Wattled Starling

Lelspreeu

Creatophora cinerea

The only Afrotropical starling which is clearly related to the Palearctic and Asian starlings, the Wattled Starling can be encountered throughout the savanna areas of southern and eastern Africa. There are also records from the Arabian peninsula, West Africa and Madagascar (Craig 1996). In southern Africa it has been recorded over most of the atlas region, and it is generally regarded as nomadic (Maclean 1993b). There are scattered records from southern Mozambique where it is uncommon (Clancey 1971c). Wattled Starlings were reported infrequently from the Transkei (cf. Quickelberge 1989), KwaZulu-Natal and the southeastern Transvaal. The gaps in Namibia and the northwestern Cape Province could be the result of less coverage in those areas.

When small numbers of birds are associated with flocks of other species, Wattled Starlings are easily overlooked (particularly in winter plumage) and they are likely to have been under-recorded in many areas.

Habitat: Reporting rates were highest from dry grasslands and dry, open country, which accurately reflects habitat preference. Wattled Starlings forage chiefly on the ground and often probe in the grass mat like European Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris*. Although the nests are built in trees – mostly thorntrees – this is not a species typical of well-developed, closed woodland habitats.

Movements: An earlier analysis indicated that Wattled Starlings were reported more frequently in winter in most areas, except for the eastern lowveld (Craig 1992b). The seasonal maps confirm that reporting rates from the Kruger National Park, Swaziland and northern KwaZulu-Natal are highest during summer, and that records from the eastern coastal strip are more frequent in the cooler months.

In Zimbabwe the reporting rates were highest in the southern sector near the Limpopo River. There are few breeding records from Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981) and the species is more common there in winter when it spreads widely over the central plateau and Zambezi Valley (A.J. Tree pers. comm.), but there is no shift towards the south in summer as shown by the maps in Craig (1992b). The models show no change in reporting rates in the southern or northern Cape Province (Zones 3 and 4), but a marked late-summer peak in central Namibia and the Kalahari in Botswana (Zone 2). By contrast, there are clear winter peaks in the eastern Cape Province (Zone 8), KwaZulu-Natal and the Free State (Zone 7).

The seasonal maps provide further evidence for departure from the Kalahari in the dry season and reveal a dry-season concentration in the Okavango (masked in the model for Zone 1). Seasonality is obscured by the continued presence of some individuals in many areas, but in general these data support the earlier conclusion that the species' heartland is a belt from the central interior of the Cape Province northwards to Botswana. Within this sector, it is likely to be encountered at any time of year (cf. Craig 1992b), but most leave the drier parts of the Kalahari in the dry season. Tracking of individual birds is required to understand their movements.

Breeding: Breeding was clearly seasonal, August–April. There is an indication that nesting occurs later in Namibia and the Kalahari (Zones 1 and 2) and earlier in the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4), as found in an earlier review (Craig 1992b). In the Transvaal (Zone 6), egglaying is October–February (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b) but December–March in Namibia (Brown & Clinning in press).

Interspecific relationships: Small groups often associate with Pied Starlings *Spreo bicolor* and they may also feed and roost with European Starlings (A.J.F.K.C. pers. obs.). In Zimbabwe they will feed and roost with *Lamprotornis* spp. (Irwin 1981).

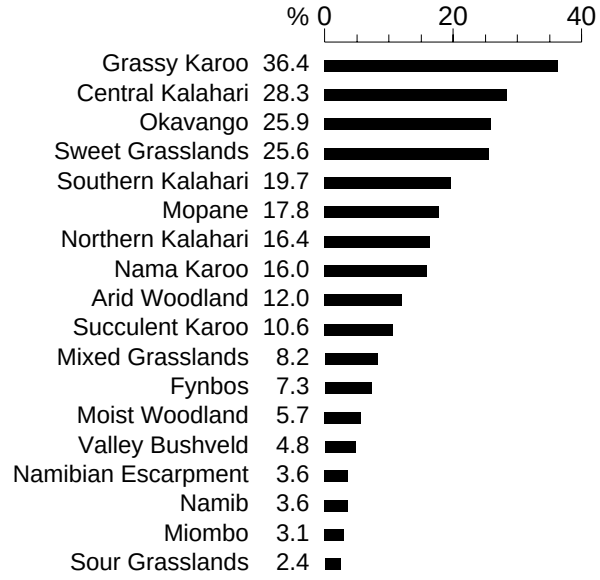
Historical distribution and conservation: Past records in southern Africa suggest that its occurrence has always been erratic and unpredictable (Craig 1992b). Apart from the suggestion that it is now more common in the southwestern Cape Province (Hockey *et al.* 1989), there is no evidence that either distribution or abundance has changed.

The Wattled Starling has been protected as important predators of locusts, although this is not a significant role today. It is perhaps the most numerous starling in Africa.

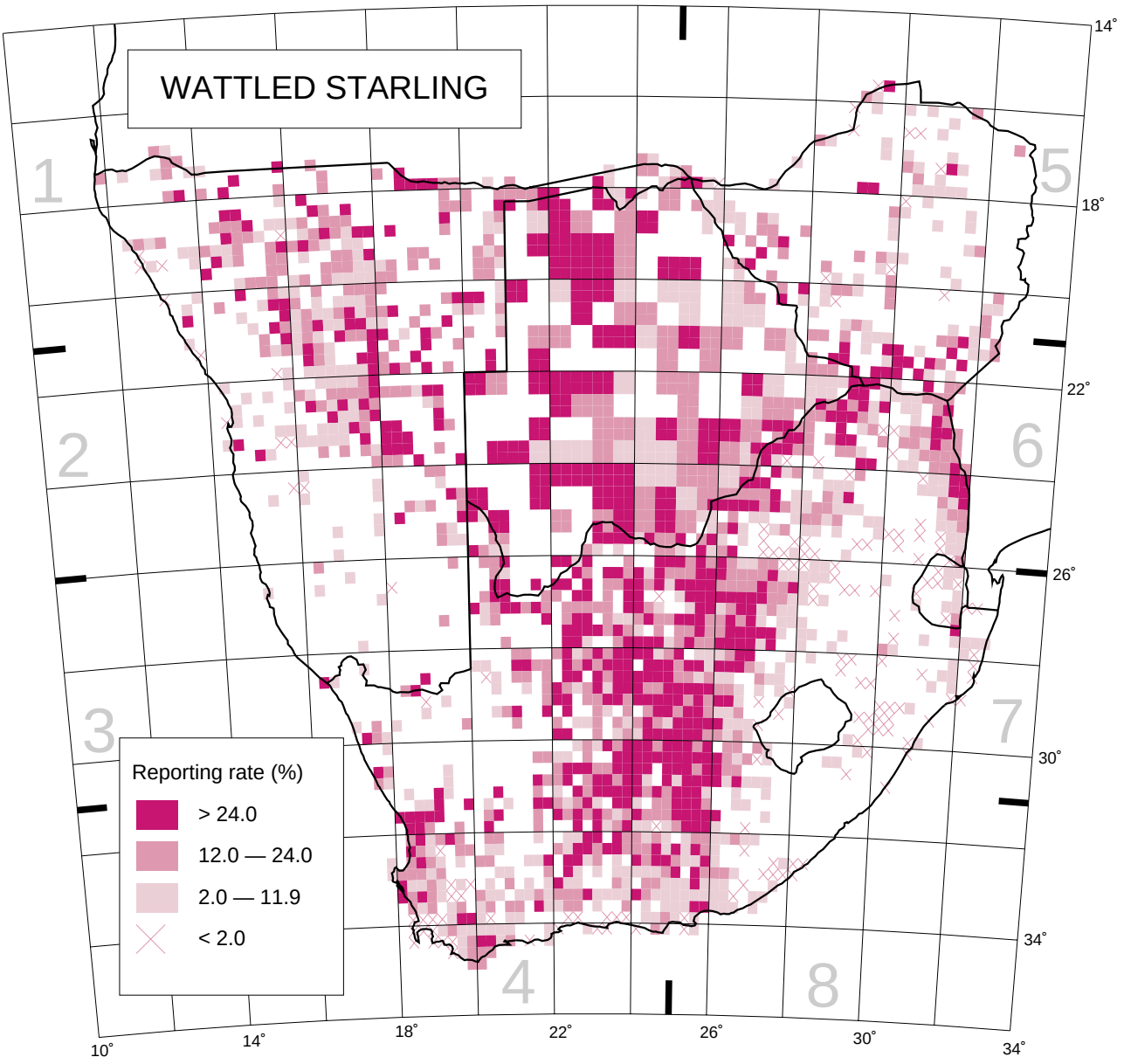
A.J.F.K. Craig and M. Herremans

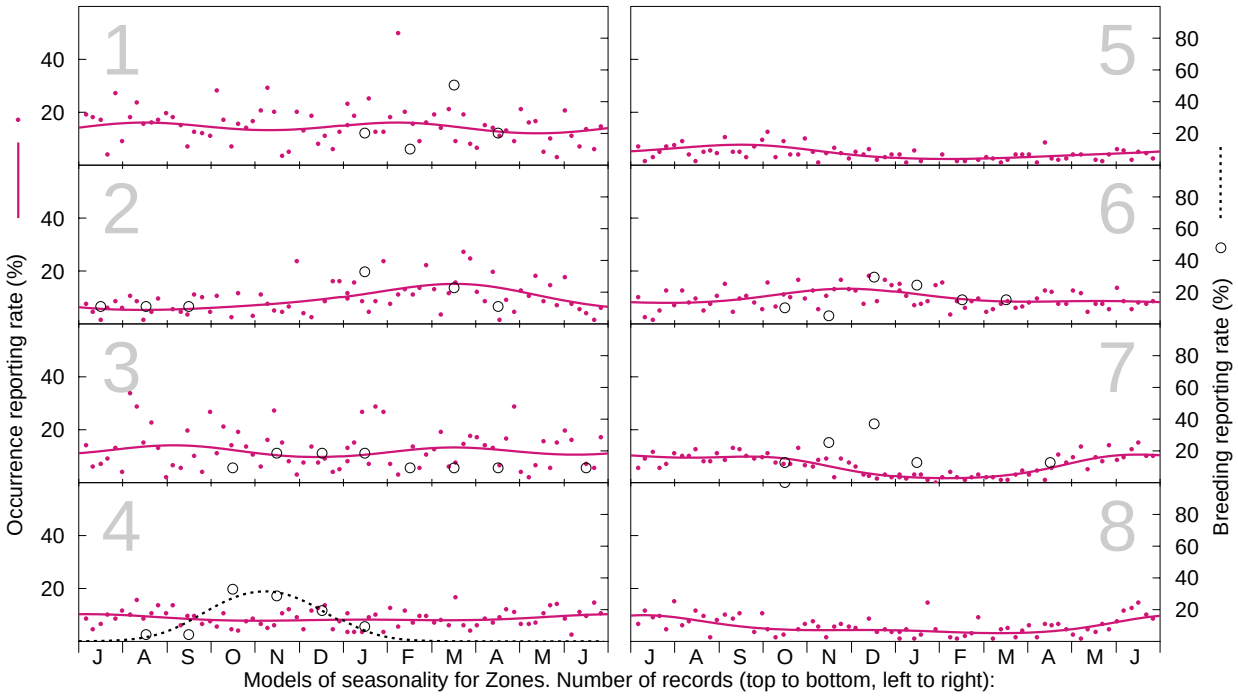
Recorded in 2143 grid cells, 47.2%
Total number of records: 13 849
Mean reporting rate for range: 12.9%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



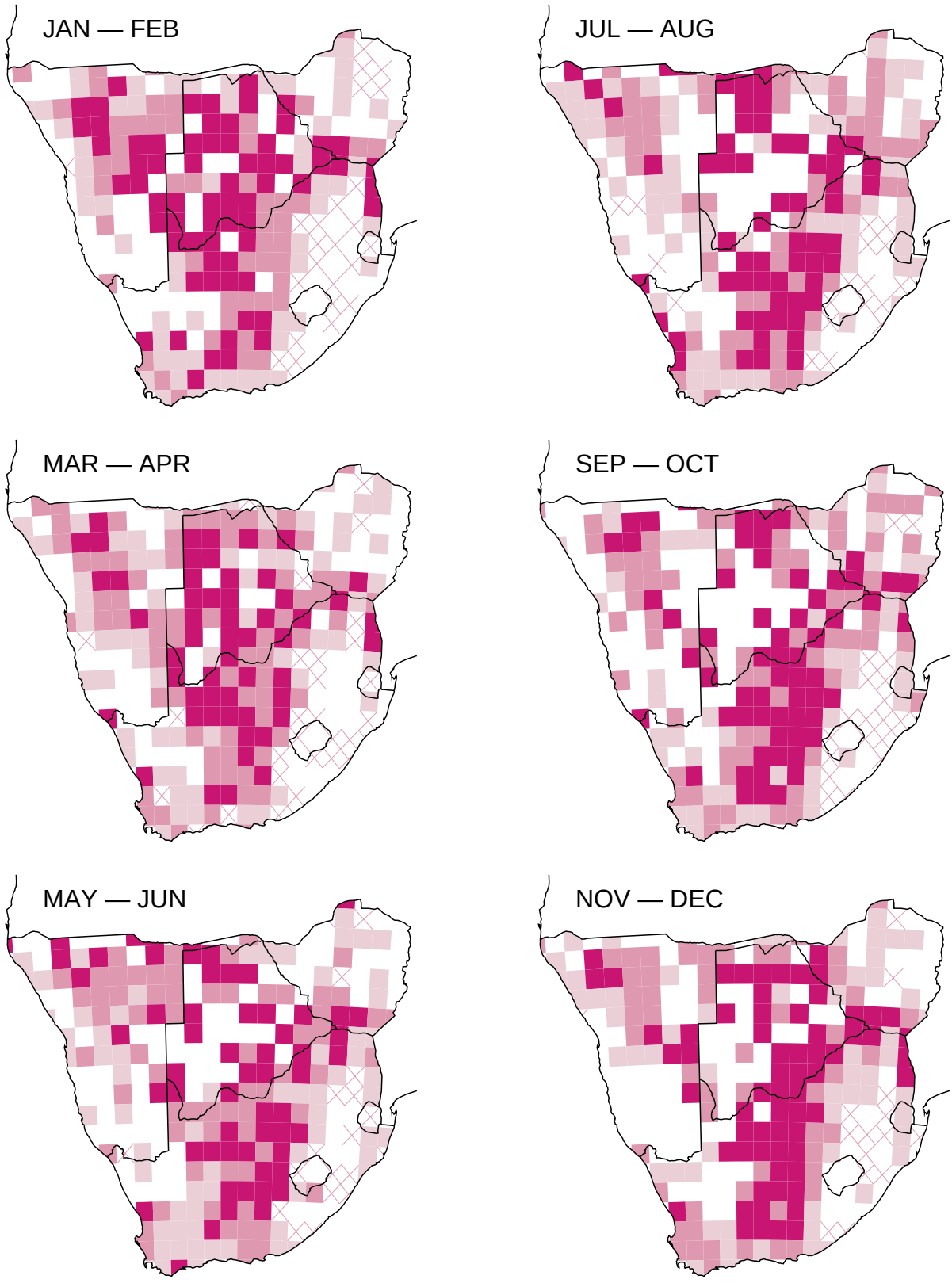
Also marginally in East Coast Littoral and Alpine Grasslands.





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 470, 351, 664, 757, 417, 1118, 1286, 296; Breeding: 10, 9, 11, 21, 0, 20, 8, 1.

WATTLED STARLING



Seasonal distribution maps; one-degree grid.