



Desert Cisticola

Woestynklopploppie

Cisticola aridula

The Desert Cisticola is a widespread African species which is found throughout dry grasslands in the arid and semi-arid interior of southern Africa. It occurs more locally in higher-rainfall areas in the north and east. It is most abundant in the northern Cape Province, Free State, central and western Transvaal, Botswana and northeastern Namibia, and is the commonest cisticola in the western and southwestern Transvaal (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). In arid regions, depressions with ephemeral pans, like the greater Etosha region (1815, 1816), the Makgadikgadi Pans (2025), the 'Schwelle' in the southwestern Kalahari (2320, 2321), and the Okwa Valley (2221–2223) through the central Kalahari, are all well-marked centres of distribution, while it is scarce in the permanent wetlands of the Okavango. Three subspecies have been described for the region (Clancey 1991b): *C. a. caligina* appears isolated in the Transvaal lowveld below the escarpment; the ranges of the races *kalahari* and *eremica* appear to be continuous through central Namibia and Botswana.

It is similar in appearance to Fantailed *C. juncidis*, Cloud *C. textrix*, Ayres' *C. ayresii* and Palecrowned *C. brunneiceps* Cisticolas, but can be distinguished by call, behaviour and habitat.

Habitat: It occurs mainly in open, dry, short grasslands and savanna with low basal cover, although it may occur in taller moist grasslands. The vegetation types with the highest reporting rates, in descending order of importance, were Sweet Grasslands, Central Kalahari, Grassy Karoo and Northern Kalahari. It is also recorded from several other vegetation types where suitable habitat occurs, including mats of *Panicum repens* on the shores of Lake Kariba (Irwin 1981). It sometimes occurs in cultivated areas that are adjacent to natural grasslands (Ginn *et al.* 1989), and it readily occupies fallow agricultural lands (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Irwin (1981) indicated that agriculture and other forms of development in southeastern Zimbabwe may have favoured it.

Movements: There is marked seasonality of reporting rates in all Zones, with a winter decline which is related to the seasonality of display calls on which identification is usually based. Clancey (1991b) suggested that the race *kalahari* of the Free State, Cape Province, Transvaal, southern Botswana and southern Namibia moves north in

the nonbreeding season, while the race *eremica* of northern Namibia, northern Botswana and Zimbabwe and further north moves eastward after breeding. Irwin (1981) suggested that there may be seasonal or other movement and Maclean (1993b) reported 'some local nomadic movements'. This species inhabits grasslands that are subjected to grazing, burning and irregular drought, and local movements must occur frequently, though not necessarily every year. It is not clear whether there is regular seasonal movement throughout the region and, if this does occur, what proportion of the population migrates. Atlas data are strongly biased towards the summer distribution and so do not show seasonal movements clearly.

Breeding: Good rains resulting in improved grass cover are likely to trigger breeding, and

most breeding was recorded in mid- and late summer, December–April. Egg-laying has been reported September–April, and once each in May and July (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Skinner 1995a; Brown & Clinning in press).

Interspecific relationships: It sometimes overlaps with Fantailed, Ayres' and Cloud Cisticolas, although it generally occurs in drier habitat when in the same area as these (e.g. Dean 1976).

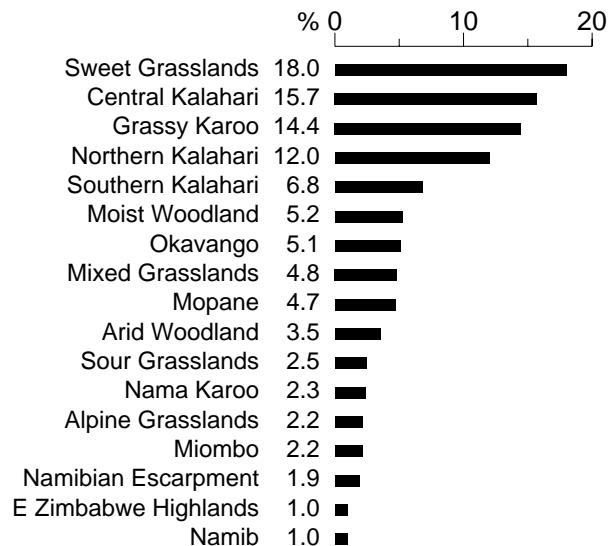
It is a host of the brood-parasitic Cuckoo Finch *Anomalospiza imberbis* (Maclean 1993b).

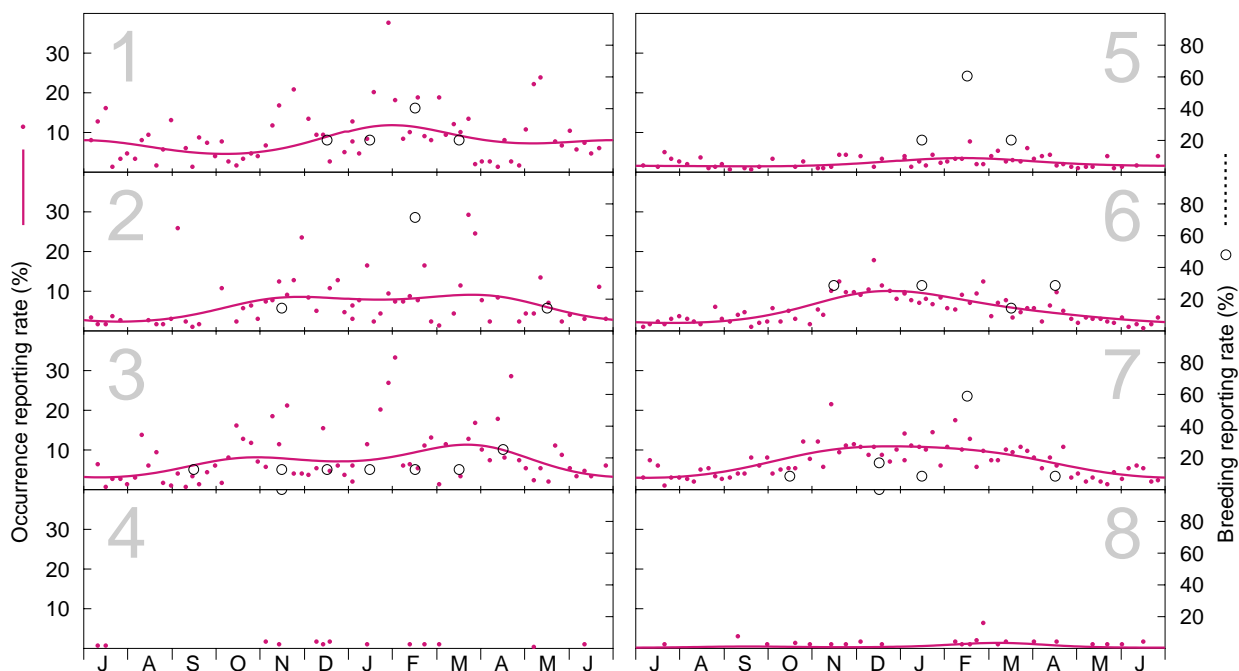
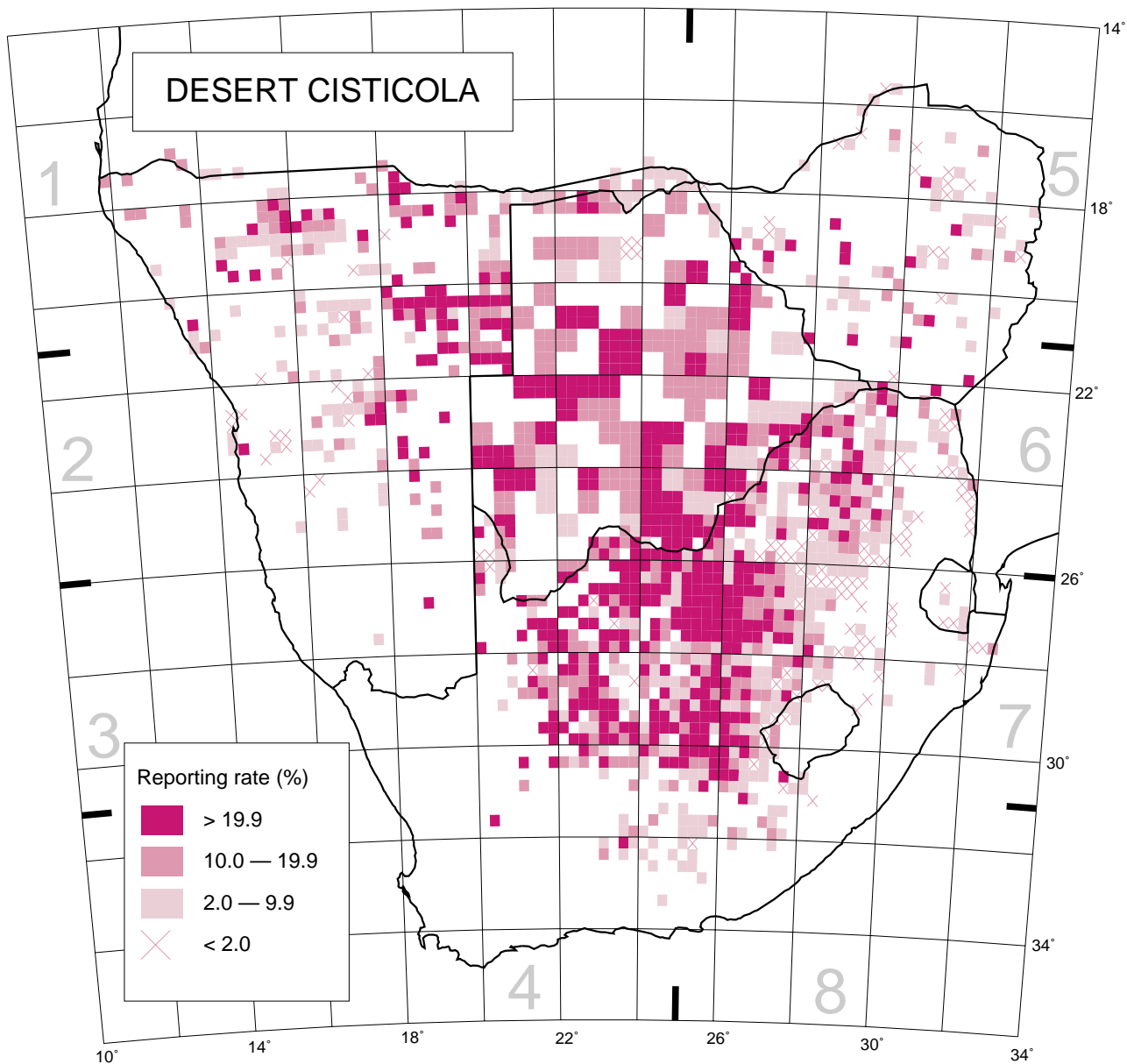
Historical distribution and conservation: The historical distribution is not known to have differed from that recorded during the atlas period, but it may have been locally adversely affected by desertification and overstocking. In Zimbabwe, range expansions appear to have occurred into areas where miombo woodlands have been cleared for agriculture (A.J. Tree pers. comm.). The Desert Cisticola is not threatened as it is widely distributed and much of its range is marginal for intensive agriculture, and it uses fallow lands.

A. Berruti

Recorded in 1536 grid cells, 33.9%
Total number of records: 5431
Mean reporting rate for range: 8.7%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 252, 225, 385, 16, 189, 610, 1406, 30; Breeding: 5, 7, 8, 1, 5, 7, 12, 1.