

Steelblue Widowfinch

Staalblouvinkie

Vidua chalybeata

The Steelblue Widowfinch is the best known and most widespread of the widowfinches, occurring throughout most sub-Saharan African savannas (Payne 1985 and references therein). In southern Africa it occurs in the north and east, from the northern Cape Province and the Kwa-Zulu-Natal coast, through Swaziland and the Transvaal to Zimbabwe, eastern and northern Botswana, and northern Namibia. It was regularly recorded from a small area in the eastern Cape Province where its host, the Redbilled Firefinch *Lagonosticta senegala*, also has an isolated, but much larger distribution.

Territorial densities were 2.2 call-sites/km of linear transect through riverine bush and citrus orchards along the Klein Letaba River (2431), South Africa, and 1.2 call-sites/km through riverine *Acacia* woodland along the Thamalakane River (1923) in Botswana (Payne 1980b, 1985).

Except for the pale-billed form in the Okavango and Caprivi (Payne 1973, 1996), it is perhaps the most reliably identifiable of the widowfinches, at least in the case of breeding males, so the atlas data are regarded as reason-

ably accurate. However, they may not be complete; females and nonbreeding males can be confused with other widowfinches and other small brown seedeaters, or be overlooked altogether. The unexplained patchiness of the distribution, especially in Namibia and Botswana, therefore probably reflects under-recording.

Habitat: It is fairly common in thorn savanna, the edges of broadleaved woodland, riverine scrub and woodland, and mosaics of rural human settlements and agricultural plots. It avoids deserts, dense moist woodlands, and forests (Payne 1985). The vegetation analysis and distribution illustrate its preference for dry woodlands in regions with permanent water.

Movements: It appears to be seasonally nomadic, often but not always returning to former 'song neighbourhoods' in subsequent breeding seasons (Payne & Payne 1977; Payne 1982, 1985). The minimum dispersal rate of males between sub-populations was 18% in southern Zambia (Payne 1985). The models show the typical viduid mid-winter decline in reporting rates when the nonbreeding plumage is assumed, but with a less severe decrease than in other species. Decreased conspicuousness and winter nomadism both contribute to this seasonal decline in reporting rates, but individual birds may remain resident year-round in some areas where surface water and food are present, as is the case with whydahs.

Breeding: The few atlas records were from summer and autumn, confirming egg-laying dates December–April for the region (Payne 1977; Irwin 1981; Maclean 1993b; Skinner 1995a).

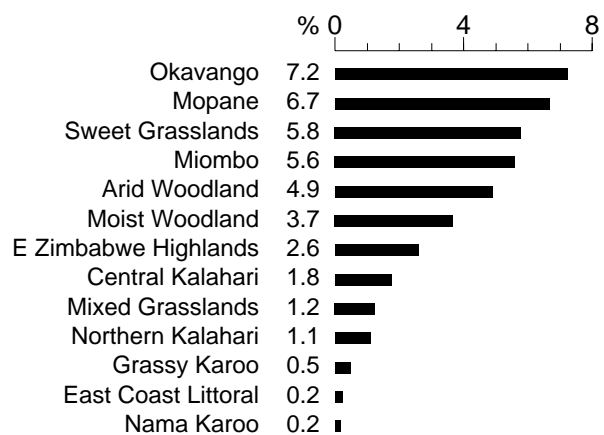
Interspecific relationships: It is a brood parasite of the Redbilled Firefinch.

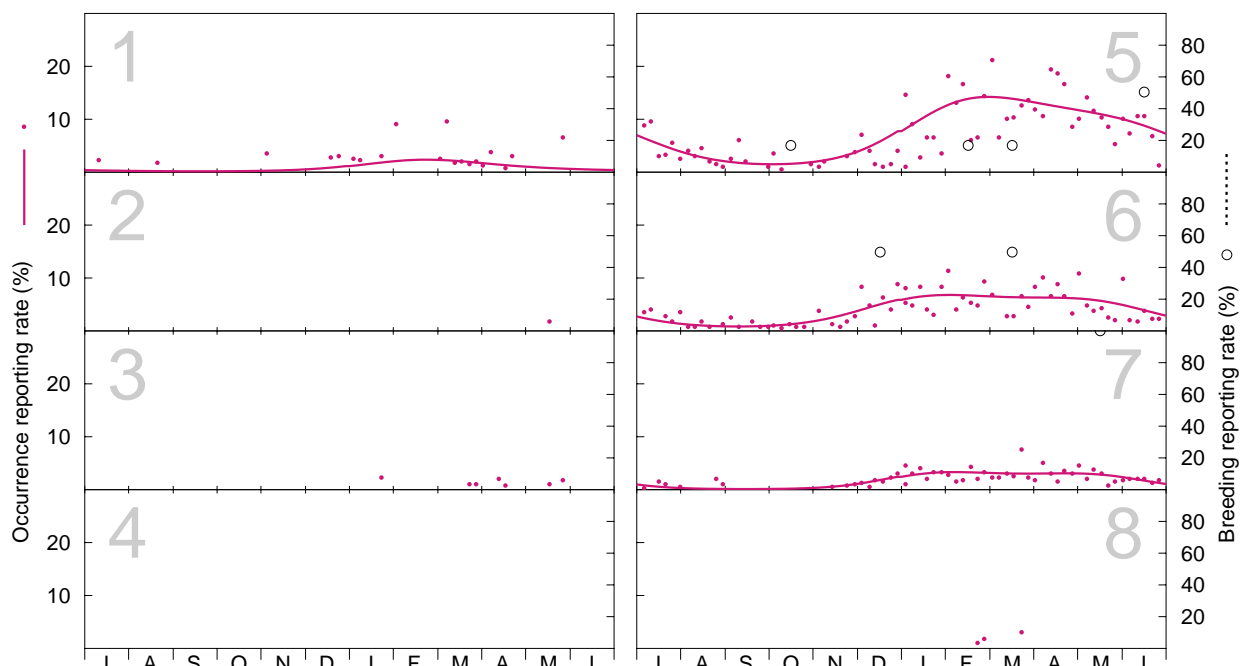
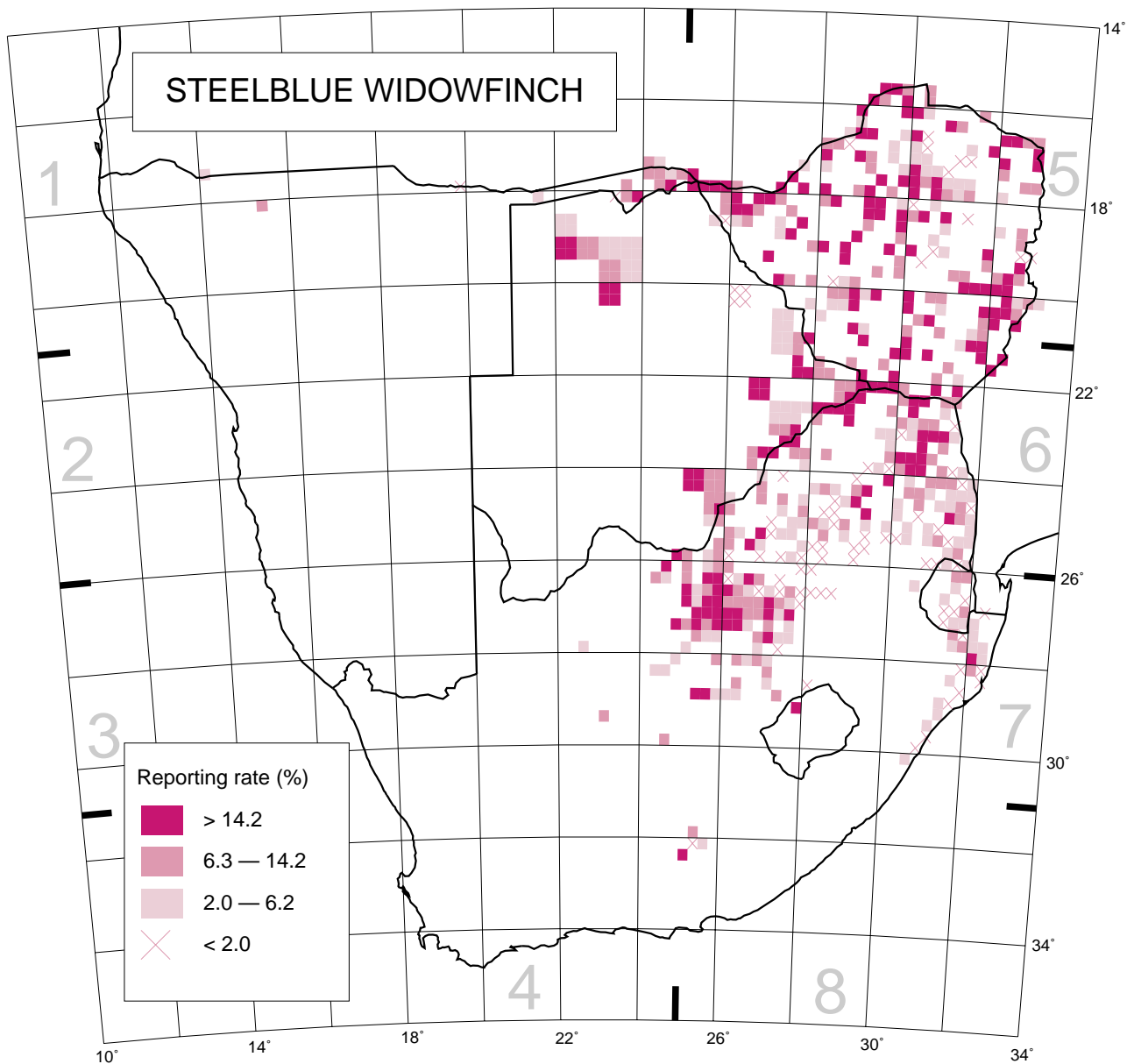
Historical distribution and conservation: Little is known, and it is not clear whether human settlement patterns are likely to have brought about expansion or contraction of the range in the past few centuries. The Steelblue Widowfinch is not in need of conservation attention at present, although the effect of habitat alteration on this and other seedeaters should be monitored.

P. Barnard

Recorded in 613 grid cells, 13.5%
Total number of records: 2819
Mean reporting rate for range: 6.5%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 29, 1, 8, 0, 635, 463, 333, 5; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 6, 2, 1, 0.