

## Plainbacked Pipit

### Donkerkoester

#### *Anthus leucophrys*

The Plainbacked Pipit is widely distributed, extending from West Africa south of the Sahara, east to Ethiopia and Kenya and round the equatorial forests southwards to northern Namibia, Botswana and the Cape Province. Its breeding range in southern Africa is broadly sundered by a swath of untenanted country in the arid interior to form two discrete population blocks. The northern subspecies *A. l. tephridorsus* extends narrowly through the ecotone between *Brachystegia* woodlands (miombo) and *Acacia* woodlands of Namibia and Botswana, with strongholds in floodplain habitat. The second block includes the plateau of the Transvaal and the adjacent eastern hardveld of Botswana, the Free State and KwaZulu-Natal to the Cape Province south of the Karoo regions. Absence of the species from Zimbabwe seems surprising in the light of its presence in northern Transvaal and eastern Botswana in habitat similar to that found in southern Zimbabwe. Irwin (1981) confirmed its scarcity in Zimbabwe where it occurs only along the Zambezi River west of Victoria Falls and at Mana Pools.

There are two subspecies involved in the southern block, the nominate race and *enunciator* which is much buffier ventrally (Clancey 1980b). It is usually considered to form a sibling pair with the Buffy Pipit *A. vaalensis*, probably derived from the same ancestral source as the Tawny Pipit *A. campestris* of the Palearctic (Clancey 1990b; Keith *et al.* 1992).

Field identification of the larger pipits is extremely difficult and all species are frequently misidentified, especially the species with plain upperparts, the Plainbacked and Buffy Pipits. Scattered records from the Kalahari were deleted as unsubstantiated and the distribution map illustrates primarily the known breeding ranges. Records beyond this range are likely (see movements) but are in need of further confirmation, preferably on the basis of combined vocal and specimen evidence. It is a slightly smaller species than the Buffy Pipit and darker with a whiter supercilium. The hind claw is longer, and the base of the bill is yellowish. Maclean (1993b) describes the song as somewhat sparrowlike, and delivered from the ground or a low eminence and not in a display flight. Its occurrence is generally localized and it is moderately gregarious during the winter months.

**Habitat:** In general it prefers relatively mesic grasslands and a less plains-like environment than the Buffy Pipit, often in edge situations in well-wooded country, and around waterbodies and marshes; it had a high reporting rate for the subspecies *tephridorsus* on the Okavango floodplains. The south-

ern populations occur widely in fallow and overgrazed lands, and also in sugar-cane fields along the KwaZulu-Natal coast. It will forage in recently burnt grasslands and fynbos. Along the Transkei coast it is found during the nonbreeding season in gardens associated with beach cottages. It breeds from the coast to c. 2000 m altitude.

**Movements:** The atlas reporting rates do not provide evidence for large-scale seasonal movements. In western Swaziland the species was present on its breeding grounds throughout the year (Parker 1994). However, the nominate subspecies and *enunciator* have marked altitudinal movements off the high eastern continental plateau; the latter race reaches the southeastern coastlands and even the Lebombo Mountains in Mozambique (Clancey 1990b). Although not shown on the present map, nonbreeding flocks of a plainbacked pipit are commonly found in the open savannas of the northern and central Kalahari during the wet season; these could be of the northern race which avoids the moist breeding habitat when it becomes overgrown at this time of year (M.H. pers. obs; see also Brewster 1991). Whether or how these observations of migrant plainbacked pipits in the Kalahari may relate to a recently proposed new species of pipit, the Longtailed Pipit *A. longicaudatus* (Liversidge 1996), remains to be investigated.

**Breeding:** The few records indicate breeding from early spring to summer (August–February), in agreement with scant published information; the northern subspecies breeds in winter and spring (Dean 1971; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Brewster 1991; Skinner 1995a).

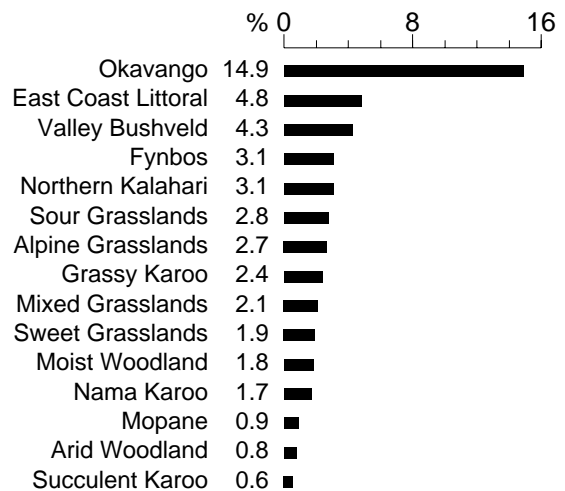
**Interspecific relationships:** It moves readily to recently burnt grassland, along with other pipits, chats and rock-thrushes, to feed on incapacitated insects. It often occurs alongside its sibling species, the Buffy Pipit, and their ranges overlap widely.

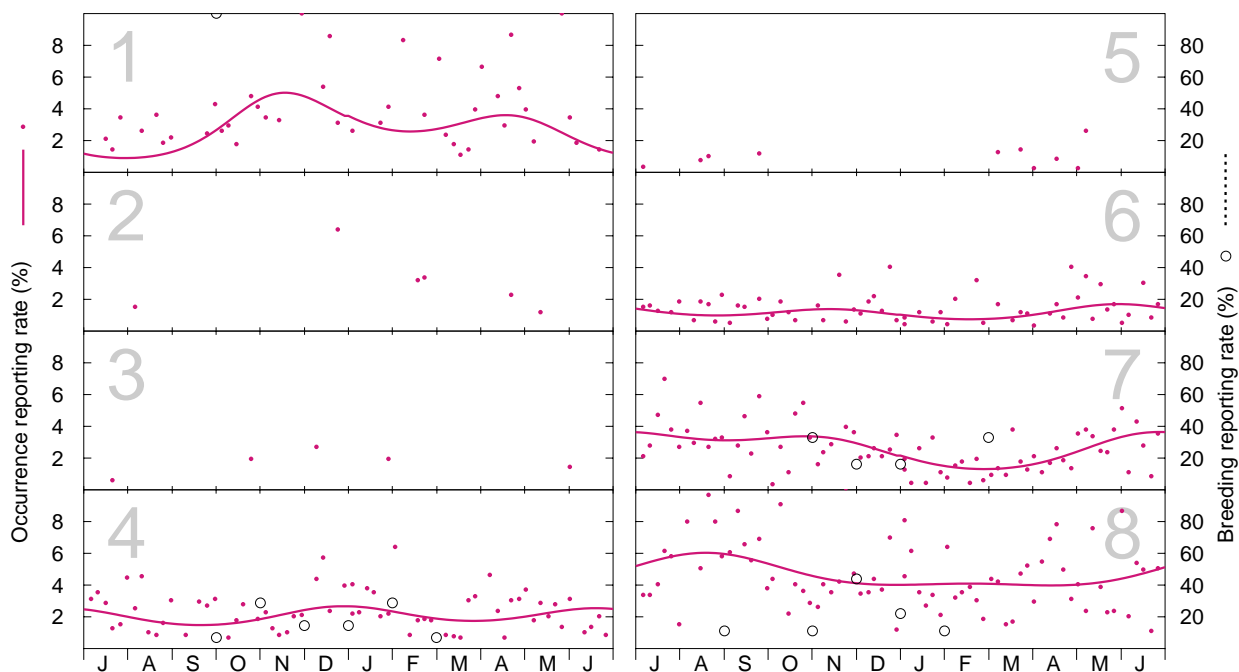
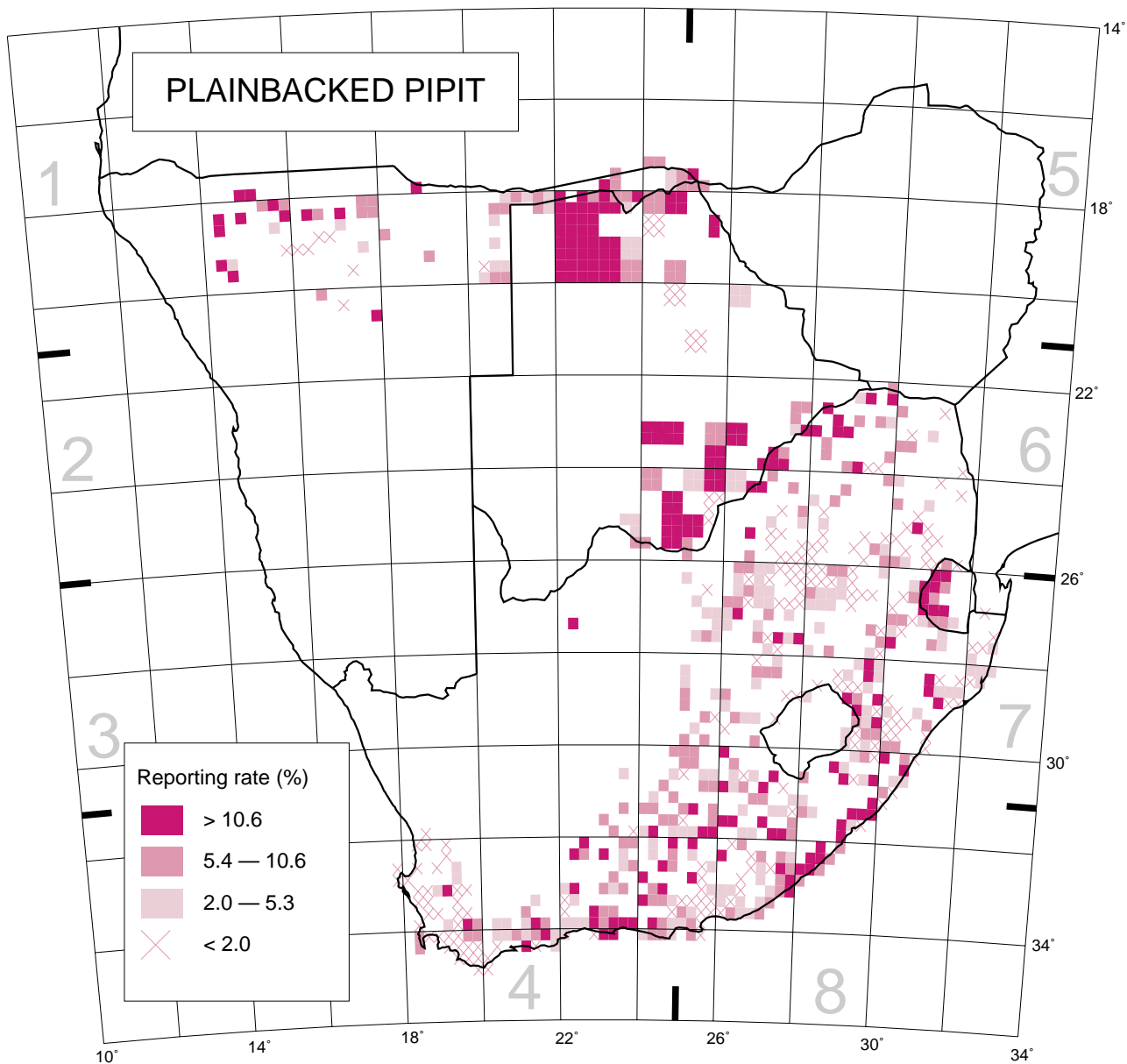
**Historical distribution and conservation:** The Plainbacked Pipit is a somewhat local but adaptable species, able to coexist with agricultural activities. Use of pesticides could affect its numbers locally, but it is not threatened.

*P.A. Clancey and M. Herremans*

Recorded in 763 grid cells, 16.8%  
Total number of records: 3187  
Mean reporting rate for range: 4.5%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 89, 8, 5, 179, 11, 134, 519, 254; Breeding: 2, 0, 0, 14, 0, 0, 6, 9.