

Great Sparrow

Grootmossie

Passer motitensis

This Afrotropical species has a fragmented distribution in the arid savannas of subtropical Africa (Summers-Smith 1983, 1988). The distribution of the Great Sparrow in southern Africa, where the nominate subspecies occurs, closely resembles that of several species that can be described as *Acacia*-thornbelt specialists, but extends somewhat further west and south into arid areas. It is locally common from the far northern Cape Province and western parts of the Free State and Transvaal, into southern Zimbabwe and throughout most of Botswana and Namibia, except the broadleaved areas in the north and northeast. Beyond the atlas region it extends into southwestern Angola (Summers-Smith 1983, 1988; Maclean 1993b).

It drinks regularly (Skead 1975a; Maclean 1993b), and the patchiness of the distribution in the arid areas is probably correlated with the availability of water (cf. the distribution of the Scalyfeathered Finch *Sporopipes squamifrons*, which does not need to drink).

In Botswana it was found in six out of 29 transect-counts in 13 suitable habitats, resulting in an average density of 1 pair/100 ha (unpubl. data).

It lives mostly in pairs and has no particular association with human habitation. It does not flock in the nonbreeding season, but occasionally associates with flocks of Cape *P. melanurus*, Southern Greyheaded *P. diffusus* or House *P. domesticus* Sparrows. It is a relatively shy and inconspicuous species that is easily overlooked; it was probably under-recorded during the atlas period. Especially females and young birds may occasionally have been confused with House or Cape Sparrows, but females are seldom separated from males.

Habitat: It has a strong preference for open, rather arid *Acacia* bushveld. It frequently occurs on fallow land under tribal agricultural practices, particularly when there are coppicing *Acacia* bushes. Reporting rates were much

higher on the Namibian Escarpment than anywhere else in the region. Associations with Mopane, Northern Kalahari, Moist Woodland, Okavango and Sweet Grasslands are due to *Acacia* intrusions. The range extends marginally into open, arid habitat such as the Nama Karoo and the Namib Desert.

Movements: No regular movements have been documented and the models do not suggest any. However, it does occasionally occur in the dry season to the northeast of its normal range in Zimbabwe (A.J. Tree pers. comm.), and it is nomadic to some extent (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Breeding: The atlas records indicate that it breeds mainly in the wet summer season, possibly with a peak in late summer (January–April) in the northwest (Zones 1–2), while breeding peaks in spring and early summer (October–January) in the eastern and southern part of the range (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Skinner 1995a). The timing of the breeding season follows that of insectivorous birds rather than typical granivores because its young are fed with insects (Summers-Smith 1988).

Interspecific relationships: There are four sparrows of the genus *Passer* in southern Africa and the Great Sparrow is broadly sympatric with the three other species; all four species can be found together. Except along the Namibian Escarpment, it is greatly outnumbered by its congeners.

It is a regular host of the Diederik Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx caprius* (Ginn *et al.* 1989; Maclean 1993b).

Historical distribution and conservation: Boreholes to water livestock might have enabled it to expand its range in arid areas. On the other hand, there appears to be evidence for local range contractions, possibly as a result of clearance of woodland for agriculture (Farkas 1966b; Skead & Dean 1977; Summers-Smith 1983). As far as is known, the Great Sparrow is not threatened in the region.

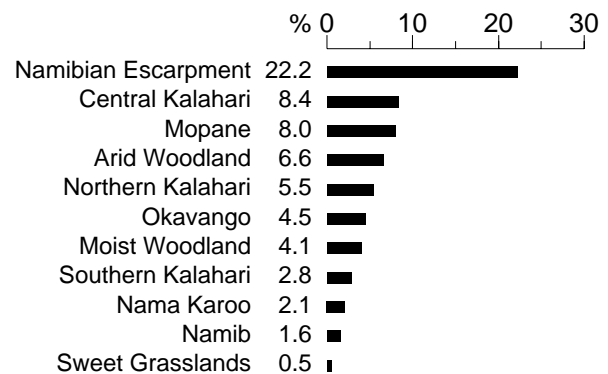
M. Herremans

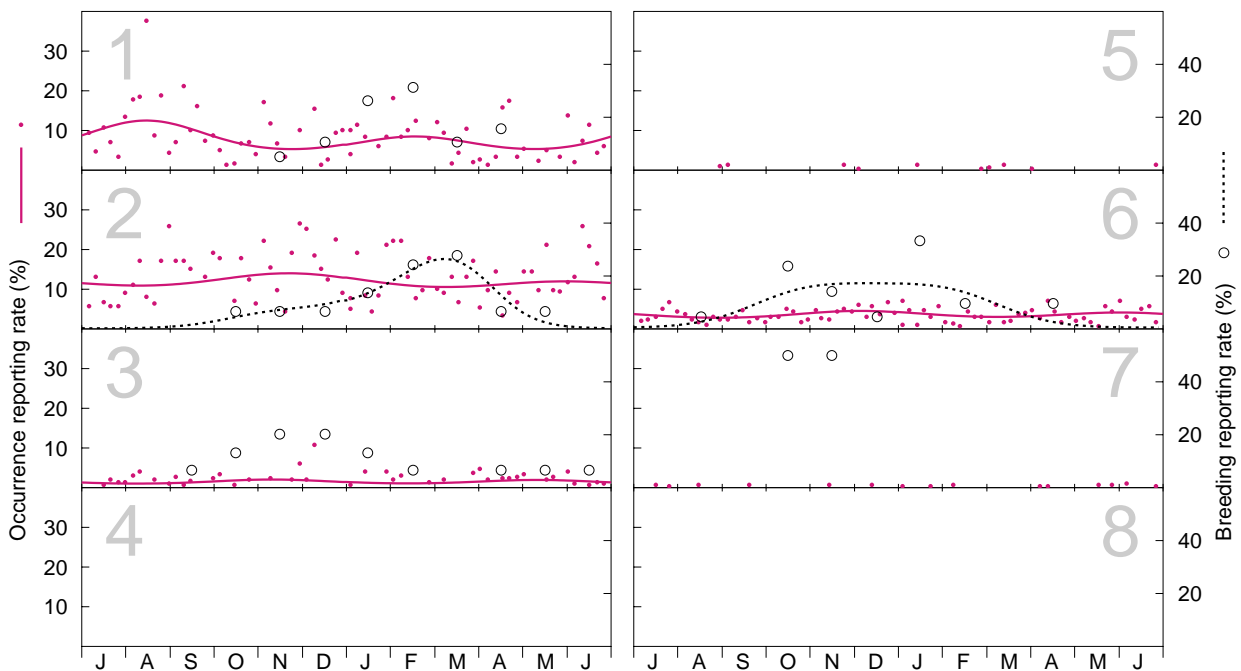
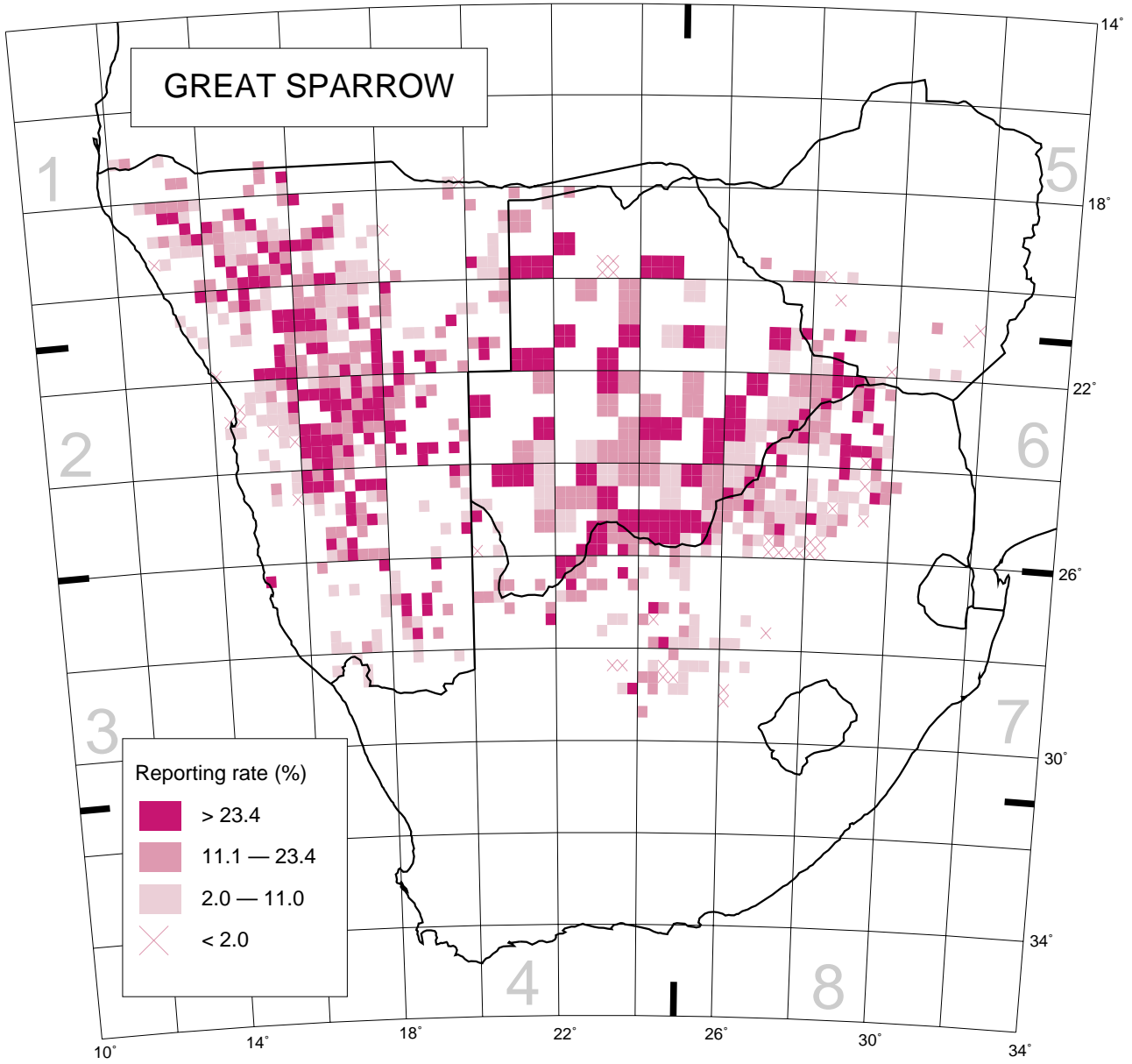
Recorded in 961 grid cells, 21.2%

Total number of records: 3773

Mean reporting rate for range: 13.7%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 258, 423, 82, 0, 13, 411, 20, 0; Breeding: 19, 29, 15, 0, 0, 21, 2, 0.