

Cape Sparrow

Gewone Mossie

Passer melanurus

The Cape Sparrow is virtually endemic to southern Africa; it is abundant throughout South Africa, except the tropical lowlands of the Transvaal and northern KwaZulu-Natal. It occurs across Namibia, except in the Namib Desert and the woodland regions in the northeast. It has been sparsely reported from the Kalahari in Botswana, typically near human settlement, and most records from that country are clustered along the Limpopo River and tributaries, and agricultural regions in the southeastern hardveld. It occurs marginally in southeastern Zimbabwe where the first breeding record was in 1990 at Nottingham Estates (2229BA) (Hustler *et al.* 1991). Outside of southern Africa it occurs along the coastal plain in southwestern Angola, north to Benguela (Traylor 1963). The three currently recognized subspecies (Clancey 1980b) have continuous distributions.

The high reporting rates over much of its range are influenced by the species' tendency to live near human habitation. It is nevertheless probably one of the commonest birds in southern Africa, usually seen in pairs or family groups, but it often forms large flocks when not breeding (Maclean 1993b).

The atlas data may be considered reliable and comprehensive. The male Cape Sparrow is unlikely to be confused with any other bird, but the female has a superficial resemblance to the Greyheaded *P. diffusus*, Great *P. motitensis* and House *P. domesticus* Sparrows.

Habitat: It occurs mainly in relatively arid Karoo and grassland biomes in the west, where it prefers woody vegetation along drainage lines. It is common on farms in grassland, and in gardens and parks in villages, towns and cities. It can become very common in intensive agricultural areas, such as irrigated farms and vineyards (Rowan 1966; Siegfried 1972b) and farmyard 'oases' in the arid regions, where it successfully uses alien vegetation such as Saltbush *Atriplex nummularia* and Mesquite *Prosopis* spp. for nest sites (pers. obs).

Movements: The models with low scatter indicate a drop in reporting rates just after breeding in Zones 4 and 8, where the breeding season is compressed, but not in other regions with prolonged breeding seasons (Zones 6–7). The differences are probably related to quiet behaviour during moult, and to post-breeding dispersal from breeding territories near human habitation to the countryside. Rural birds disperse further than urban breeders (Earlé 1988a).

Breeding: The models show an early-summer breeding peak throughout its range, including the winter-rainfall areas. Breeding is clearly more seasonal in the southern part of the range (Zones 4 and 8), and occurs throughout the year further north, particularly in the most arid part of the range (Zone 2) (see also Maclean 1993b). Peak breeding is about a month earlier in the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4) than in the Transvaal (Zone 6), confirming published information (Winterbottom 1968a; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). In a detailed study in Bloemfontein (2926AA), Earlé (1988a) found differences in the timing of breeding and in breeding success between Cape Sparrows living in preferred rural and suburban environments, as compared to urban areas.

Interspecific relationships: It associates with other seed-eating species such as Yellow Canary *Serinus flaviventris* and, less often, Whitethroated Canary *S. albigularis*. It mixes freely with the Cape Weaver *Ploceus capensis* and bishop birds *Euplectes* spp. at a food source (Clement *et al.* 1993). It both coexists and competes with House and Greyheaded Sparrows for food in gardens (pers. obs). Earlé (1988a) described differences in habitat preference between Cape and House Sparrows, resulting in differences in timing of breeding, breeding success and body condition between rural, suburban and urban environments.

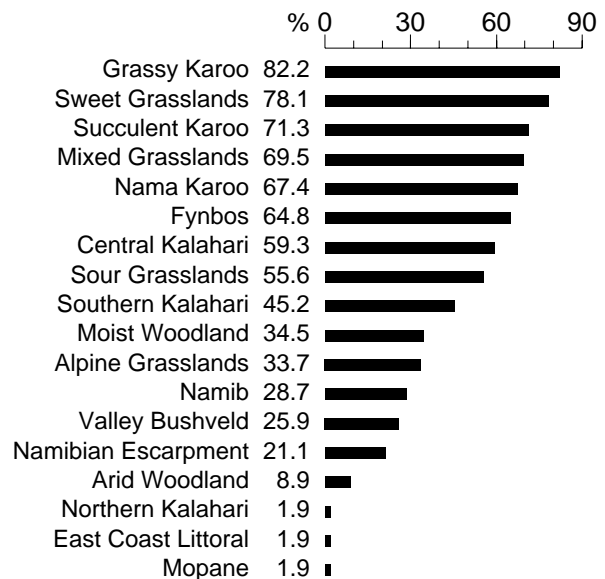
The Cape Sparrow is one of the prime hosts of the Diederik Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx caprius* (Maclean 1993b).

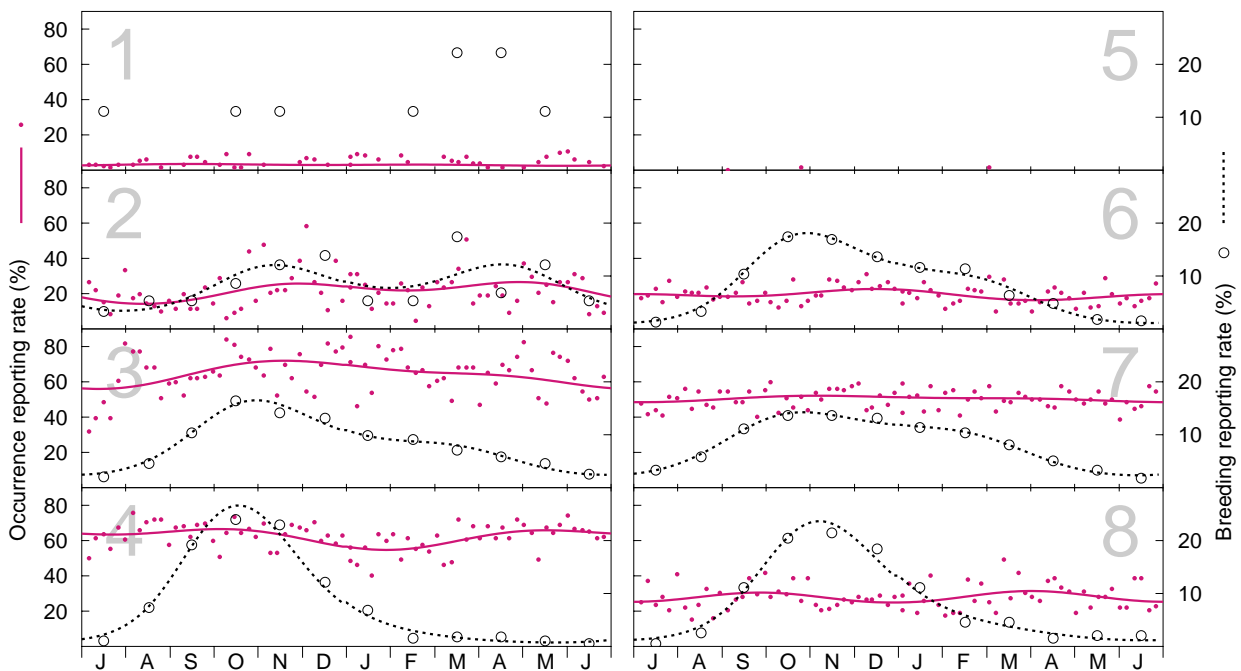
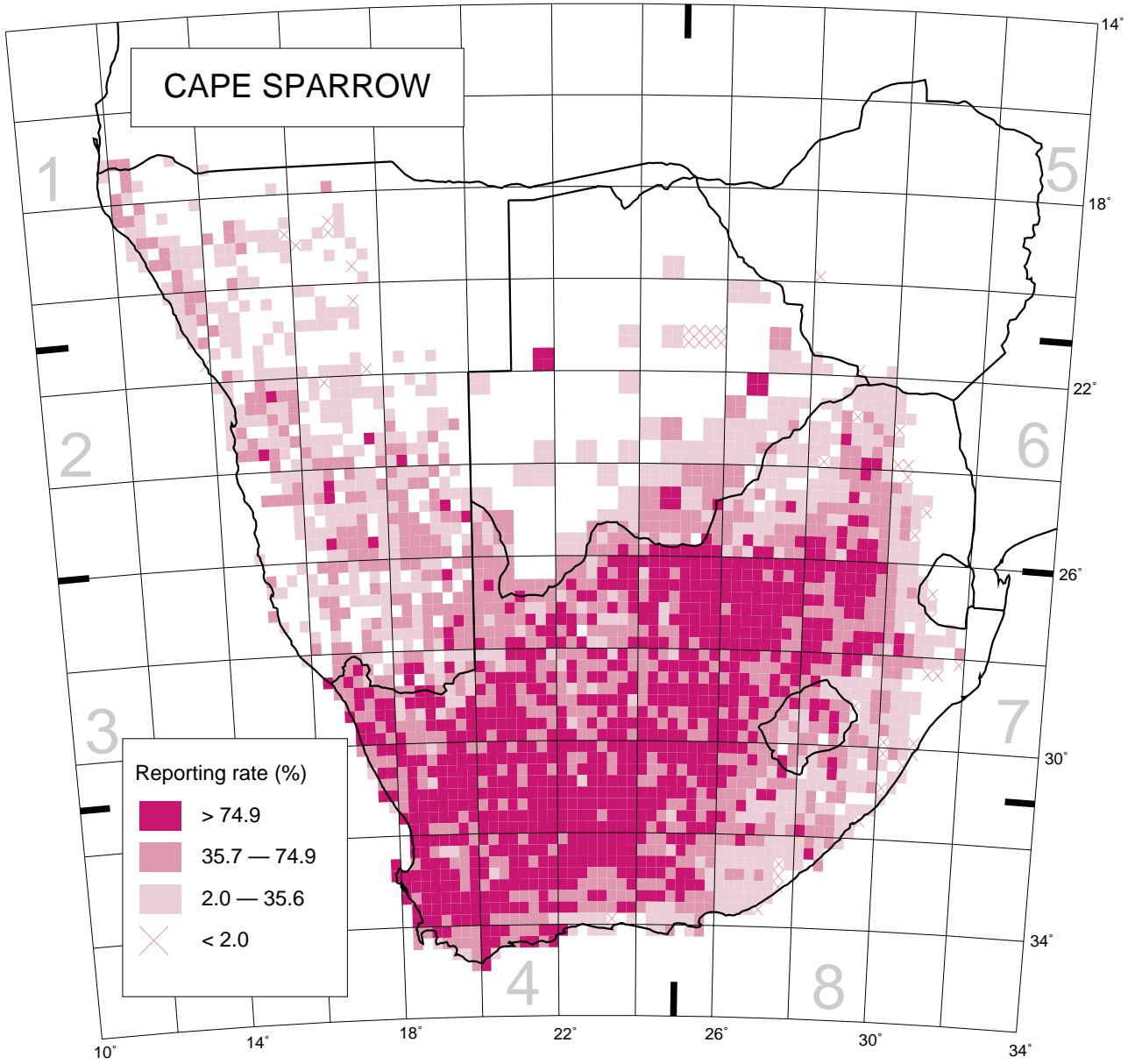
Historical distribution and conservation: There is no evidence of recent changes in the distribution in southern Africa. However, the species has certainly benefited from human settlements and agriculture and it is likely that its overall range and abundance have increased considerably since southern Africa was settled. Other changes have been documented; for example Rowan (1966) noted that, during the 1950s, the diet of Cape Sparrows in the southwestern Cape Province changed from granivory to seasonal frugivory, following the introduction of different tillage methods in the vineyards. The Cape Sparrow is not threatened (Brooke 1984b).

W.R.J. Dean

Recorded in 2482 grid cells, 54.7%
Total number of records: 60 757
Mean reporting rate for range: 54.3%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 99, 780, 3525, 5461, 4, 2195, 9868, 1542; Breeding: 9, 58, 445, 675, 0, 472, 1980, 197.