Blackbacked Cisticola

Swartrugtinktinkie

Cisticola galactotes

The Blackbacked Cisticola is a widespread African species. In southern Africa, it is common in the Okavango and along the Kavango, Kwando, Linyanti, Chobe and Zambezi rivers in the Caprivi, northern Botswana and western Zimbabwe. It also occurs along the Kunene River in northwestern Namibia. It is widely distributed in Mozambique (Clancey 1971c) and has a localized distribution in wetlands along the KwaZulu-Natal coast, extending marginally into the Transkei. There are isolated atlas records from larger rivers in the Kruger National Park and southeastern Zimbabwe, areas where it has been reported previously (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Three subspecies have been described from the region (Clancey 1980b): *C. g. stagnans* in the Okavango and adjacent Caprivi and western Zimbabwe; *isodactyla* in the Transvaal and southeastern Zimbabwe lowveld; and nominate *galactotes* along the coast in the Transkei and KwaZulu-Natal.

Like the other dark-backed cisticolas, it is relatively conspicuous, with specific habitat requirements, and is one of the more distinctive cisticolas. However, it is easily confused with the Chirping *C. pipiens* and Levaillant's *C. tinniens* Cisticolas, which have similar plumage and also occur in wetlands. There are differences in plumage, voice and habitat preference between the three species, but it is likely that they were confused to some extent.

Habitat: It inhabits emergent aquatic vegetation of more permanent wetlands such as marshes, lagoons, lakes and rivers in subtropical areas. It is regular in ecotonal habitat (fringes) and it also uses the margins of maize fields (Clancey 1964b) and sugar-cane plantations where these abut rivers or suitable wetland vegetation. Its association with dry woodland types is a consequence of its occurrence in wetlands within these vegetation zones. The reporting rate in the Okavango was more than twice that in the East Coast Littoral.

Movements: It is resident and territorial throughout the year. The slight summer increase in reporting rates almost certainly reflects the greater conspicuousness of the male during the breeding season, when it sings from the tops of reeds and performs a circular aerial display.

Breeding: Few breeding records are available for southern Africa. Breeding has been reported October–February (and once in June) for *galactotes* in KwaZulu-Natal (Dean 1971), in January and April for *isodactyla* in Zimbabwe and the Transvaal (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), and in October and March–April for *stagnans* in Botswana and Namibia (Skinner 1995a; Brown & Clinning in press). The atlas data confirm the early-summer peak in KwaZulu-Natal (Zone 7).

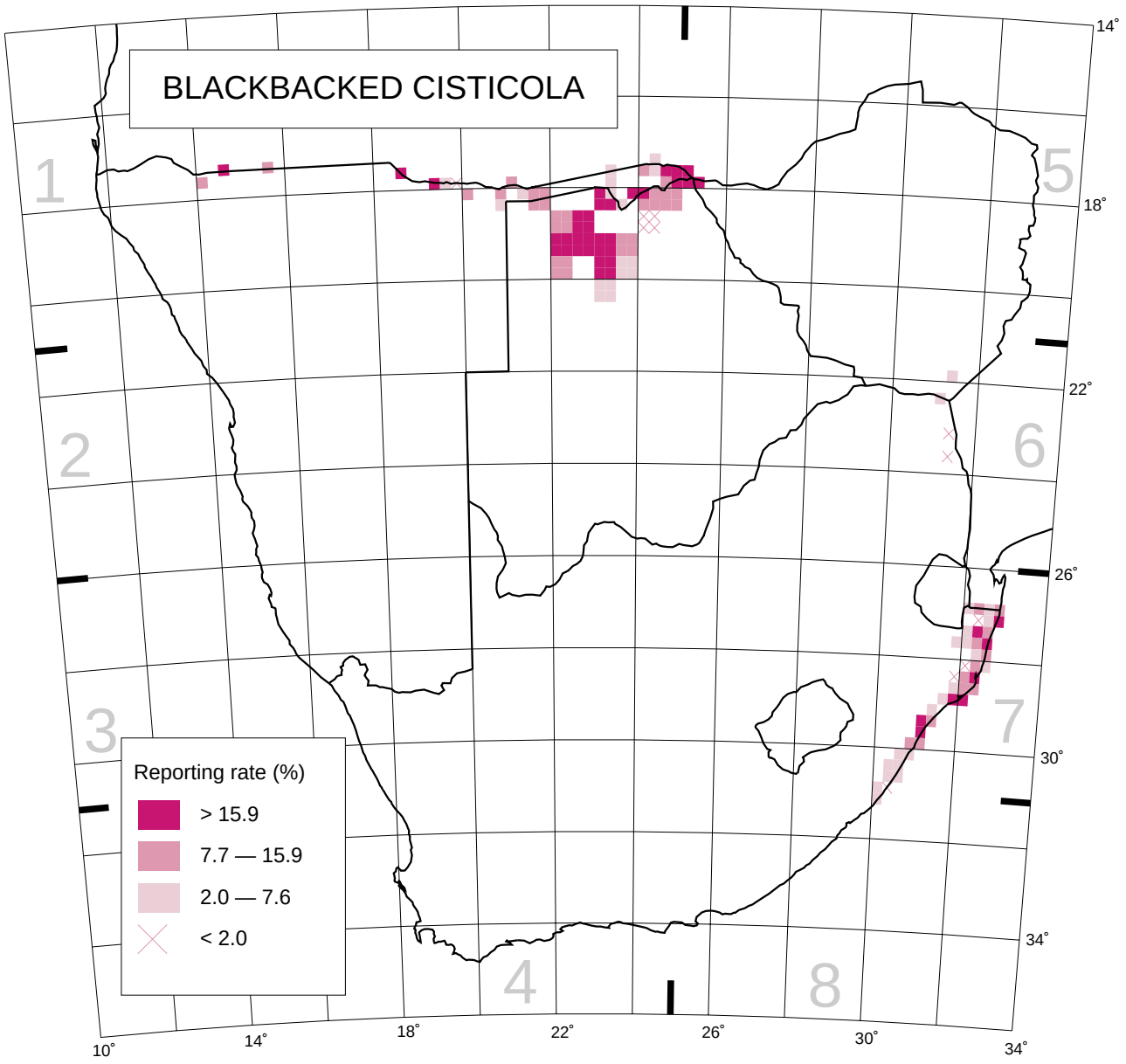
Interspecific relationships: It is one of three similar dark-backed cisticolas which occur in aquatic vegetation. In southern Africa the Chirping Cisticola is confined to the Okavango basin where it prefers taller, more rank vegetation than the Blackbacked Cisticola. Levaillant's Cisticola is widely distributed in wetlands throughout regions of South Africa and Zimbabwe with a relatively temperate climate. Blackbacked and Levaillant's Cisticolas are sometimes found in sympatry in the coastal zone of southern and central KwaZulu-Natal.

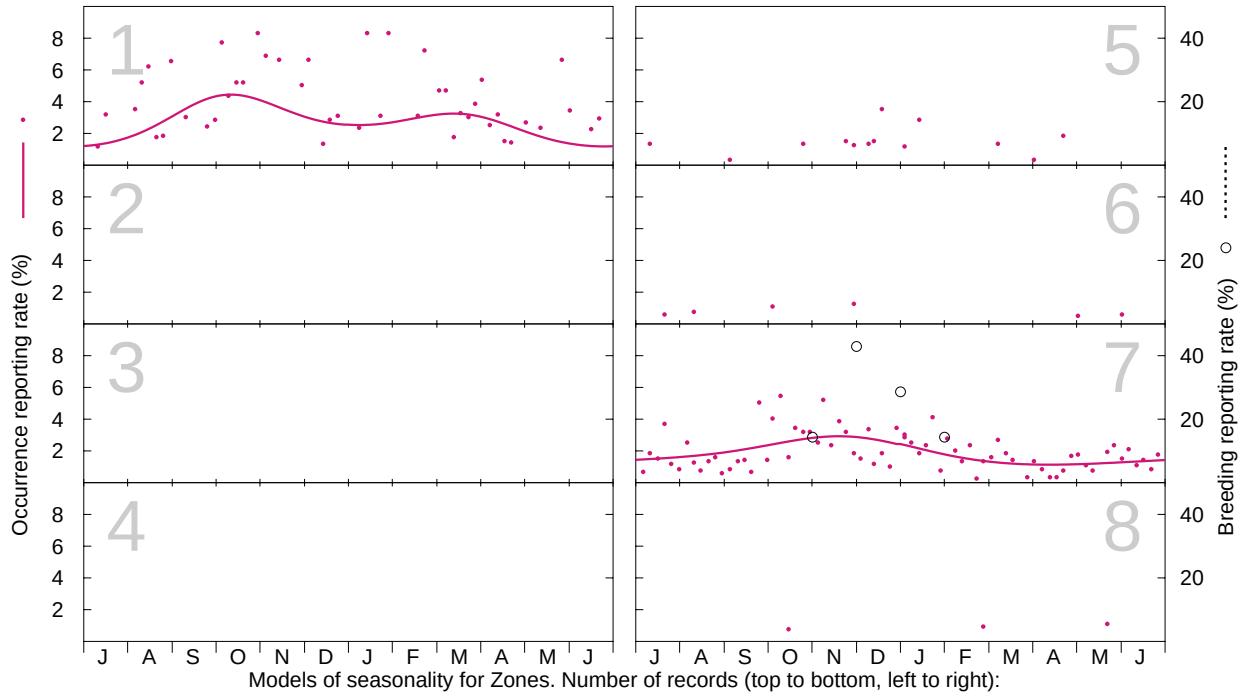
Historical distribution and conservation: It was not previously reported from the Transkei (Quickelberge 1989), where it may have been overlooked. It seems unlikely that the historical distribution differed much from the present-day. Most artificial impoundments do not have sufficiently broad shallow margins to support a wide fringe of tall aquatic vegetation which would allow it to colonize. Although it is not widely distributed in the atlas region, the Blackbacked Cisticola is not threatened. However, the degradation of coastal lagoons and rivers, and draining of coastal wetlands in KwaZulu-Natal, has almost certainly led to a significant reduction in its abundance.

A. Berruti

Recorded in 133 grid cells, 2.9%
Total number of records: 1118
Mean reporting rate for range: 10.5%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 88, 0, 0, 0, 17, 8, 362, 3; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 7, 0.