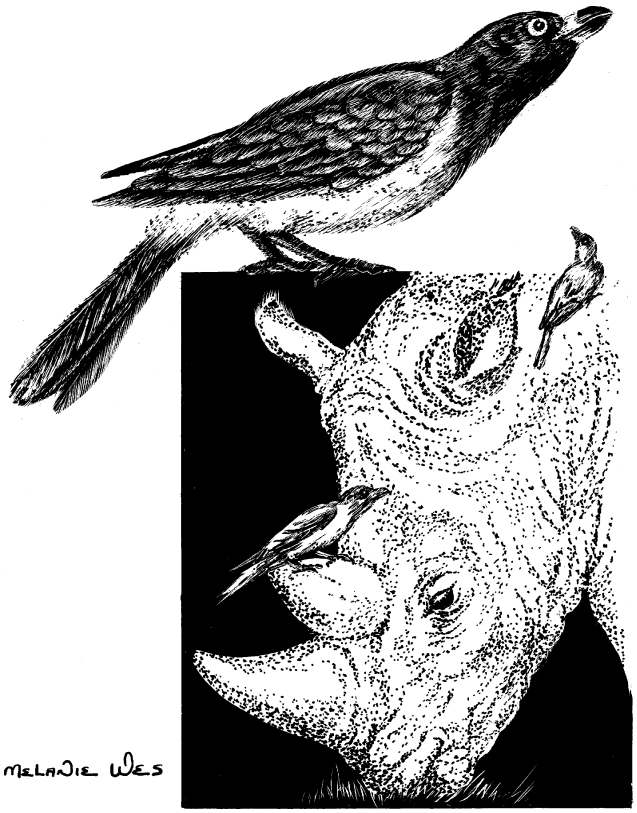


Yellowbilled Oxpecker

Geelbekrenostervoël

Buphagus africanus

The Yellowbilled Oxpecker is much the more widespread of the two species of oxpecker, as it is the only one in the whole of West Africa, but it is much less numerous and less widely distributed in southern Africa. It is commonly sighted only in northern Botswana, the Caprivi Strip, northwestern Zimbabwe, and also in southeastern Zimbabwe (Gonarezhou National Park and adjoining areas). It extends into the northern third of the Kruger National Park in South Africa and also occurs in extreme northwestern Namibia. All these regions are big-game areas with elephants, Buffalo *Syncerus caffer* and antelope.

In 1975 it was successfully translocated to the Matobo National Park (2028) (Grobler 1979), where it still thrives in spite of the removal of Buffalo (Dale 1992). In 1979 it naturally colonized the Kruger National Park (Hall-Martin 1987), and in 1986 it was translocated to the Umfolozi Game Reserve (2831B) (Ritchie 1986). Around 1987 it was first seen in the midlands of Zimbabwe (P. Oosthuyzen pers. comm.) where it has remained. It is absent from the Zambezi Valley, east of the Matusadona National Park; this is an anomaly as Buffalo, and previously Black Rhinoceros *Diceros bicornis*, abound there.

It is easy to distinguish it from the Redbilled Oxpecker *B. erythrorhynchus*, especially in flight, as the Yellowbilled Oxpecker has a pale-buff rump at all ages (Stutterheim *et al.* 1976).

Habitat: It is seen mostly in dry deciduous woodlands where natural holes for breeding commonly occur in trunks and branches. It may use *Acacia* trees for communal roosting, and outside the breeding season it also roosts on mammalian hosts. Hosts with ticks are an essential requirement.

Movements: No regular movements are known, and the atlas data indicate residency. There have been natural expansions into new areas; the recolonization of Kruger National Park apparently occurred when buffalo moved in from Zimbabwe, carrying oxpeckers with them.

Breeding: The few atlas records were from the wet season, according with egglaying data from the region which span September–March (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Skinner 1995a). Other than in tree cavities, it also breeds in metal fence posts.

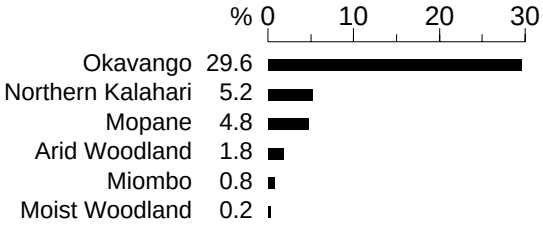
Interspecific relationships: (See also the account for the Redbilled Oxpecker.) The range of the Yellowbilled Oxpecker in southern Africa is almost entirely within the range of the Redbilled Oxpecker. The former is marginally larger and dominant over the latter. Their bill shapes differ, presumably because diet and feeding methods are different: for example 'hammering' or plucking by the former and 'scissoring' by the latter. However, detailed work has not yet produced the answers to the enigma of how the two species can coexist in so many places and on the same host species. Previously it was thought, wrongly, that the Buffalo was an essential host of the Yellowbilled Oxpecker (Mundy 1983).

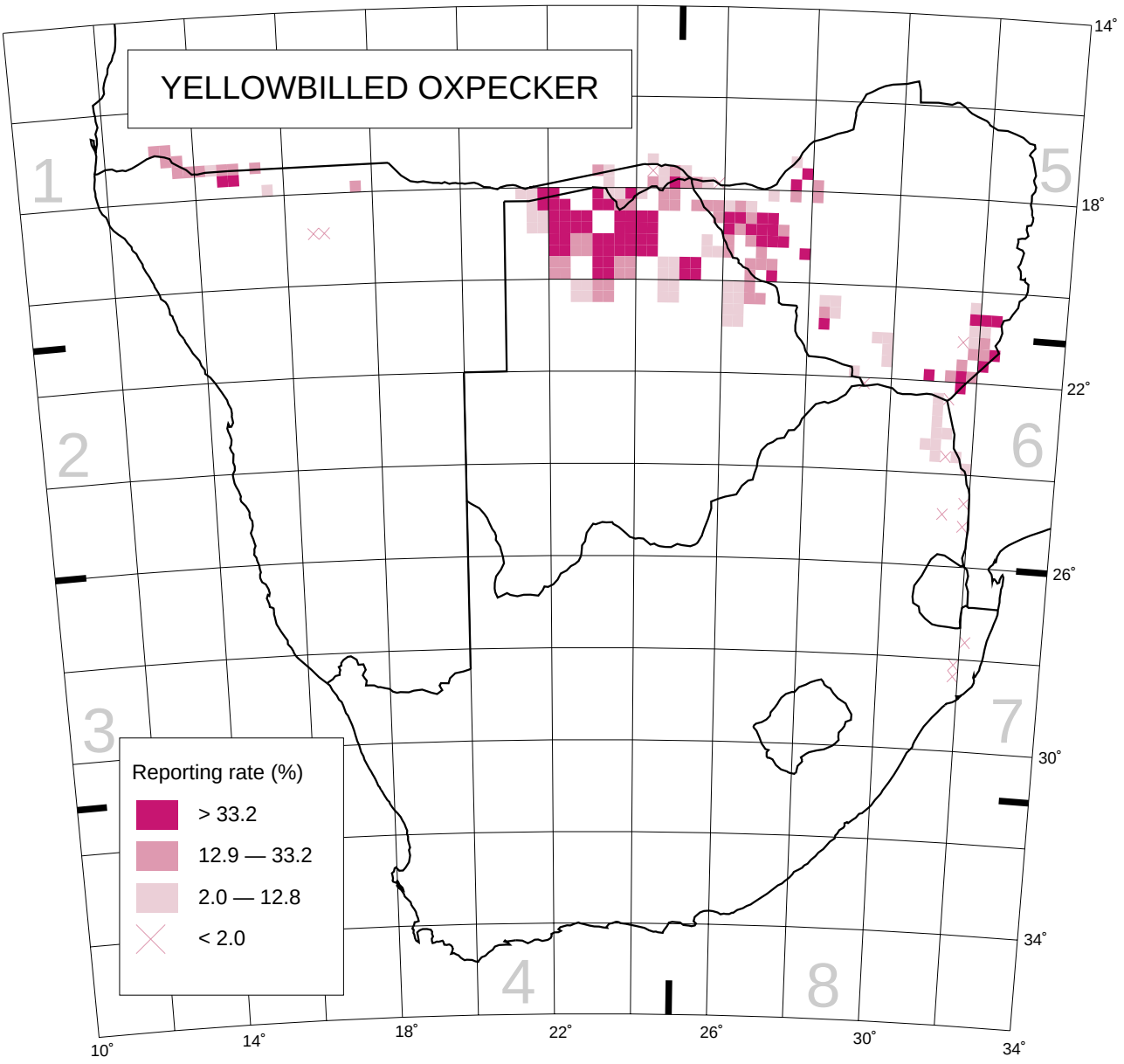
Historical distribution and conservation: It has had a chequered history in the subcontinent. In the 19th century it was recorded in the Transvaal, KwaZulu-Natal and Swaziland, with the last known breeding record in 1906 (Stutterheim & Brooke 1981). The South African Red Data book called it 'extinct', the first bird species known to have become so in that country in recent times (Brooke 1984b). Likely causes were the extreme decline in Buffalo and cattle numbers from the rinderpest epidemic of the 1880s, and the use of arsenic dips for cattle subsequently. However, it is clearly now well on the way to recovery, aided by translocations as well as by its own natural expansion. Outside of protected areas, the changeover to oxpecker-friendly 'green-label' dips on cattle ranches will further aid this process (Bezuidenhout & Stutterheim 1980).

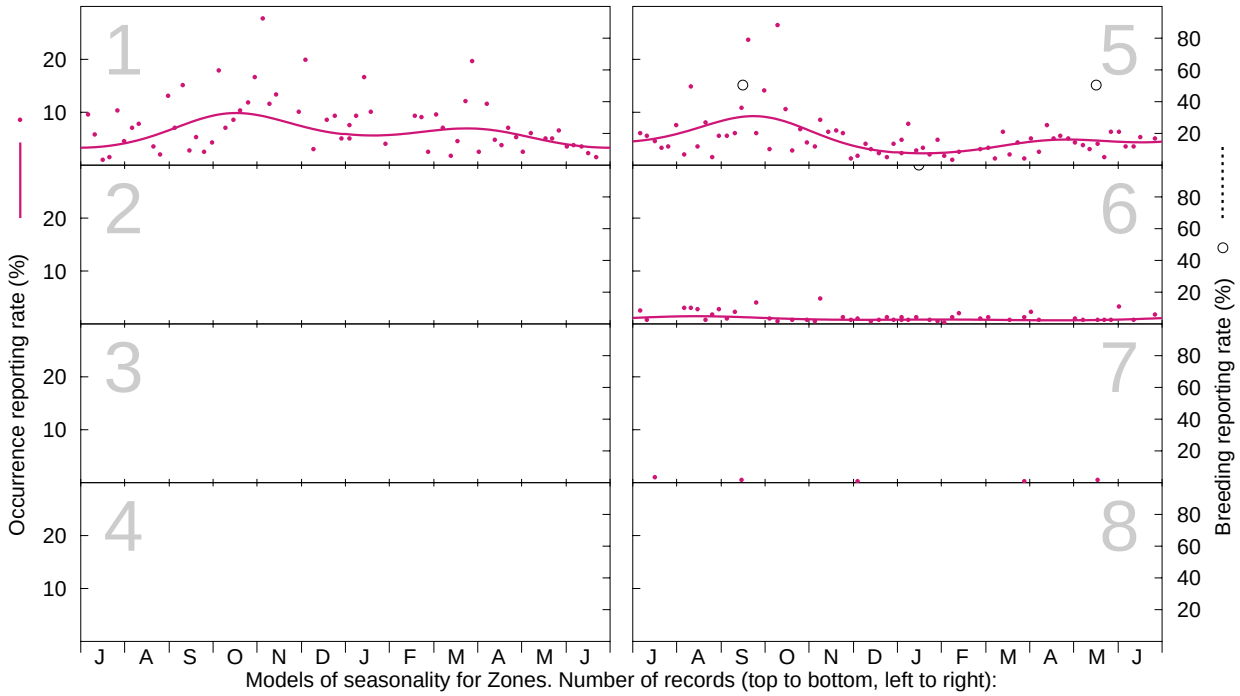
P.J. Mundy

Recorded in 225 grid cells, 5.0%
Total number of records: 1076
Mean reporting rate for range: 16.3%

Reporting rates for vegetation types







Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 204, 0, 0, 0, 453, 107, 6, 0; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 2, 1, 0, 0.