

Chorister Robin

Lawaaimakerjanfrederik

Cossypha dichroa

A southern African endemic, the Chorister Robin extends from the forests of the southern Cape Province north-eastwards to its northern limits on the Soutpansberg range (2229D). It does not occur north of the Limpopo River and has not yet been recorded from Mozambique, but frequents the forest relicts in the highlands of western Swaziland. Birds in the Soutpansberg and Woodbush (2330CC) at the northern extremity of the range are smaller and constitute the subspecies *C. d. mimica* (Clancey *et al.* 1987).

It can be confused with the more widespread Natal Robin *C. natalensis*. Although the Chorister is a slightly bigger bird, these two species are difficult to tell apart if one cannot see the head, and their songs are also similar. It is a powerful singer and a superb mimic of other birds' calls, but is quiet and unobtrusive during the winter months, making its older name of Noisy Robin (Roberts 1948) inappropriate (Oatley 1954).

Habitat: Characteristically a bird of Afromontane forest, its breeding range is restricted to escarpment forests above 1500 m in the northern parts of its range. From KwaZulu-Natal southwards it inhabits transitional forests at lower levels as well as the mistbelt forests of the midlands and Drakensberg, and is found as a breeding bird in coastal forests of the eastern and southern Cape Province. It seldom moves far from evergreen forest and is found in gardens only when these are in close proximity to forest patches. It avoids sand forest and evergreen thickets in valley bushveld, except in the eastern Cape Province where Skead (1967b) included it in the list of species observed in 'forest-type Valley Bush' but classified it as a 'truly forest species'.

Movements: It is one of the classic altitudinal migrants, especially in the KwaZulu-Natal monocline area. In a par-

tial migration, some Chorister Robins (including adults) move coastwards during autumn in April–May and disappear from their winter haunts in September. The seasonal distribution maps show how reporting rates increase along the coast during winter, especially south of 28°S. This evidence for altitudinal migration is clear but is partially masked by resident populations. Immigrants can sometimes be distinguished by their songs which include mimicry of species which do not occur locally (pers. obs).

Breeding: It is an early-summer breeder with egg-laying mainly in November (Keith *et al.* 1992), though breeding appears to peak later in the southern Cape Province. Nests are often sited in rot-holes in tree limbs and may be as high as 12.5 m above ground-level (the average of 32 nests was 4.9 m), substantially higher than the nests of any other robin. Predation rate is nevertheless high, and replacement broods are attempted, so attended young may be found as late as February, as indicated in the models.

Interspecific relationships: It is closely related to the Natal Robin which is primarily a coastal and lowland species in southern Africa. The breeding ranges of these two species overlap at transitional altitudes in parts of KwaZulu-Natal and the eastern Cape Province. Hybrids between the two are known, mainly from the eastern Cape Province (Clancey 1982a), and some such specimens were described as a new species *C. haagneri* by Gunning in 1911. They sometimes imitate each other's calls, so caution is required when attempting to record presence on the basis of vocalization alone. The Chorister Robin is a rare host of the Red-chested Cuckoo *Cuculus solitarius* (Rowan 1983).

Historical distribution and conservation: It is not known to have undergone any change in distribution in historic times, though it is likely to have been adversely affected by the extensive forest exploitation of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Because of its comparatively restricted breeding range in evergreen forests in South Africa, the Chorister Robin will be vulnerable to further loss of forests, but it is not currently listed in Red Data books.

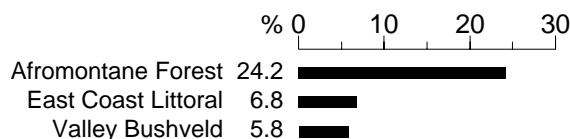
T.B. Oatley

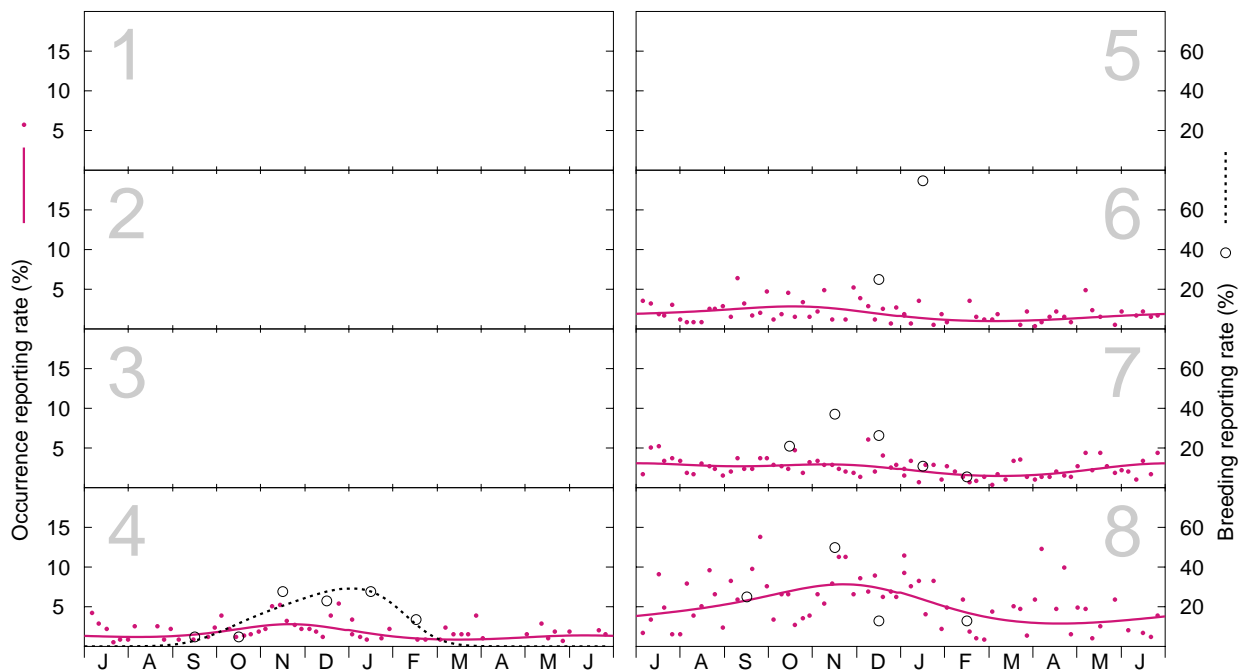
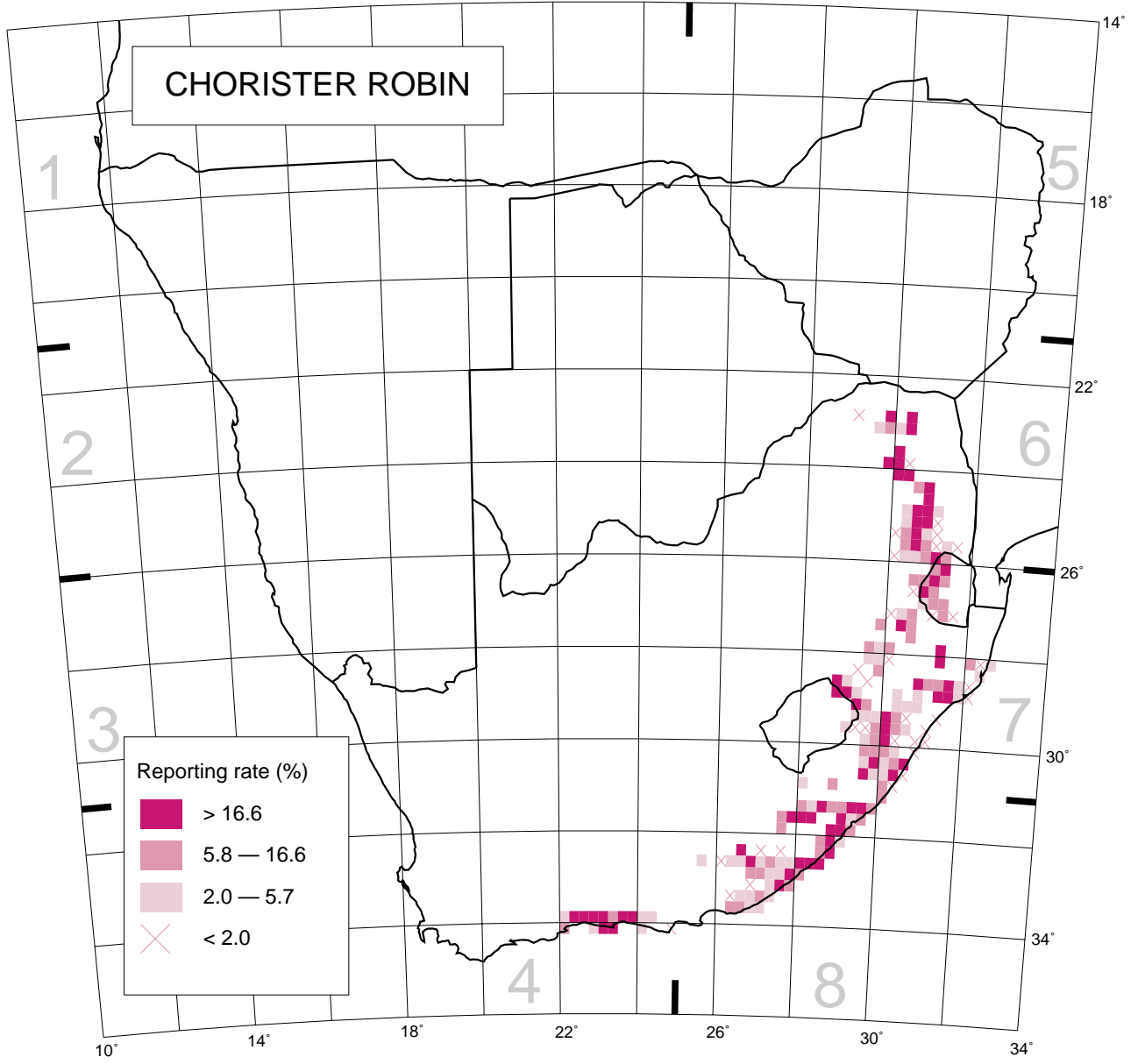
Recorded in 215 grid cells, 4.7%

Total number of records: 3559

Mean reporting rate for range: 12.9%

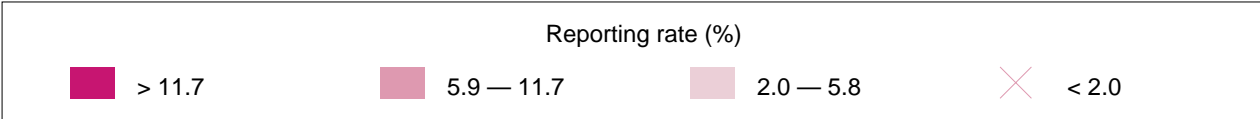
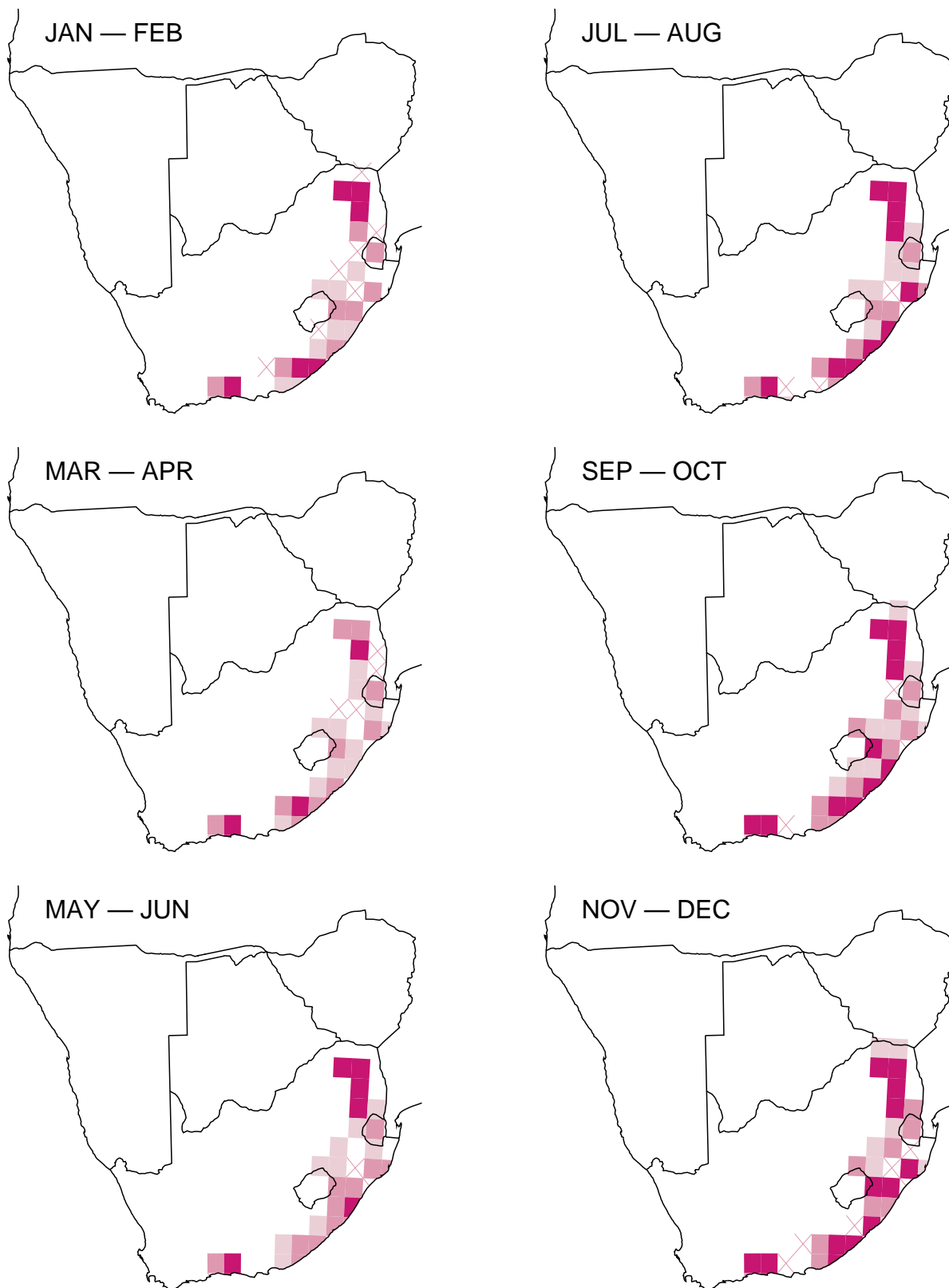
Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 0, 0, 0, 133, 0, 209, 476, 274; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 22, 0, 4, 19, 8.

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Seasonal distribution maps; one-degree grid.