



Ayres' Cisticola

Kleinste Klopkloppie

Cisticola ayresii

Ayres' Cisticola is a widespread African species which occurs in the eastern half of southern Africa. It is most abundant from the eastern Cape Province to the eastern Transvaal, and is often the most abundant small cisticola where it occurs. It also occurs in Zimbabwe, in the eastern highlands and at scattered localities on the central plateau above 1400 m (Irwin 1981). There is a large gap between the populations in Zimbabwe and further south, but the species is monotypic in the region (Clancey 1980b).

Like the other small grass cisticolas, it is usually identified by its call, which is heard mostly in summer. The atlas probably reflects summer distribution fairly accurately, although some records are likely to be misidentifications.

Habitat: It occurs in short, moist and relatively dense grasslands on well-drained soils, most commonly in Alpine, Sour and Mixed Grasslands. It tends to occur at higher altitudes than the other small cisticolas, being the only species in the eastern highlands of Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981) and the most abundant species on the Lesotho massif.

Movements: There is marked seasonality in the reporting rates; a decline in winter is related to seasonality of vocalizations. It is unobtrusive and seldom recorded in winter, thus any seasonal movements which may occur are not apparent in the models. It is less abundant in the high-lying Giant's Castle Game Reserve (2929AD) in KwaZulu-Natal in winter, while it possibly occurs as high as the main Drakensberg escarpment in summer (Little & Bainbridge 1992). Work in the highlands of Lesotho found the species to be migratory, being common in summer and virtually absent during winter (Tarboton *et al.* 1993; Allan *et al.* 1996). Because it occurs at higher altitudes than the other small grass cisticolas, it is more likely to show seasonal

altitudinal movement. Maclean (1993b) reported that there is some local movement, particularly away from burnt areas in winter. Clancey (1964b) mentioned that it may be found in family groups near marshy ground in winter. Droughts, overgrazing by domestic stock, burning and snow cover alter grassland habitats drastically for varying lengths of time and at various times of year, so local movements may occur at any time. In Zimbabwe, birds disappear from the Mashonaland highveld as habitat becomes dry (A.J. Tree pers. comm.).

Breeding: Breeding was recorded in summer, mainly November–March. Egg-laying spans September–March (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Interspecific relationships: This is one of five small grass cisticolas in southern Africa, and it is most closely related to the Cloud *C. textrix* and Pale-crowned *C. brunnescens* Cisticolas. In the Transvaal, it overlaps mainly with the Cloud Cisticola (Dean 1976; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), which elsewhere generally occupies drier and sparser grasslands. The Pale-crowned Cisticola occurs in wetter grasslands, the Fantailed Cisticola *C. juncidis* in longer,

more rank vegetation, and the Desert Cisticola *C. aridula* in dry grasslands.

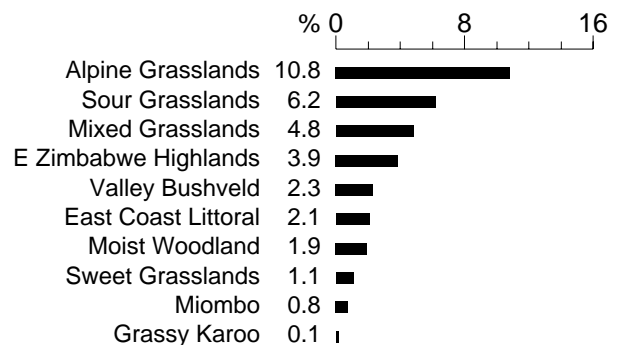
It is a host of the nest-parasitic Cuckoo Finch *Anomalospiza imberbis* (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Maclean 1993b).

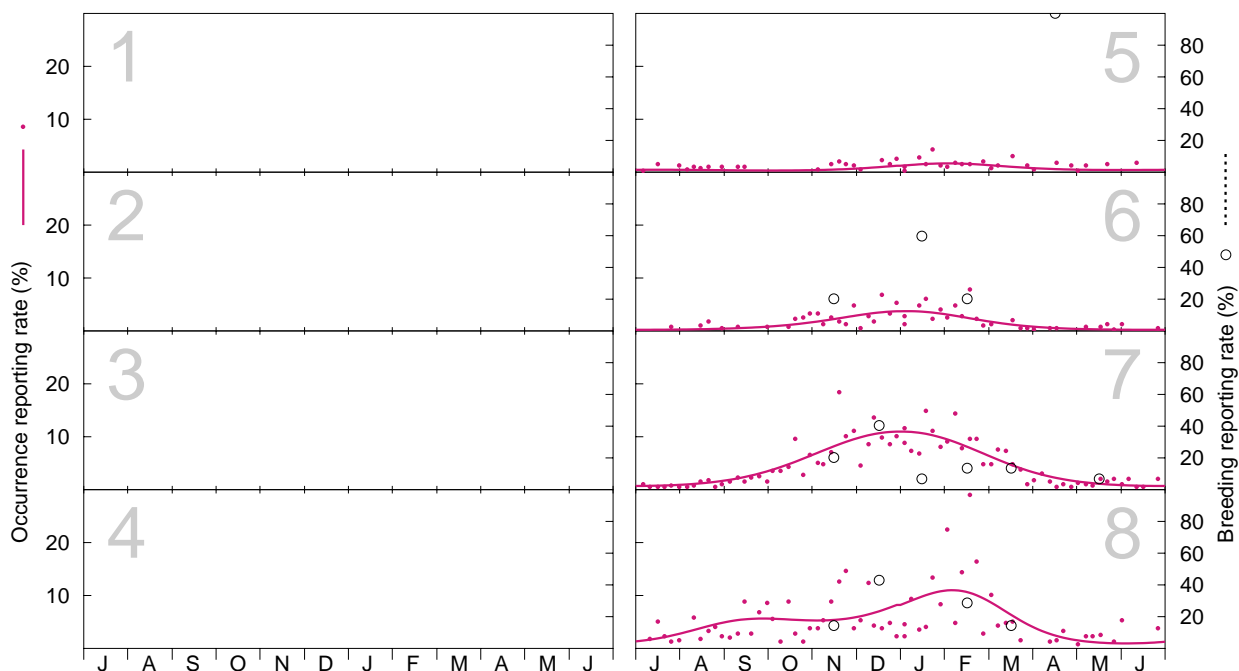
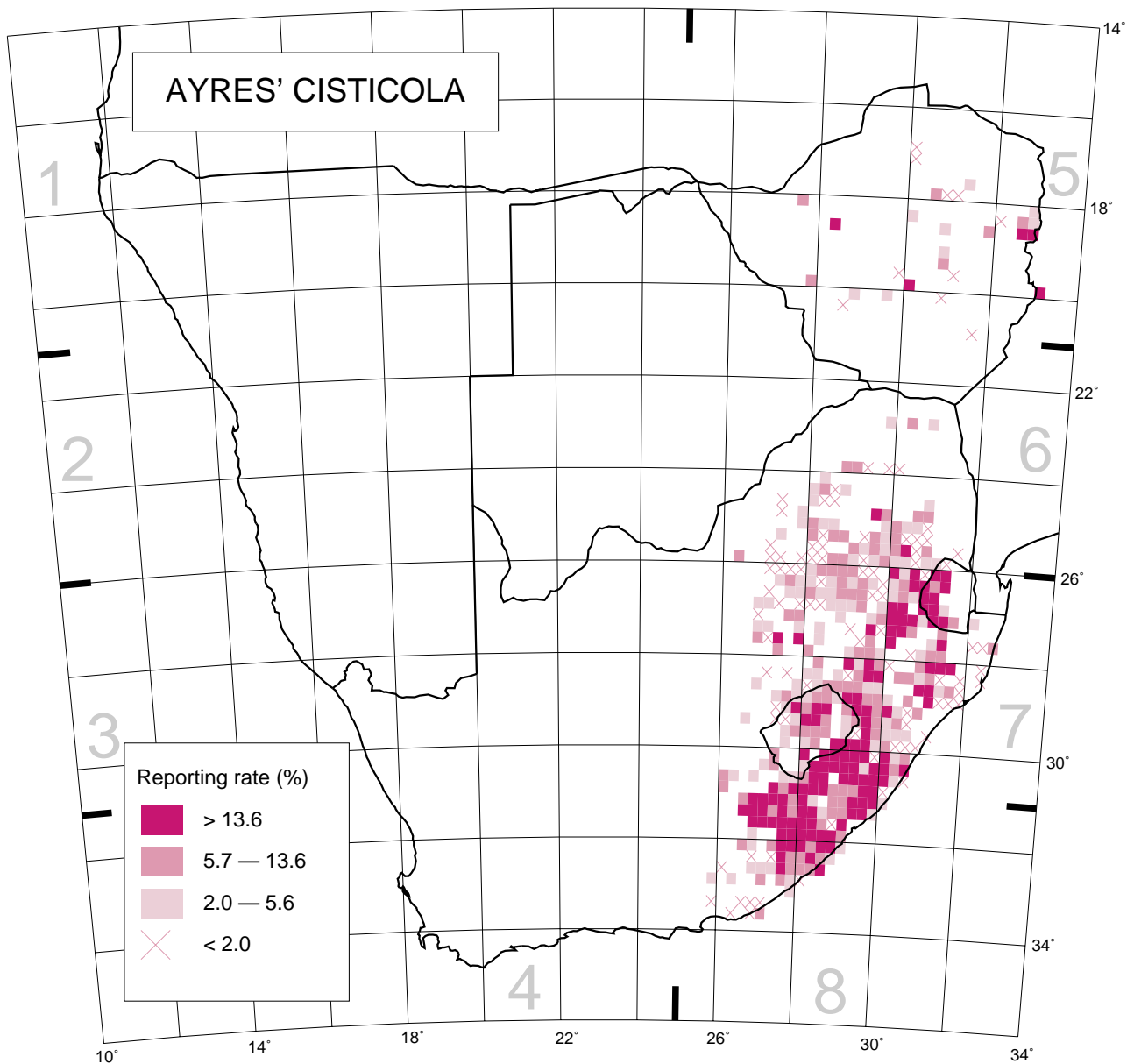
Historical distribution and conservation: Cyrus & Robson (1980) showed it to be more restricted to upland and central drier areas of KwaZulu-Natal than shown here, or as described by Clancey (1964b), but confusion between this species and the Cloud Cisticola occurred during the inventory of Cyrus & Robson (1980). There are no other indications of change in historical distribution. Ayres' Cisticola does not seem to be threatened at present, although large-scale afforestation in the eastern Cape Province, KwaZulu-Natal and the eastern Transvaal, overstocking and uncontrolled fires reduce its habitat and abundance.

A. Berruti

Recorded in 469 grid cells, 10.3%
Total number of records: 2904
Mean reporting rate for range: 5.8%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 0, 0, 0, 0, 60, 155, 920, 276; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 1, 5, 15, 7.