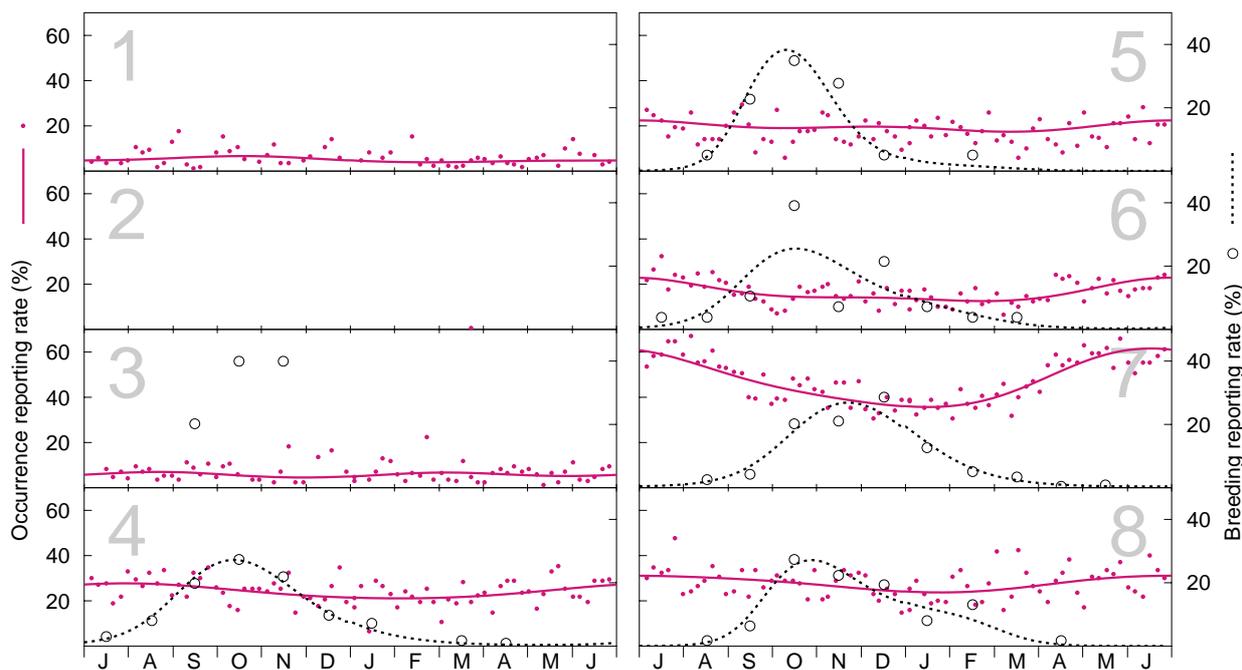
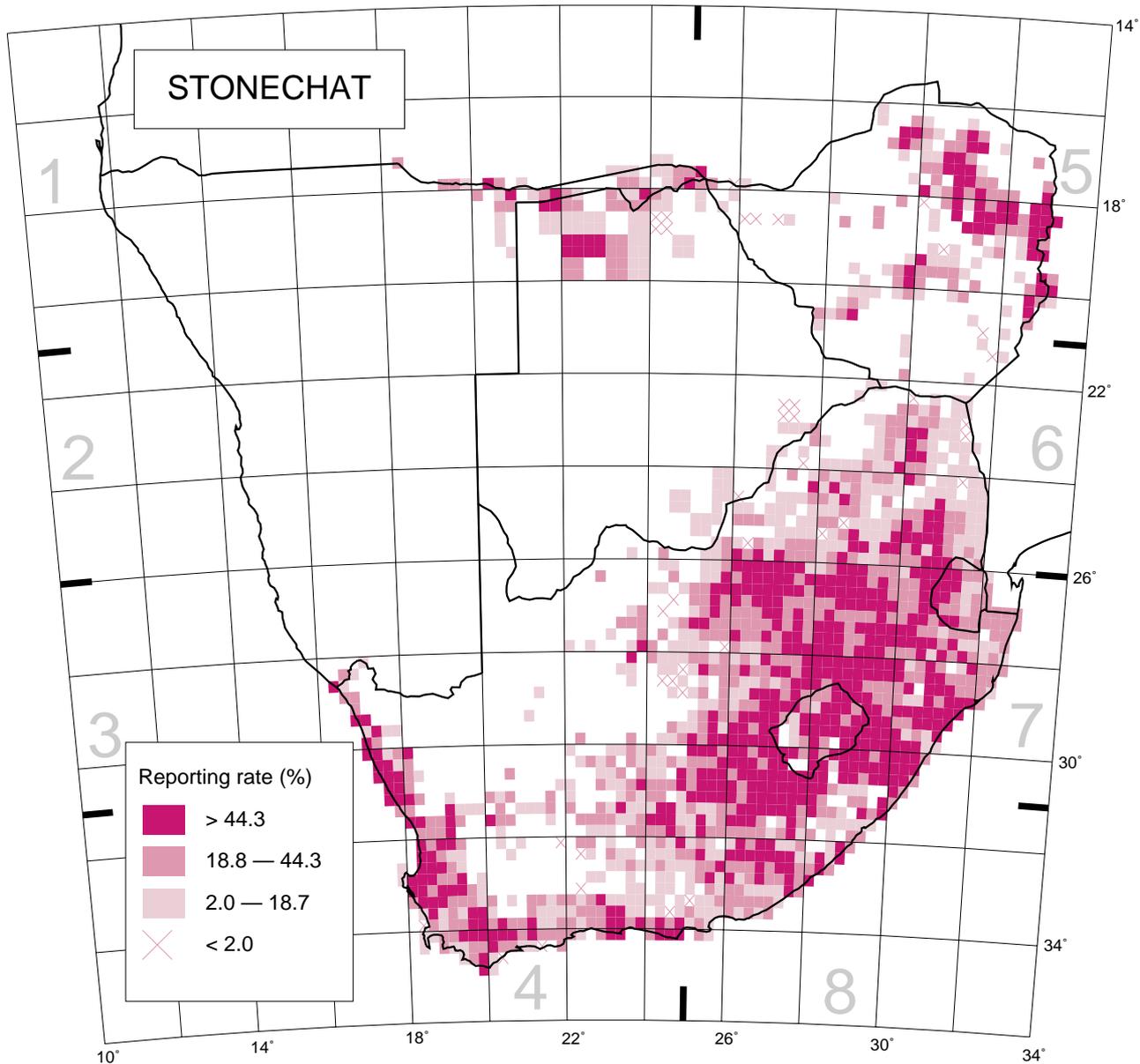
Recorded in 1618 grid cells, 35.7%

Total number of records: 40 124

Mean reporting rate for range: 34.6%

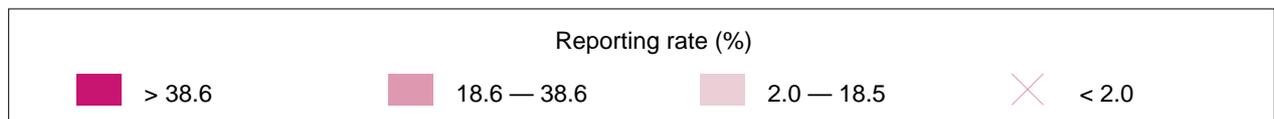
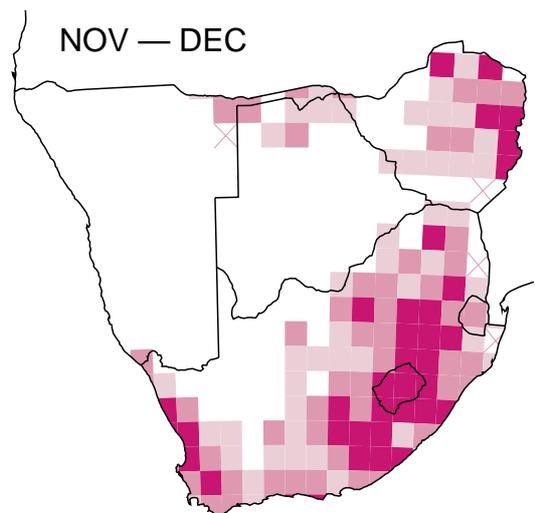
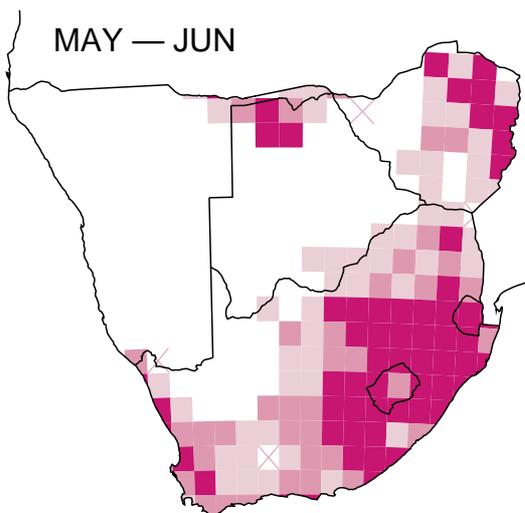
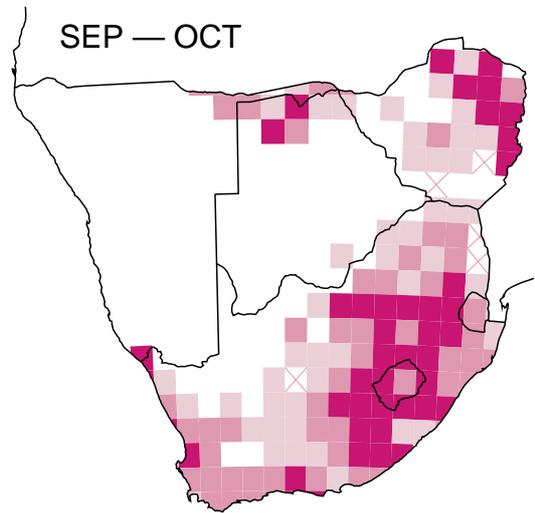
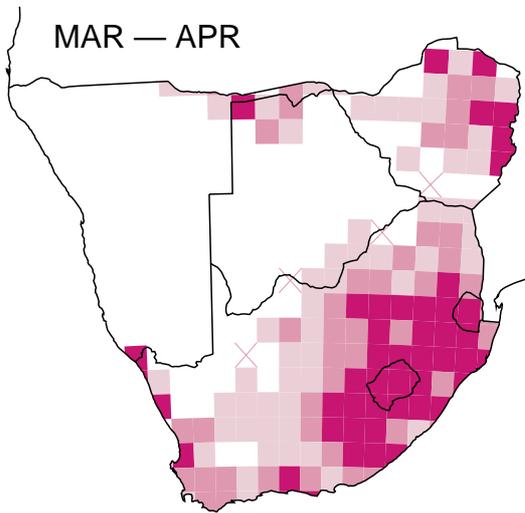
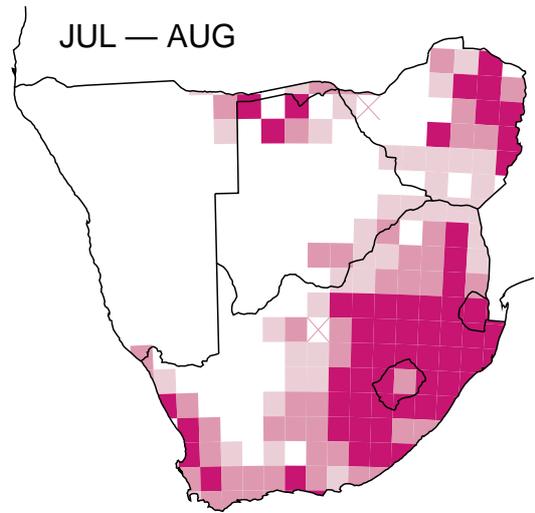
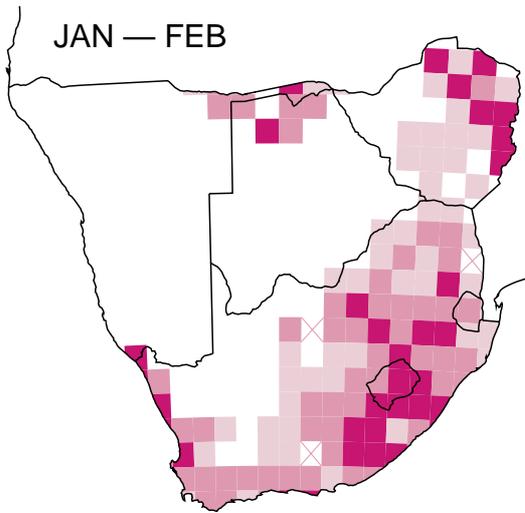
#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 165, 1, 326, 2110, 1716, 1860, 9225, 1521; Breeding: 0, 0, 5, 110, 40, 28, 178, 62.

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Seasonal distribution maps; one-degree grid.