



Fairy Flycatcher

Feevlieëvanger

Stenostira scita

The Fairy Flycatcher is a southern African endemic. The range encompasses most of South Africa, but excludes a narrow coastal strip in the south and a broad coastal strip from about East London (3327BB) northwards, and the lowveld and eastern escarpment of the Transvaal. The range includes the whole of Lesotho, and just extends into Swaziland. All records in southern Botswana and Namibia are of winter migrants, and so are the occasional records from Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981). The greatest abundance occurs in the Karoo, especially in the south, and in the western Free State.

Three subspecies are recognized (Clancey 1980b): *S. s. saturator* accounts for the stronghold from the eastern to the southern Cape Province and *scita* is the form in the western and northern Cape Province; birds of the Lesotho highlands have been separated as *rudebecki*.

It is easily recognized and the atlas data are reliable.

Habitat: Atlas reporting rates were highest in the Grassy and Nama Karoo biomes, but Alpine and Sweet Grasslands and Succulent Karoo are also used extensively. There are few records from predominantly woodland biomes. Nevertheless a woody component, however sparse, seems essential in Fairy Flycatcher habitat, and nearly all foraging takes place amongst woody plants. Skead (1967b) described the habitat as 'intermittent scrub', and Winterbottom & Winterbottom (1984) placed the species in riverine *Acacia*. A dense thorny tree or bush is needed for nesting (James 1922). Further into the Karoo the habitat includes farmsteads, gardens, kloof bush and streamside shrubbery. Kieser & Kieser (1978) said that there is no apparent change of habitat with season, but other authors disagree. Gardens appear to be primarily a winter habitat (Maclean 1957; Skead 1963; Winterbottom 1971a); similarly, it occurs only in winter in tall bushes in the Arid and Moist Woodland and Kalahari biomes.

Movements: Over the entire range it was recorded most often in winter; this can possibly be attributed to the invasion of gardens and greater mobility at that time. However, the extent of the seasonal variation varies with region, being least in the Karoo where the species is largely resident (Kieser & Kieser 1978; Winterbottom & Winterbottom 1984). There are strong winter peaks in KwaZulu-Natal (Zone 7), and especially in the Transvaal and eastern Botswana (Zone 6) where it is present May–September and virtually absent in summer (Farkas 1962; Bunning 1977; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Herre-

mans 1994d; Penry 1994). In the Free State, winter records predominate too (Earlé & Grobler 1987). In these areas, and to a lesser extent in the eastern Cape Province, the winter increase must be due to an influx of migrants. (See also the seasonal distribution maps.)

In KwaZulu-Natal, migration is partly altitudinal. In the Natal atlas (Cyrus & Robson 1980), all records were in winter, but breeding was noted in summer on the Lesotho border at about 3000 m (Brown & Barnes 1984). The effect of temperature on wintering altitude is marked, heavy snow forcing the Fairy Flycatcher down to Giant's Castle camp (2929BC) (Skead 1963). In the northern part of the range, migrant numbers vary considerably from year to year (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Abernethy & Herremans 1994), birds apparently being more common in the north and migrating further during dry years (Irwin 1981; Brewster 1992b; Maclean 1993b).

Breeding: Breeding is confined largely to the southern part of the range: the Karoo and the eastern Cape Province. It is a common breeder in *Passerina montana* scrub in the Lesotho highlands (D.G. Allan pers. comm.).

Breeding was in spring and early summer (August–December) in the Cape Province (Zone 4), confirming Winterbottom (1968a). Clancey (1964b) indicated that the race *rudebecki* starts breeding late October in Lesotho, which agrees with the few midsummer breeding records from Zone 7.

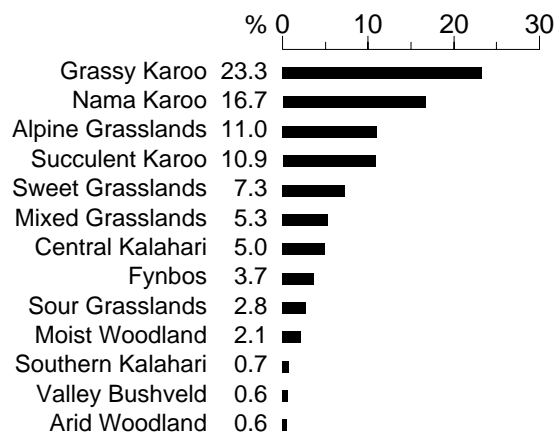
Interspecific relationships: There are no close relatives (Hall & Moreau 1970), nor does it have any particular ecological relationships with other avian species. It was until recently considered to be a warbler (e.g. Clancey 1980b; Irwin 1981).

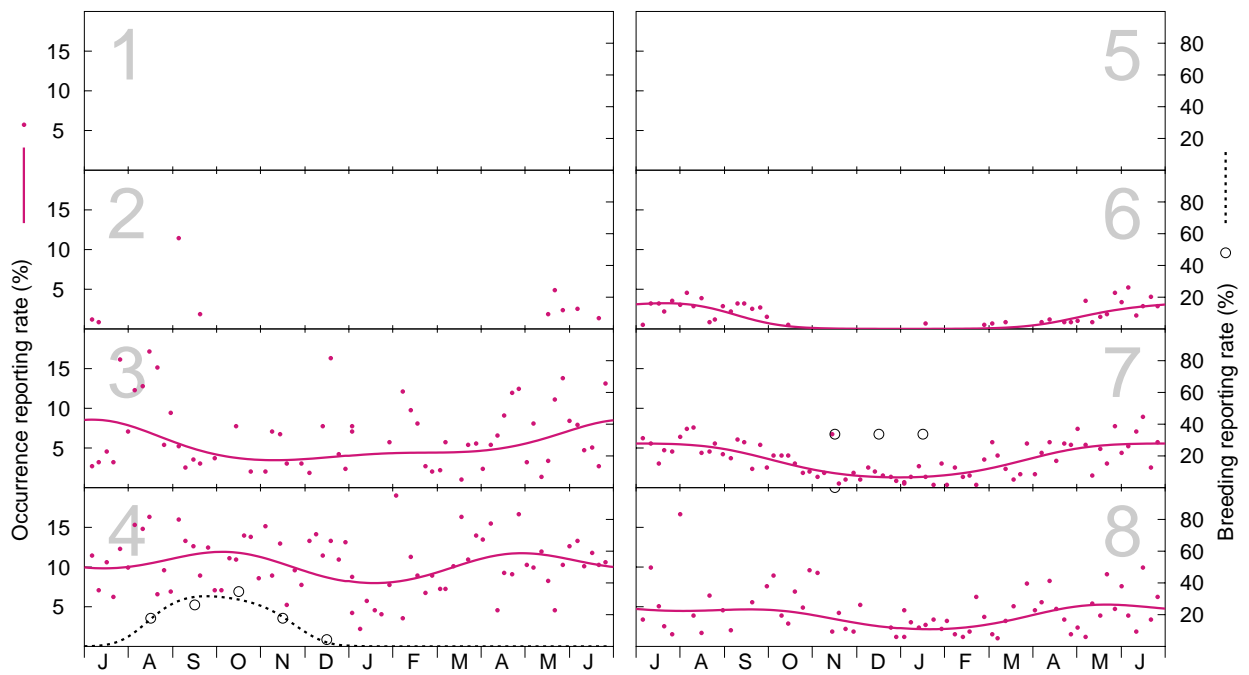
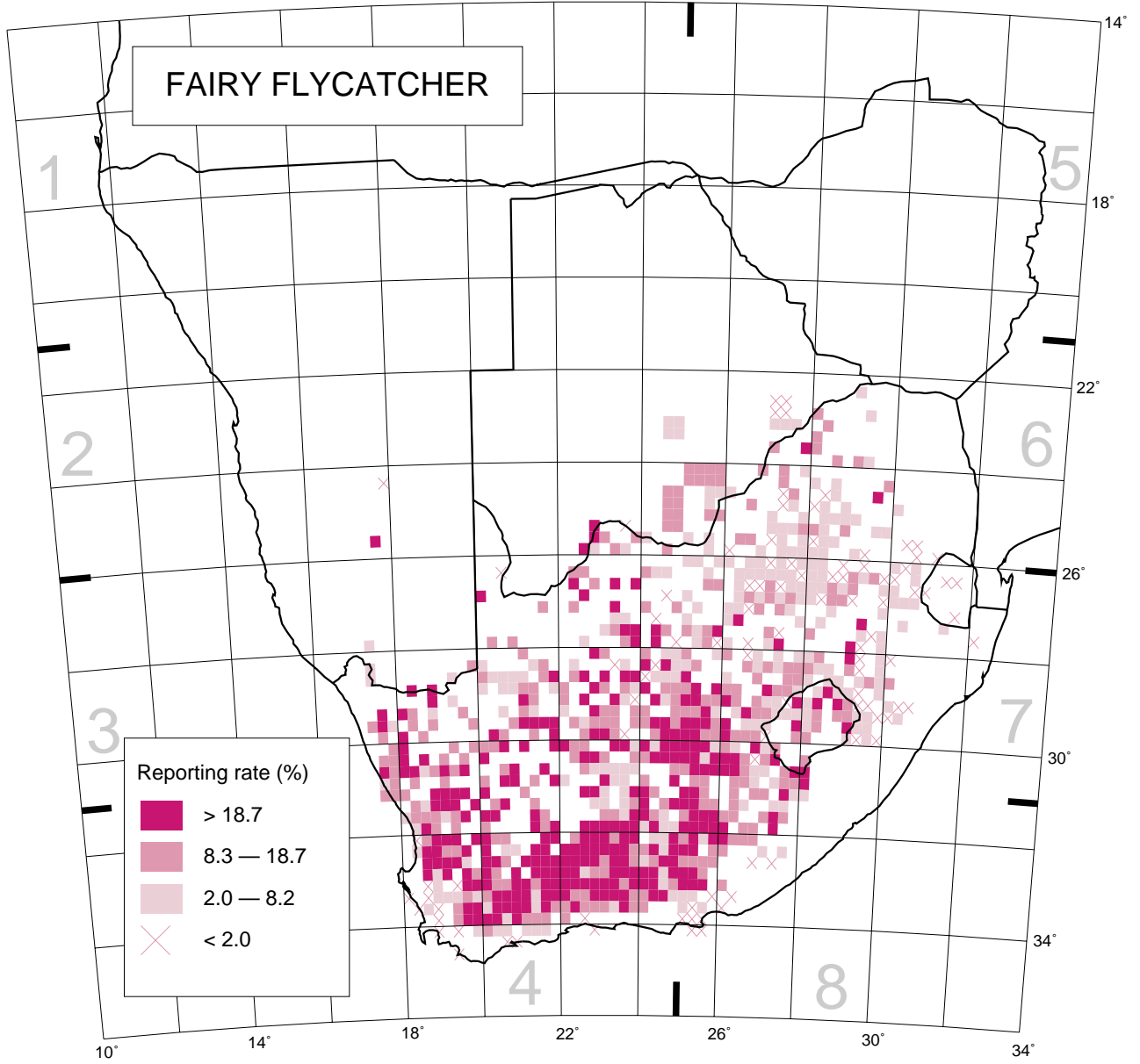
Historical distribution and conservation: There is no evidence of change in distribution. Skead (1956) recorded it for the first time at King William's Town (3227CD) in 1950, describing it as being 'outside the normal range'. If that represented a significant expansion it has not continued. There are other old records from beyond the range shown here: southern Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981), the Kaokoveld in north-western Namibia (Clancey 1966c), and Ghanzi (2121D) in Botswana (Tree 1975f). These would have been nonbreeding vagrants. The Fairy Flycatcher is not threatened.

D.N. Johnson

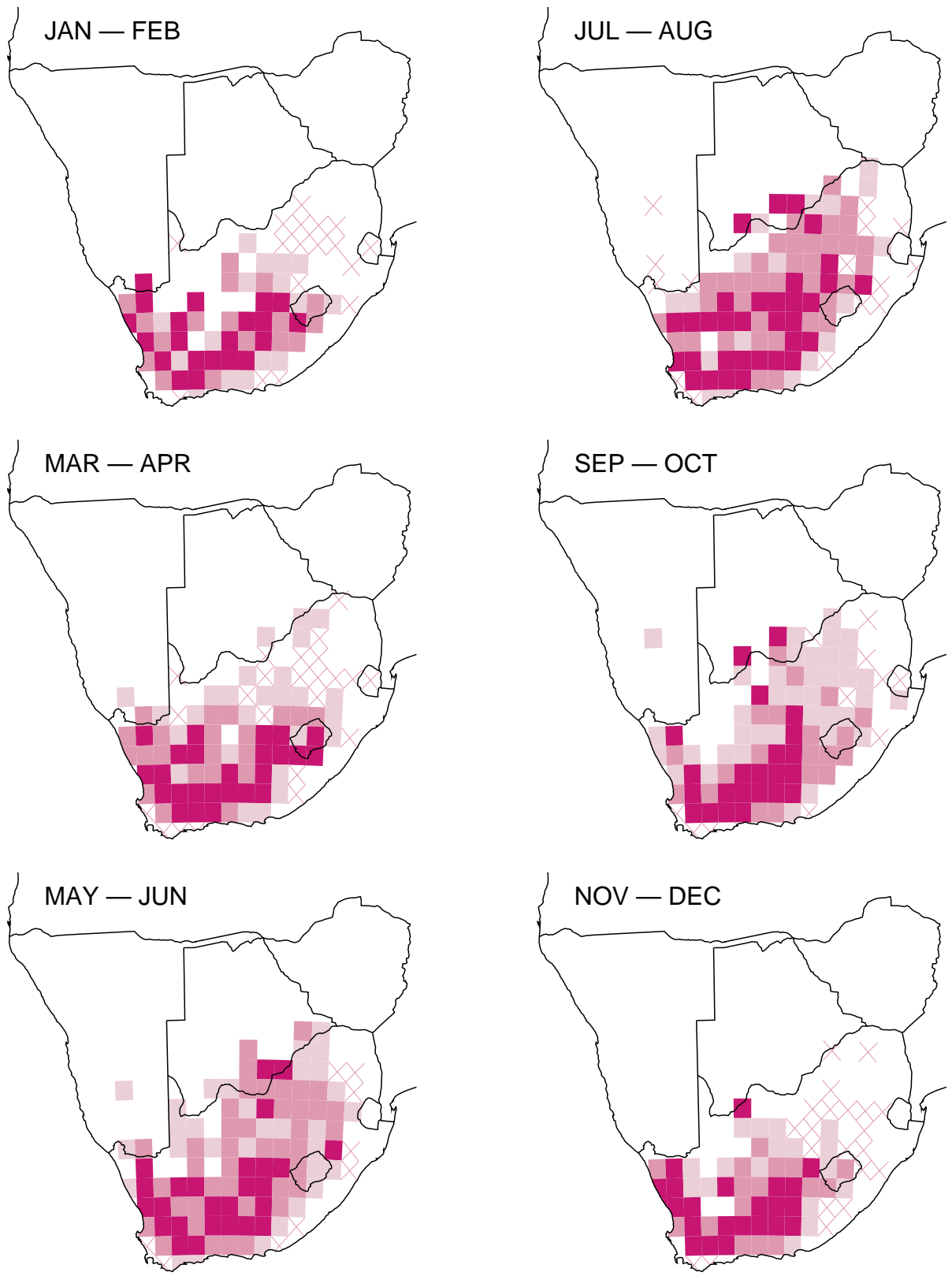
Recorded in 940 grid cells, 20.7%
Total number of records: 5351
Mean reporting rate for range: 8.9%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





FAIRY FLYCATCHER



Seasonal distribution maps; one-degree grid.