



Little Egret

Kleinwitreier

Egretta garzetta

The Little Egret ranges from southern Eurasia to Australia and throughout Africa, except for deserts and the western equatorial forests (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). The Palearctic population migrates as far south as the equator; the southern African population is resident with local movements (Cramp *et al.* 1977; Brown *et al.* 1982).

It is found throughout southern Africa, but is sparsely distributed in the interior of the dry west, and is absent from arid parts of the Kalahari. Highest reporting rates were in the Okavango Delta, along the South African coast and coastal plain, and in the southern Transvaal and Free State. It is uncommon in the woodlands of the northern Transvaal and Zimbabwe (Clancey 1964b; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

It occurs solitarily or in small flocks. The atlas data are reliable for this easily identified and conspicuous species.

Habitat: It favours open areas of shallow water, such as the margins of lakes, dams, rivers, marshes, irrigated land and sewage works; it also occurs at salt pans, estuaries and mangrove swamps and along the open coastline, especially rocky shores (Clancey 1964b; Hockey *et al.* 1989). It breeds near water in trees or bushes, sometimes in reedbeds and on rock ledges (Brown *et al.* 1982).

Movements: It is resident on many permanent waterbodies but is a nomad to seasonal wetlands (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). There is an influx of summer visitors to Zones 1 and 4–7, especially in the north. It is mainly a summer visitor in inland areas (Cyrus & Robson 1980) and winter numbers in the Transvaal are about 10% of the summer level (Brown *et al.* 1982). Counts in Zimbabwe indicate peak numbers in January, and a gradual decline through the dry season to lowest numbers September–October (A.J. Tree *in litt.*). At various coastal localities in the eastern and southern Cape Province, numbers more than double May–August (Martin & Baird 1987; Spearpoint *et al.* 1988; Boshoff *et al.* 1991c).

The seasonal distribution maps support the hypothesis of winter movements from the interior to the southern and eastern coasts, and inland birds may also winter in Mozambique. But in the southwestern Cape Province, numbers are greatest

during summer (Hockey *et al.* 1989). There is no evidence that Palearctic migrants penetrate as far south as southern Africa. Juvenile dispersal is shown by a nestling ringed at Rondevlei (3418AB) in September 1964 and recovered seven months later, *c.* 1800 km to the northeast at João Belo (25°S 34°E), near the mouth of the Limpopo River (Elliott & Jarvis 1970). This is the only long-distance recovery (SAFRING); further studies are required to discover the patterns of movement.

Breeding: It breeds colonially, often in mixed heronries. There were few breeding records from predominantly inland areas in Zones 1, 3, 5 and 6; breeding does occur in these areas but probably only during years of good rainfall (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The atlas data indicate little breeding in winter, although a few records are known June–August from Botswana and Namibia (Brown & Clinning *in press*; N.J. Skinner *in litt.*). Peak breeding was October–December in the winter-rainfall region (Zone 4), November–January in predominantly summer-rainfall areas (Zones 7 and 8), and January–February in the area with mainly late-summer rainfall (Zone 2). In the Transvaal and Zimbabwe, peak breeding, December–March, coincides with peak rains (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Interspecific relationships: It sometimes joins mixed feeding groups with herons, cormorants, African Spoonbills *Platalea alba* and terns. Habitat preferences and feeding methods ensure niche segregation between this species and the physically similar Black *E. ardesiaca* and Slaty *E. vinaceigula* Egrets (Snow 1978; Brown *et al.* 1982).

Historical distribution and conservation: The 19th-century plume trade caused major declines in Eurasia that were reversed following protection (Cramp *et al.* 1977). The extent to which the southern African population was affected is unknown. The draining of wetlands has been compensated for, to a greater or lesser extent, by the creation of artificial waterbodies and planting of trees, probably enabling the Little Egret to extend its range.

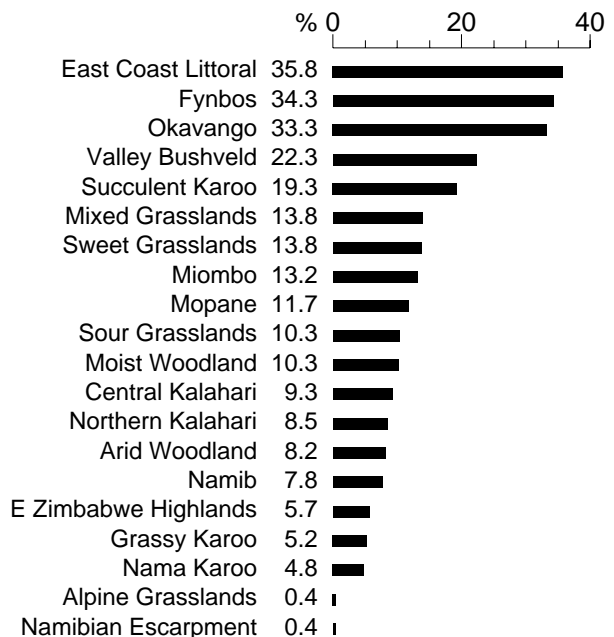
A.P. Martin

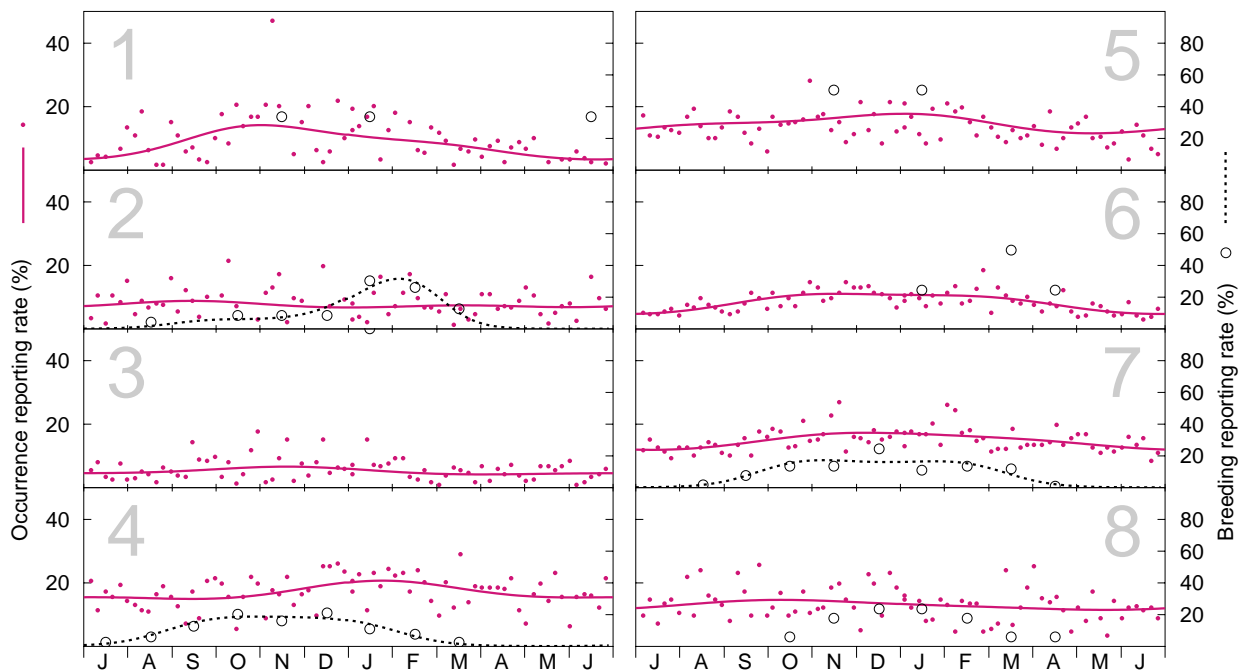
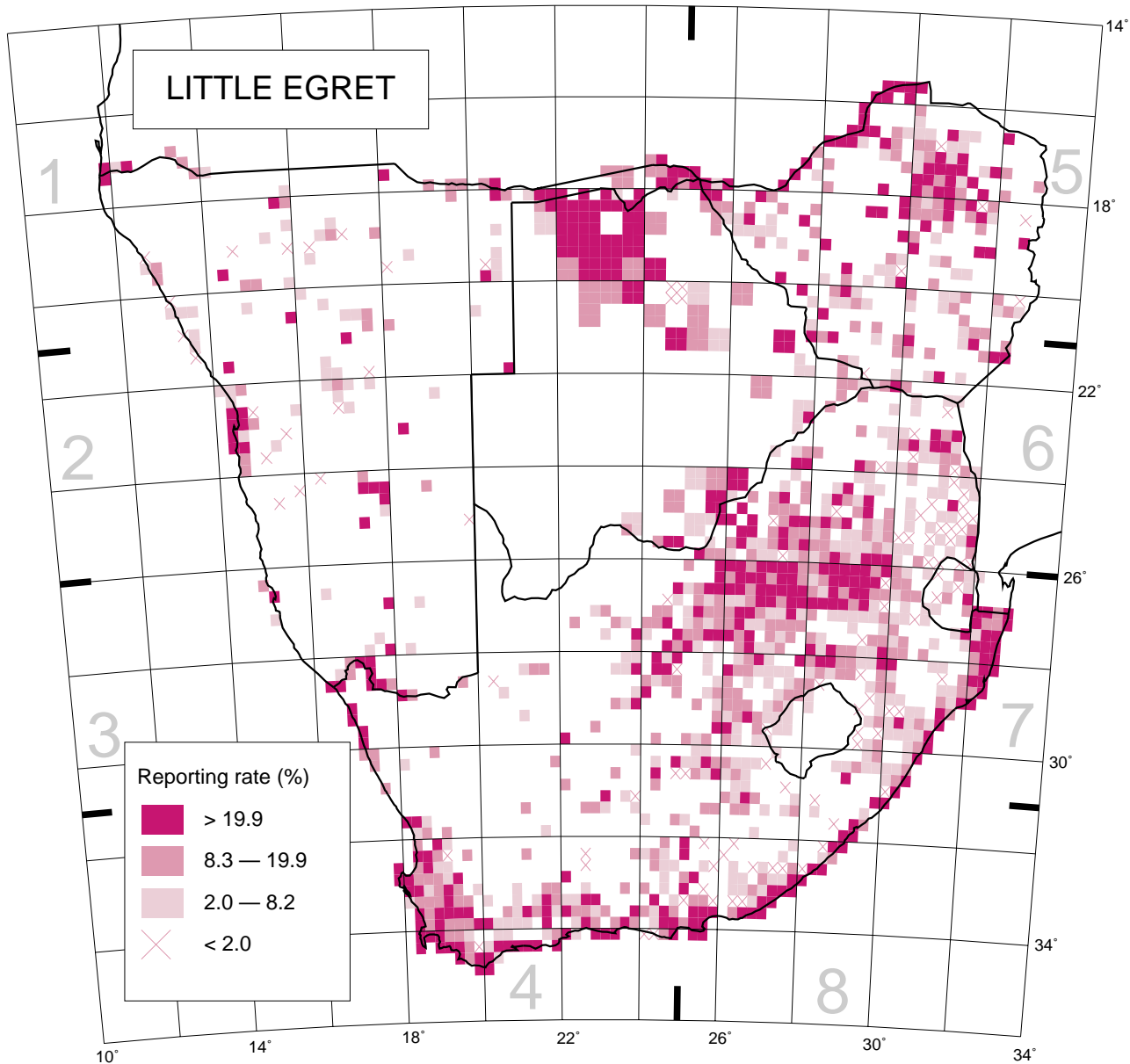
Recorded in 1387 grid cells, 30.6%

Total number of records: 23 429

Mean reporting rate for range: 20.8%

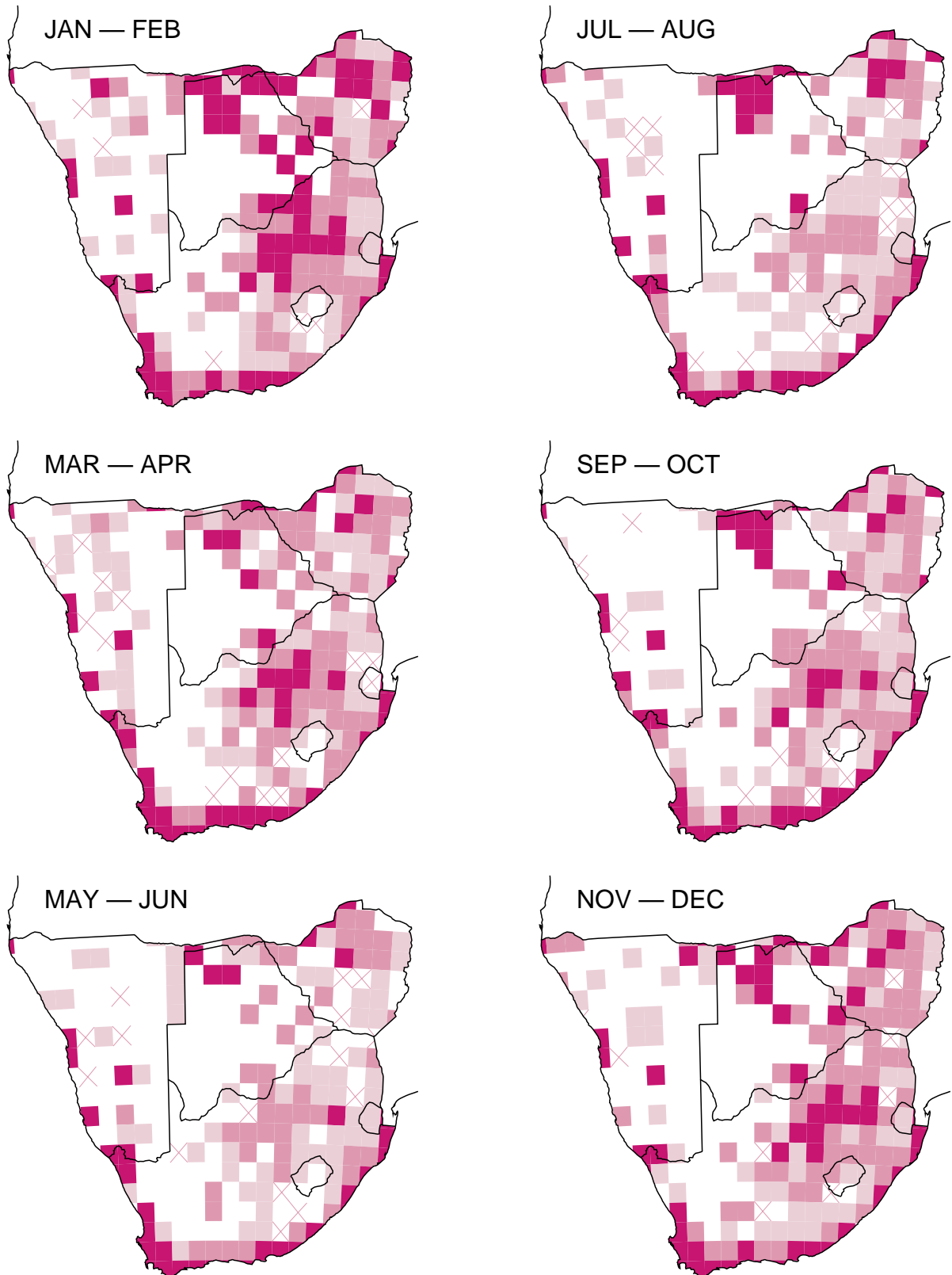
Reporting rates for vegetation types








Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 257, 270, 277, 1471, 1280, 962, 2903, 715; Breeding: 3, 23, 1, 83, 2, 4, 89, 17.

LITTLE EGRET



Reporting rate (%)

 > 19.4 7.7 — 19.4 2.0 — 7.6 < 2.0

Seasonal distribution maps; one-degree grid.