



Cape Vulture

Kransaasvoël

Gyps coprotheres

The Cape Vulture is endemic to southern Africa, although occasional wanderers have been recorded north of the Zambezi River, all in the Kafue Flats of southern Zambia (Mundy *et al.* 1992). It is distributed fairly widely in the east and north of southern Africa, with an isolated cluster of records in the southwestern Cape Province. Most sightings are concentrated around breeding colonies and the bulk of these are located in two discrete regions: (1) the northern Transvaal and eastern Botswana, and (2) the Lesotho highlands, Transkei and western KwaZulu-Natal (Mundy *et al.* 1992). The distribution map illustrates the hitherto unappreciated geographical separation of these two major strongholds, probably brought about by the extinction of intervening populations in recent times. There is also an anomalous break in the distribution corresponding with the escarpment in the northern Transvaal. Small remnant and isolated colonies persist in the southwestern Cape Province (Potberg 3420BC), northern Namibia (Waterberg 2017AD), and central Zimbabwe (Wabai 2029BA) (Mundy *et al.* 1992), and there is a small colony on the Swaziland–Mozambique border (Parker 1994).

Its total population is *c.* 12 000 birds and the total breeding population is *c.* 4400 pairs, with over 60% of these in the Transvaal and *c.* 20% in the Drakensberg (Tarboton & Allan 1984; Brown & Piper 1988; Benson *et al.* 1990; Mundy *et al.* 1992; Piper 1994).

It is conspicuous but can be confused easily with the White-backed Vulture *G. africanus* in the northern regions where these two species overlap widely. The atlas data were carefully vetted in this regard in an attempt to remove any doubtful records of either species, but some errors probably still remain.

Habitat: It forages over both open country (grassland) and woodland. It is reliant on tall cliffs for breeding and it usually roosts on cliffs, but it wanders widely away from these when foraging and will roost in trees and on pylons in open country. It occurs and breeds from sea-level (in the southwestern Cape Province) to 3100 m (in the Lesotho highlands). Its current distribution is closely associated with subsistence communal-grazing areas, characterized by high stock losses (Huntley *et al.* 1989) and low use of poisons and, to a lesser extent, with protected areas.

Movements: Although wide-ranging in its foraging habits, it is not known to have regular migrations, nor are any evident from the models. Immatures are known to wander widely, and to concentrate in 'nursery' areas distant from breeding colonies (Vernon 1978; Mundy 1982; Mundy *et al.* 1992). The farthest ringing recovery was over a distance of 1250 km.

Breeding: The models suggest a protracted breeding season, with nesting having been recorded throughout the year. This, however, is an artefact of the long breeding cycle which spans most of the annual cycle (Mundy *et al.* 1992). Published egg-laying data are more reliable in this regard, spanning mainly March–July and occurring about one month later in the southwestern Cape Province than elsewhere in the range (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Mundy *et al.* 1992; Brown & Clinning *in press*; N.J. Skinner *in litt.*). Breeding in Botswana is also about a month later than in the Transvaal (Borello & Borello 1993).

Interspecific relationships: Over most of the south of its range it is the only vulture present. North of 28°S it is extensively sympatric with four other species and would appear to be in direct competition with the more numerous White-backed Vulture. At most of its colonies, its nestlings are vulnerable to predation by Black Eagles *Aquila verreauxii* (e.g. Mundy *et al.* 1986; Borello & Borello 1993).

Historical distribution and conservation: In South Africa and Namibia it has become greatly reduced or extinct in many commercial farming areas of its former range, especially small-stock farming regions in the fynbos, Karoo and grassland biomes (Boshoff & Vernon 1980b; O'Connor 1980; Tarboton & Allan 1984; Brown 1985c; Colahan 1989b; Mundy *et al.* 1992). The extent of this decrease is evident from the distribution map which shows the fragmented nature of its current distribution. Poisoning is probably the chief cause (e.g. Benson & Dobbs 1984; Brown 1985c; Allan 1989b; Benson *et al.* 1990), although electrocution (e.g. Ledger & Annegarn 1981), calcium deficiency (Houston 1978; Dobbs & Benson 1984; Richardson *et al.* 1986, but see also Kemp & Kemp 1975b) and food shortages brought about by the extinction of migratory wild herds (e.g. Boshoff & Vernon 1980b) have also been implicated in its demise. In Botswana, a 45% decline in breeding pairs occurred 1960–90, but the remaining population has stabilized since (Borello & Borello 1993). The Cape Vulture is listed as 'vulnerable' in both the South African (Brooke 1984b) and global (Collar *et al.* 1994) Red Data books.

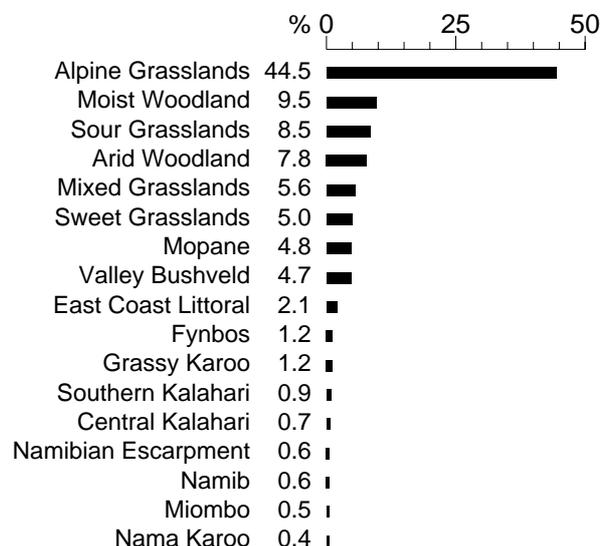
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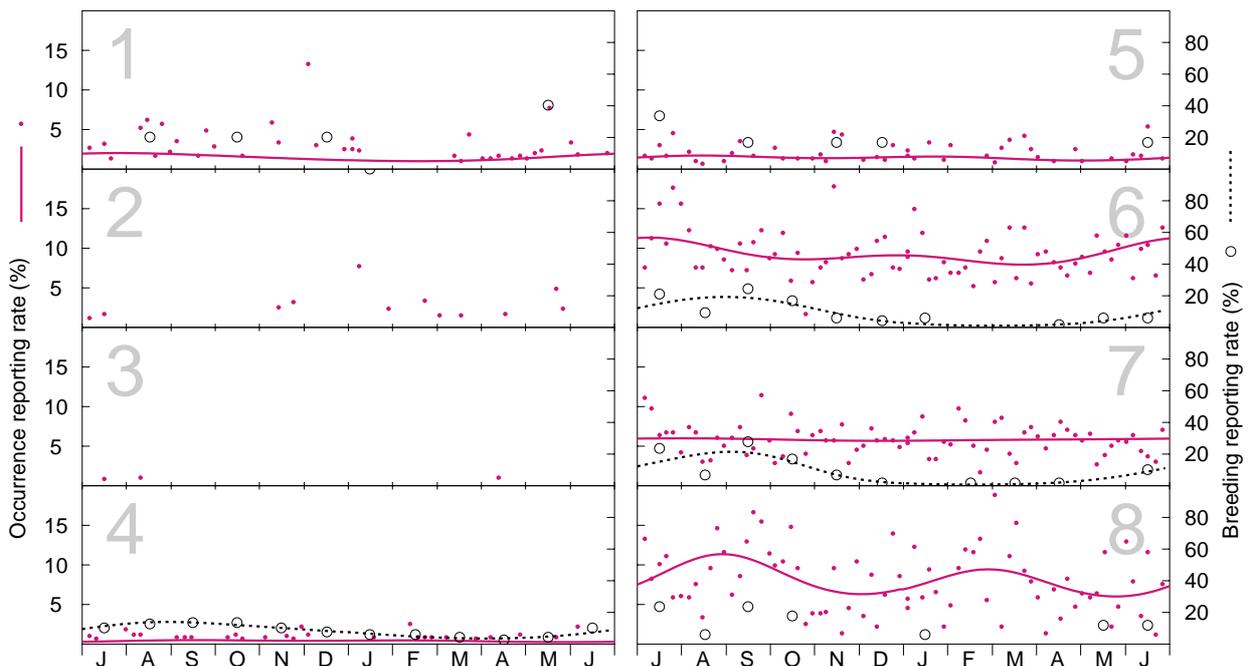
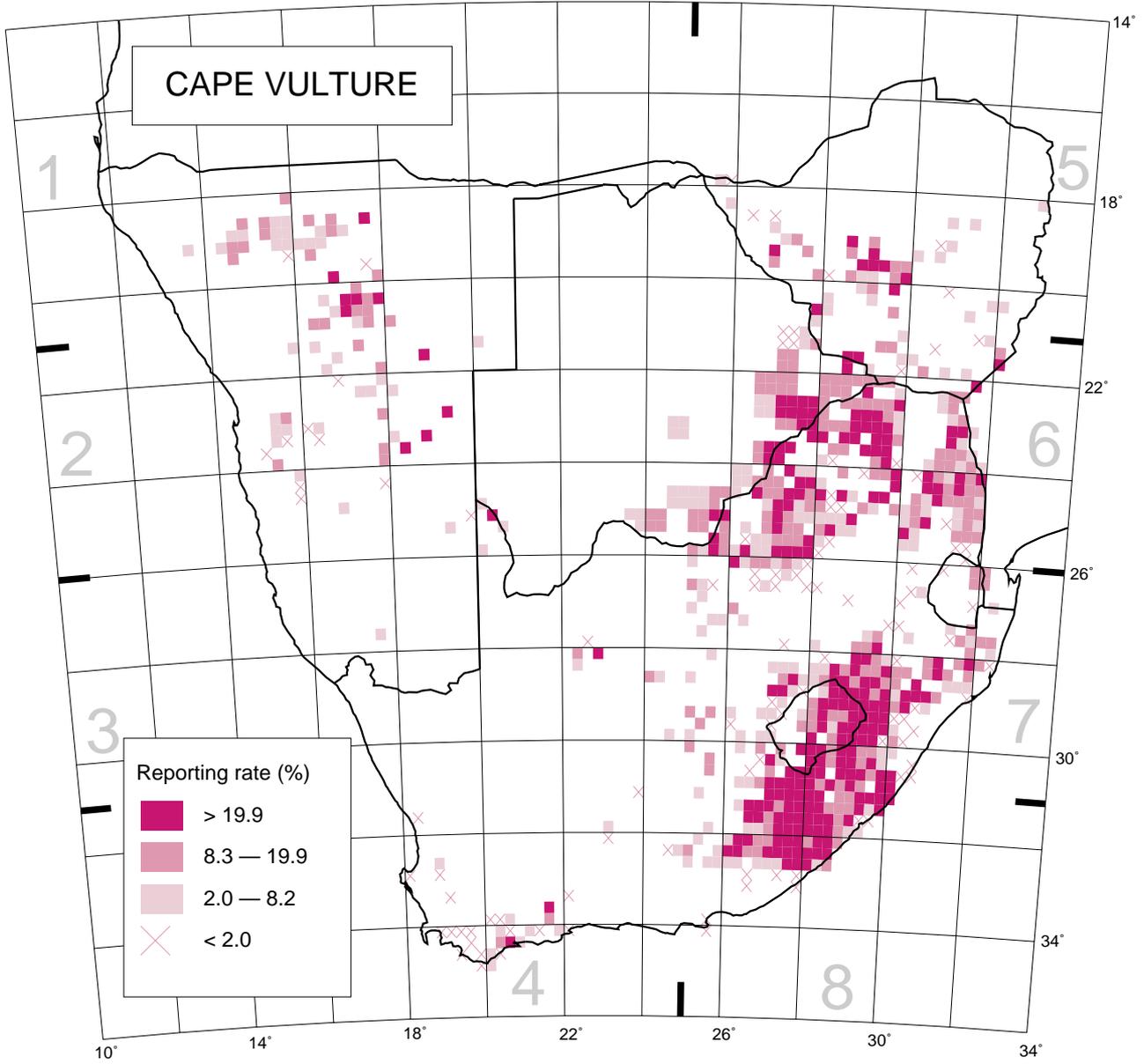
Recorded in 806 grid cells, 17.8%

Total number of records: 6993

Mean reporting rate for range: 11.8%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 50, 14, 3, 34, 125, 1056, 1140, 446; Breeding: 5, 1, 0, 80, 6, 53, 47, 17.