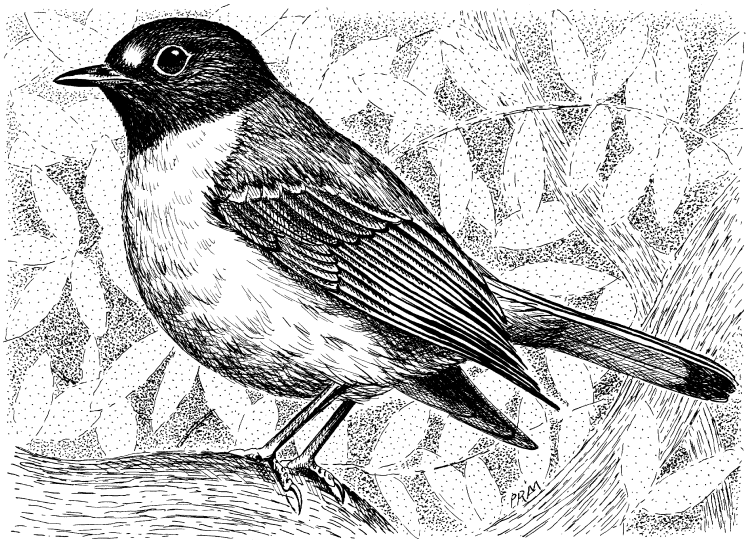


# Starred Robin

## Witkoljanfrederik

*Pogonocichla stellata*

The Starred Robin is an Afrotropical endemic of the eastern half of the continent with a wide latitudinal range from 4°N in the Sudan to 34°S in the southern Cape Province. This extensive distribution is fragmented and composed of a complex of discrete populations, some very localized; 10 geographic races are currently recognized, following Keith *et al.* (1992). The contact call also varies geographically but not clinally, and populations have either a simple two-syllabled call or a more complex multi-syllabled one (Oatley 1982a). Both types occur within the atlas region; the simple type, *P. s. stellata* (including *margaritata* recognized by Clancey 1980b), south and west of the Umfolozi River in KwaZulu-Natal, and the complex type, *transvaalensis* (including *chirindensis* and *hygrica* recognized by Clancey 1980b), from the Umfolozi to the Zambezi River. The Starred Robin is a notable altitudinal migrant, appearing in many lowland localities during the dry season. The distribution map includes many such records and should not be interpreted as depicting the breeding range, which is much more circumscribed.

It is unique amongst African passerines in that it moults from its spotted juvenile plumage into a dull subadult plumage which is maintained for a year, during which time the bird looks more like a diminutive forest bulbul than a Starred Robin. Adults are distinctive and easily identified, but can be confused with Forest Weavers *Ploceus bicolor* by novice observers.

**Habitat:** It is characteristic of Afromontane forest and usually breeds only in the Afromontane zone above 1700 m, but at lower altitudes in southern Africa, e.g. 1300 m in Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981). Vegetation types with reporting rates lower than that in Afromontane forest reflect records of altitudinal migrants. The high reporting rate for the Eastern Zimbabwe Highlands should not be taken to mean that it is especially abundant there, but is probably an artefact of comparatively specialized birding visits to the area. Altitudinal migrants prefer to frequent forest habitats – but avoid sand forest – and move through more open habitats by following riverine forest and woody cover along drainage lines.

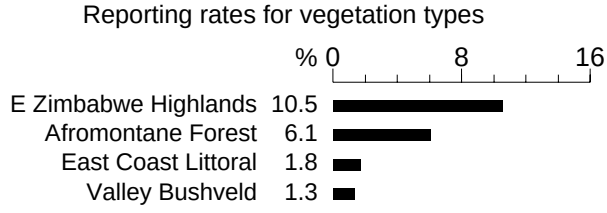
**Movements:** The models provide evidence for movement in Zones 6–8; in Zone 4 the highest reporting rate in the summer months is probably occasioned by the birds being more vociferous during the breeding season. This effect has also influenced the models for Zones 5, 7 and 8. Starred Robins which have undertaken altitudinal migration are seen more frequently on their return (upward) migration to the breeding haunts in September than during downward passage in April, and this variation is apparent in the models. There are no recoveries of ringed birds to reveal distances moved by altitudinal migrants, but in winter months Starred Robins have been observed as far as 120 km distant from the nearest known breeding localities. Adult males which are part of the breeding population remain on their territories throughout the year, so migrants represent only part of the population (Oatley 1982b). Most of the birds breeding in the Zimbabwean highlands are thought to migrate eastwards to Mozambique (Irwin 1981).

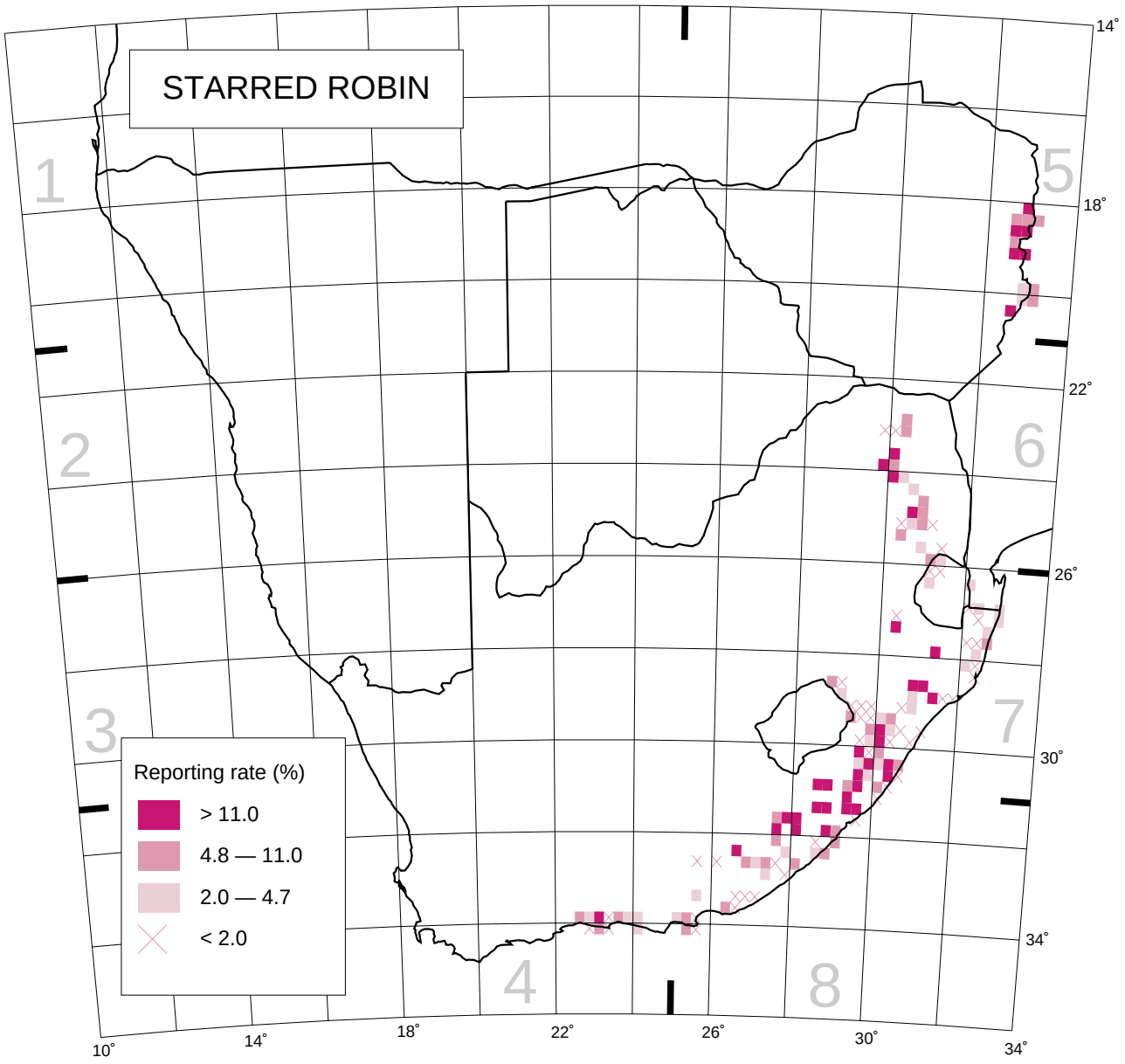
**Breeding:** The atlas records show breeding activity from as early as August/September (Zone 4) to as late as February/March (Zone 8). The last mentioned are probably based on sightings of spotted juveniles. Alternative and more comprehensive sources of data show egglaying October–January with a peak in November (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Oatley 1982c).

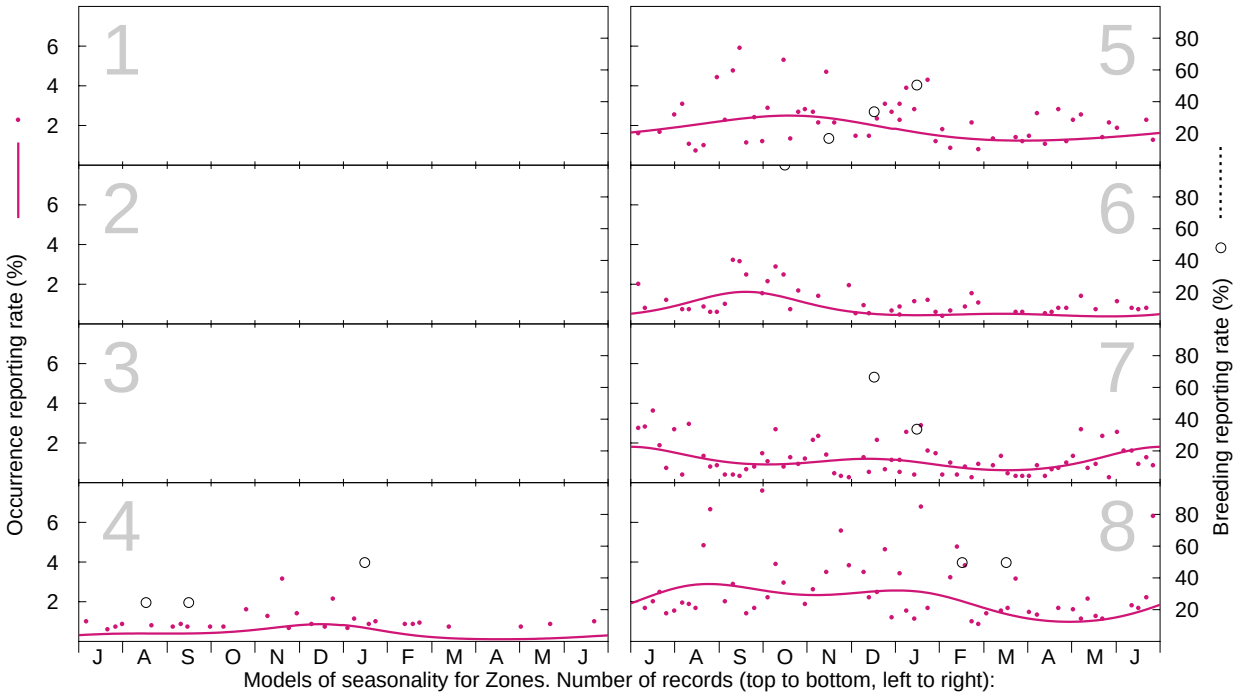
**Historical distribution and conservation:** Like most forest birds, it is not commonly observed and there are no records to suggest that its range has changed in historical times. The Starred Robin's ability to disperse (on migration) through non-forest habitats has probably enabled it to adjust well to the reduction in number and extent of mistbelt forests over the past 150 years, and it is not currently considered to be under threat.

*T.B. Oatley*

Recorded in 153 grid cells, 3.4%
Total number of records: 1108
Mean reporting rate for range: 5.1%






Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 0, 0, 0, 34, 158, 83, 216, 112; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 4, 6, 1, 3, 2.