

Quail Finch

Gewone Kwartelvinkie

Ortyospiza atricollis

The Quail Finch is distributed throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa (Maclean 1993b), absent only from dense forests and the southwestern deserts. In southern Africa the distribution centres on the central, highveld grasslands, and those of western KwaZulu-Natal and the northeastern Cape Province, with relatively high reporting rates also from the central plateau of Zimbabwe. The Etosha Pan region (1816C,D) also holds a significant population. While largely absent from the afforested and urbanized KwaZulu-Natal coast, it is fairly common on grassy hillsides along the coast of the eastern Cape Province. It is absent from the drier parts of the Kalahari and from most of the Karoo and Namib. Isolated populations occur in the southwestern Cape Province and in central Namibia.

Three subspecies have been described in the region, of which *O. a. pallida* is endemic to the Makgadikgadi Pans (Clancey 1980b). During the atlas period, the species was sparsely distributed in this area, which Penry (1994) attributed to prevailing drought conditions.

This small, terrestrial species typically occurs in small, loose flocks, but it is difficult to see when it is on the ground, before it suddenly takes off vertically. If its diagnostic call is not known, it is easily overlooked. It is probably more widespread in some parts of its range than indicated.

Habitat: Open areas of short grassland, floodplains, vleis and surrounding sedges are preferred. In drier regions, grassland close to water is favoured, particularly when on a heavy, muddy and trampled soil. Stock-farming areas, including the Grassy Karoo, with attendant water provision in dams, and with short, grazed grass, provide ideal habitat. Fallow agricultural lands (Davidson 1986; Day 1987) and woodland, often including areas of open grassland and bare ground, are also utilized. Although found in high-altitude grasslands, it avoids Afromontane forest within such areas.

Movements: It is thought to be nomadic when not breeding (Aspinwall 1980; Clancey 1980b; Irwin 1981; Clement *et al.* 1993; Maclean 1993b). The models do not show a clear pattern indicative of regular movements within the region, nor is seasonal movement of races from northcentral Botswana to western Zimbabwe obvious, as suggested by Clancey (1980b). Although the models do indicate seasonality, particularly in Zones 6–8, these probably reflect differences in conspicuousness and incidental nomadic dispersal. Local movements

are dependent on rainfall and habitat conditions (Winterbottom 1959a; Clancey 1965a; Benson *et al.* 1971); extended ranges after good rains shrink again as surface water dries up and grass cover disappears (Clancey 1965a). Late-summer peaks in reporting rate probably result from increased conspicuousness with the appearance of family groups, young birds remaining with their parents for some time after leaving the nest. Nest sites situated some distance from feeding and watering sites may necessitate frequent movement by breeding individuals between these areas. Lone birds vocalize more frequently, using a more complex and noticeable call while in flight than do individuals in groups (Nuttall 1993b). Birds are also more widespread during wetter summer months; together with increased overall activity, this probably increases conspicuousness. Compression of ranges in drier winter months presumably makes these birds less

noticeable. The two apparently localized populations may represent marginal areas of suitable habitat in larger, unsuitable areas, occasionally utilized by birds in summer.

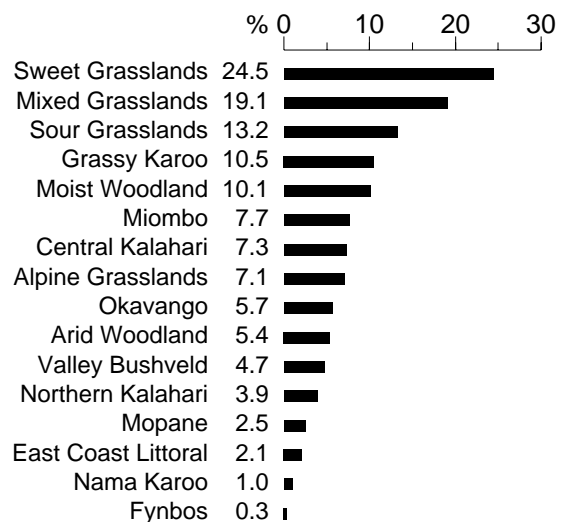
Breeding: Breeding was recorded mainly November–June, particularly in late summer. This is in agreement with published information; Dean (1971), Irwin (1981), and Tarboton *et al.* (1987b) all found peak breeding from January onwards. Nesting occurs in late summer when grass cover is sufficient to conceal the nest which is constructed of growing grass and built on or close to the ground (Nuttall 1992b).

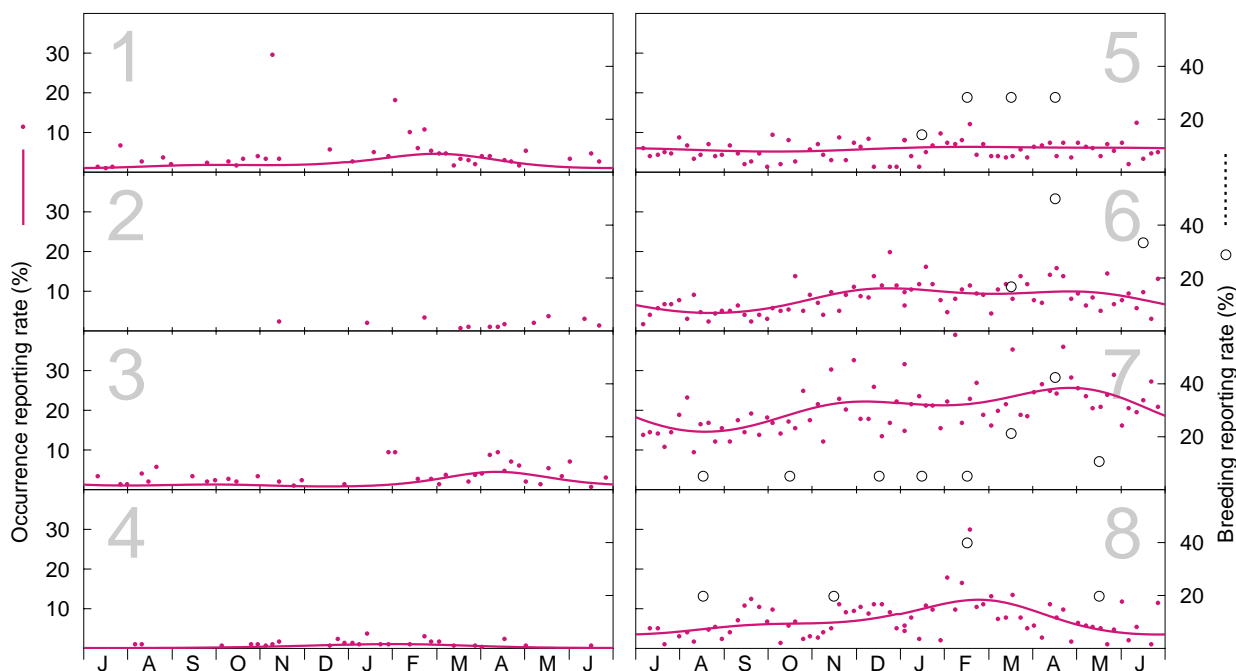
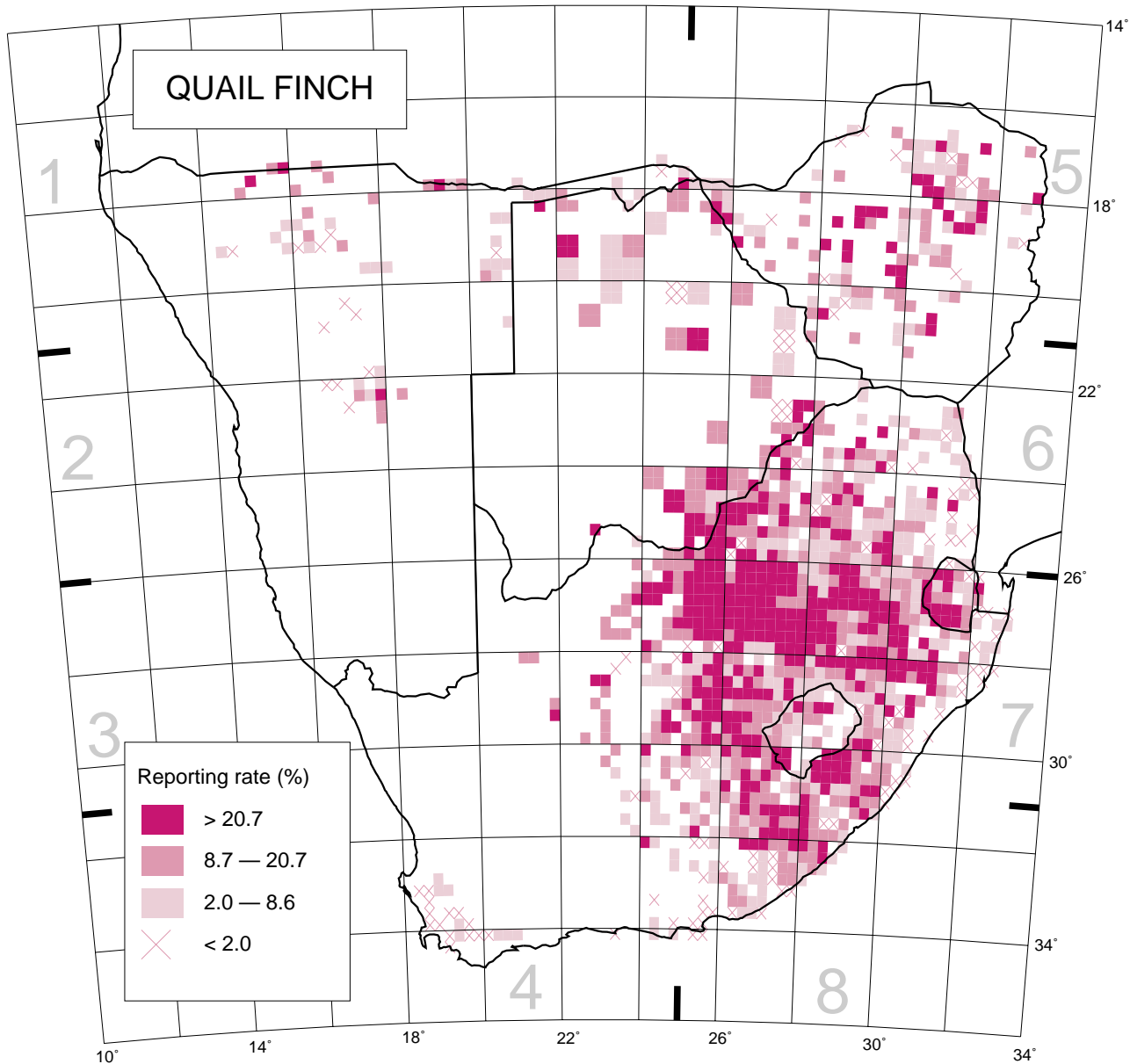
Historical distribution and conservation: Apart from localized, seasonal movements, extensions to the range have been brought about by human activities. Clearing areas of Transvaal bushveld for crop farming has opened up previously wooded areas and provided suitable habitat (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The Quail Finch is not threatened; the quota for the cage-bird trade in Botswana may be sustainable and any illegal offtakes elsewhere would be negligible. The southwestern Cape Province isolate requires investigation.

R.J. Nuttall

Recorded in 1265 grid cells, 27.9%
Total number of records: 11 061
Mean reporting rate for range: 12.7%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 75, 13, 110, 39, 513, 940, 4033, 386; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 7, 6, 19, 5.