



Whitebrowed Sparrowweaver

Koringvoël

Plocepasser mahali

The Whitebrowed Sparrowweaver occurs mainly on the central plateau of southern Africa where it is a dominant species (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Its main stronghold is in northcentral southern Africa, with isolated populations in the eastern Cape Province and eastern Free State. It occurs northwards into Angola, and from Zimbabwe its range extends further north into East Africa, as far as Ethiopia (Hall & Moreau 1970). Four subspecies are recognized in the region (Clancey 1980b): nominate *P. m. mahali* occurs in the eastern part of the northern Cape Province; *stentor* extends from the western part of the northern Cape Province northwards along the Namibian escarpment; *terricolor* has a wide range in the centre of the region with a stronghold in the middle Limpopo catchment in eastern Botswana; and *pectoralis* occurs along the lower Zambezi in northeastern Zimbabwe, north of the gap on the Mashonaland plateau.

It is conspicuous, building prominent untidy grass nests in small colonies in the outer branches of trees. It is a cooperative breeder (Collias 1977). It is unlikely to have been misidentified and the scattered records beyond the edge of the main range are reliable.

Habitat: Although particular in its micro-habitat requirements (Vernon 1983b; Ferguson 1985), it finds these in a variety of vegetation types, with high reporting rates in particular from the dry woodland and savanna areas, and the much-altered Sweet Grasslands of central southern Africa. Nest trees are usually at the ecotone between two habitats: one with reduced ground cover, where the birds forage, and the other having good grass cover, providing nest material (Vernon 1983b; Ferguson 1985). Such ecotones have been extensively generated in the Sweet Grasslands by crop farming and livestock grazing; in these areas alien trees planted as windbreaks, or along roads, are commonly used for nesting (pers. obs).

C. J. Skead (1966c) thought that the sparrowweavers in the eastern Cape Province were isolated from those in the Free State by a region lacking suitable thickets of *Acacia karroo*,

the favoured nest tree; however, its readiness to nest in alien trees would suggest that other essential habitat elements are lacking in this gap in distribution.

Movements: The establishment and maintenance of a nest colony probably require that most of the population be sedentary; 13 of 15 ring recoveries were close to the ringing site and two were 12 and 20 km distant (SAFRING). This stability is reflected in the models for the eastern Zones, while the suggestion of an increase in reporting rates in late summer in the drier west is probably unreliable in view of the large scatter on the data. Populations at the eastern edge of the range in the Transvaal are reported to occur 'erratically' (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). In the Alice (3226DD) and Cathcart (3227AC) districts in the eastern Cape Province, Skead (1967b) described 'a degree of temporary vagrancy', which he suggested was 'an indication of a spread in population'.

Breeding: Breeding was recorded in most months of the year throughout its range, but mainly in the warmer months. Birds use nests for roosting throughout the year and this could have resulted in misleading records of breeding activity. There is a marked early-summer peak for Zone 3, while peak breeding in Zones 1 and 2 is much later in summer, but the data for these areas are fewer. Peak breeding is earlier in Zimbabwe (Zone 5) than in the Transvaal (Zone 6), confirming published information (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Jones (1978) provided unequivocal evidence for breeding in the Okavango (Zone 1) as late as May.

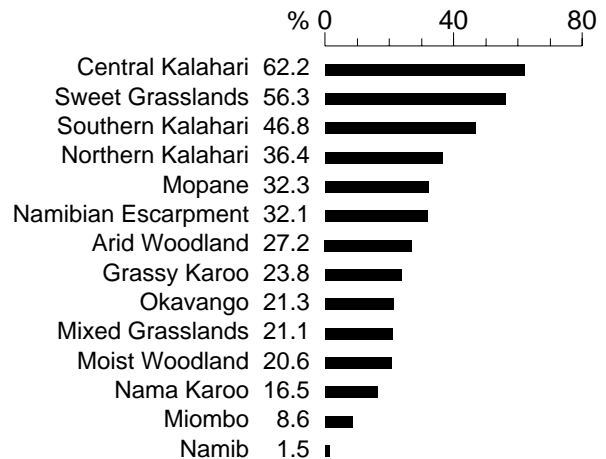
Interspecific relationships: Its nests are used for roosting by other birds, e.g. Ashy Tit *Parus cinerascens* and Red-headed Finch *Amadina erythrocephala* (Macdonald 1983). Despite its prominent nests, it has not yet been reported as a host of the Diederik Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx caprius*.

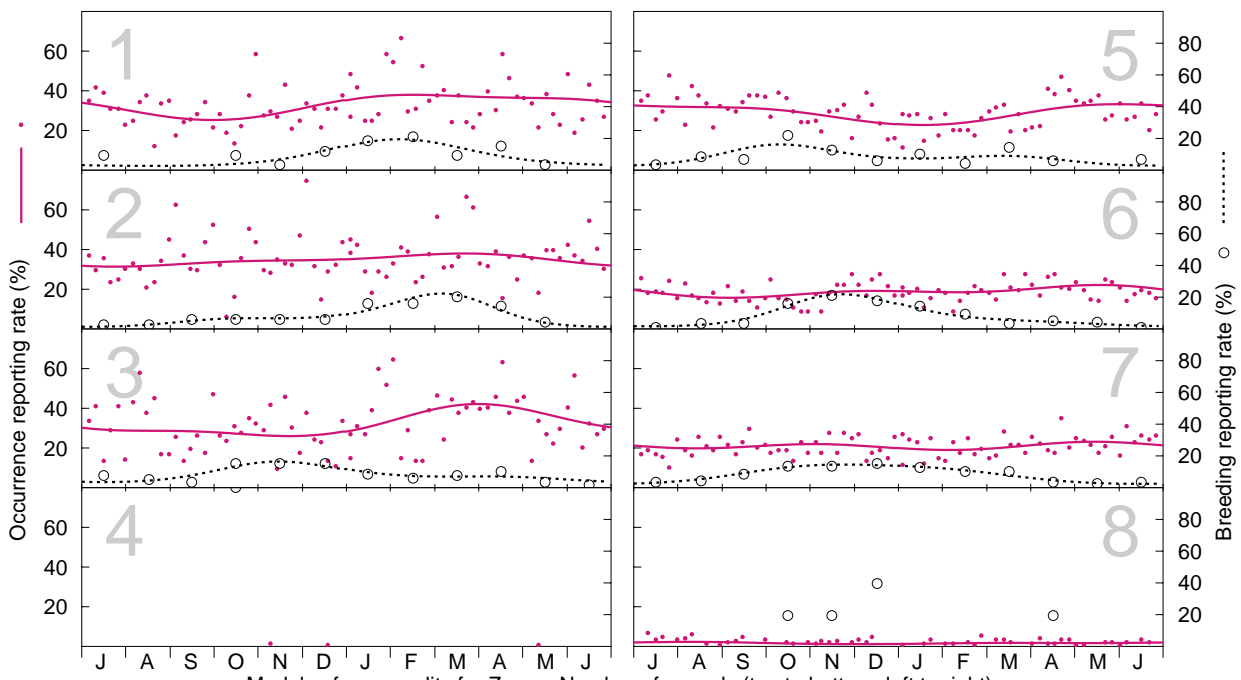
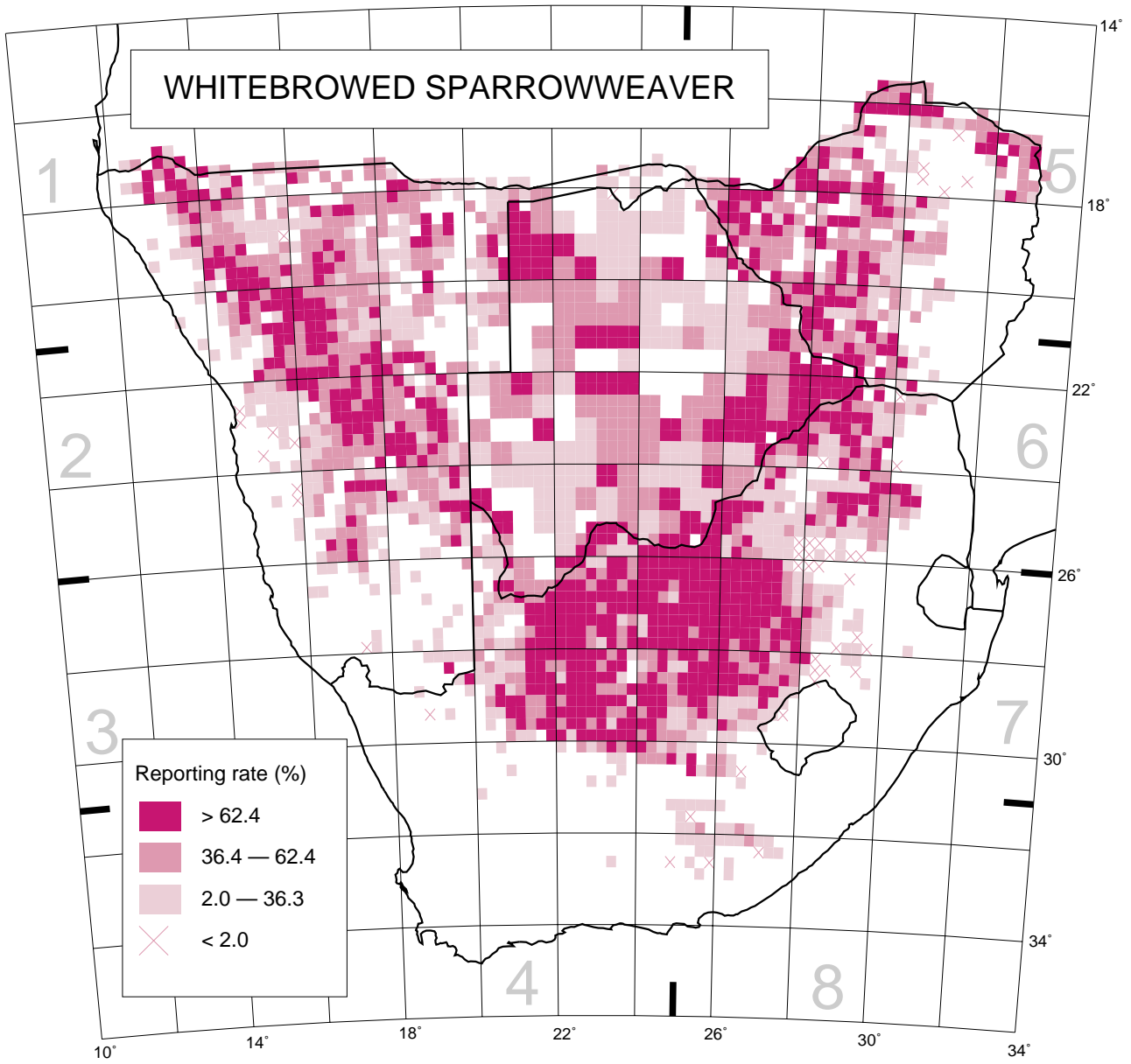
Historical distribution and conservation: The Whitebrowed Sparrowweaver has increased in numbers and range in the eastern Cape Province, spreading southwards through the Cradock district (3225BA) since 1950 (Skead, C.J. 1966c, 1967b; Collett 1982). The distribution map also shows records from the northern and eastern Transvaal beyond the eastern edge of the range shown by Tarboton *et al.* (1987b). It has increased in numbers and range around Bulawayo (2028DA) (A.J. Tree pers. comm.).

B.D. Colahan

Recorded in 2460 grid cells, 54.2%
Total number of records: 24 530
Mean reporting rate for range: 37.5%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 1097, 1257, 1809, 3, 2549, 2152, 4098, 92; Breeding: 33, 49, 148, 1, 70, 143, 405, 5.