



Lappetfaced Vulture

Swartaasvoël

Torgos tracheliotos

The Lappetfaced Vulture is the most widespread of the vultures of Africa; its distribution extends into the Arabian Peninsula and formerly into Israel. It is the largest in size (wingspan 2.8 m) though not in weight (adults average 6.8 kg), and it is one of the largest flying birds in Africa.

Its distribution in southern Africa closely mirrors that of the Whitebacked Vulture *Gyps africanus*, except that it also occurs in the desolate Namib. Although present in the Zimbabwe highveld and in much of the Transvaal and eastern Swaziland, it is uncommon there and is usually seen singly or in pairs. It is commonest in Botswana and Namibia where road counts have produced 12 sightings/1000 km in southern Botswana (Borello 1987) and 8.3/1000 km in the Etosha region of northern Namibia (Brown 1986c). High breeding densities of 40–50 pairs or more are known in the Namib Desert Park and in the Gonarezhou National Park (Zimbabwe), and possibly also in the Kruger National Park. In fact, these are the highest known densities in Africa (Mundy *et al.* 1992). The distribution map reveals high reporting rates in the Namib and Etosha regions of Namibia, in the lowveld conservation areas of eastern Transvaal, and virtually throughout Botswana. Also revealed are two of the same 'holes' as shown for the Whitebacked Vulture: northwest of Kimberley (2824DB), and in southern Namibia. The latter is thought to be due to predator-control activities by small-stock farmers (Brown 1986c), and this may also be responsible for the other gap in its distribution.

It is a conspicuous and easily identified species and the atlas data can be considered reliable.

Habitat: Predominantly a bird of semi-arid regions (rainfall less than 600 mm and often less than 400 mm), it has a marked preference for arid woodlands, Mopane, dry bush country as in the Kalahari, and in the arid parts of Namibia, particularly the Namib Desert itself. In the Namib it is particularly associated with stands of acacias and Shepherd's Trees *Boscia albitrunca* along dry rivers. Elsewhere it also uses the Purple-pod Terminalia *Terminalia prunioides*. Even in well-wooded country it prefers open areas with scattered short trees.

Movements: The models give no indication of any movements, and the species is regarded as resident. Among ringed birds, the farthest known distance traversed is 1107 km, by a first-year bird. There is likely to be post-fledging dispersal, and this has been implicated in Namib juveniles moving southwards and northwards over 200 km (e.g. Oatley 1994, 1995a; Anon. 1995).

Breeding: The models indicate that breeding is underway by June, though in most areas it is known that egg-laying starts in May. Successful breeding takes about 180 days, and post-fledging dependence may take up the rest of the 12-month annual cycle (Mundy *et al.* 1992), so it is no surprise that evidence of breeding activity was reported in all months of the year.

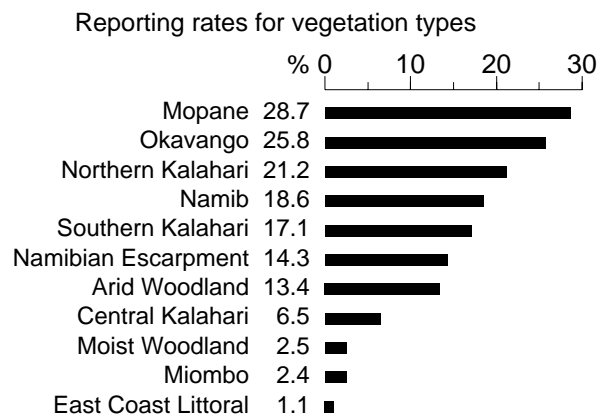
Interspecific relationships: The ranges of four other species of vulture are sympatric with that of the Lappetfaced Vulture; it is dominant over all these at carcasses.

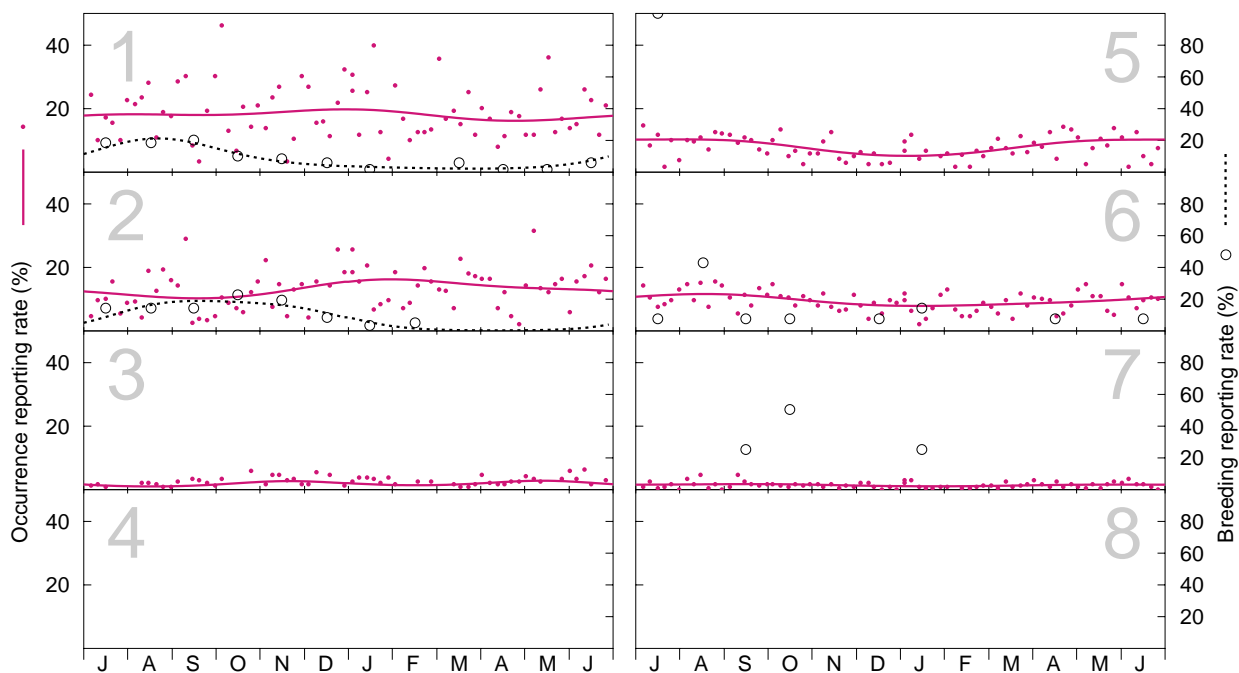
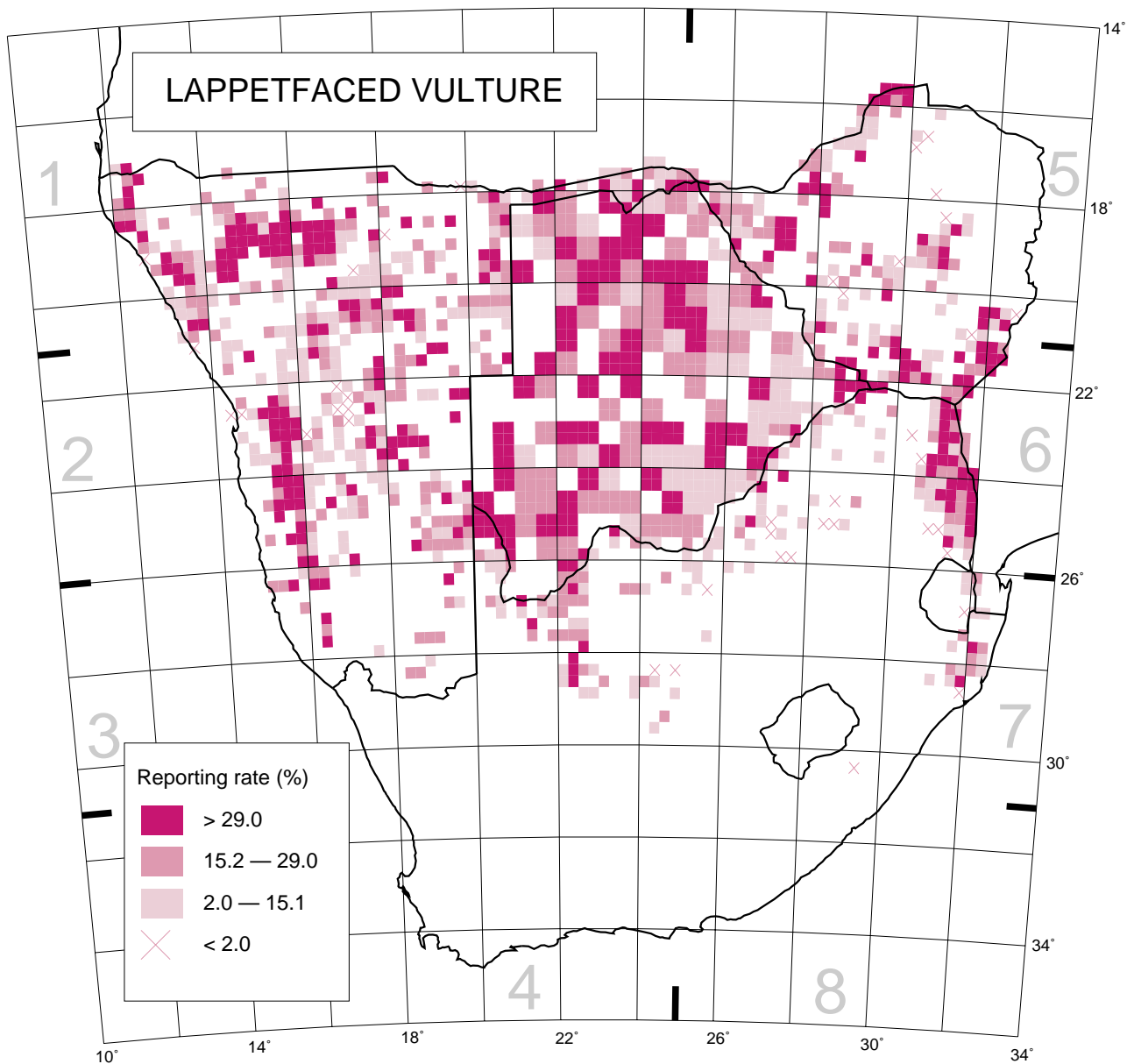
Historical distribution and conservation: Previously it occurred in the southwestern, southern and eastern Cape Province (Boshoff *et al.* 1983), but had disappeared from these regions by c. 1960. It is similarly believed to have decreased markedly in the Transvaal (Tarboton & Allan 1984) and southern Namibia (Brown 1986c).

It is considered to be 'vulnerable' in South Africa (Brooke 1984b) and poisoned carcasses pose a particular threat (e.g. Brown 1986c; Mundy *et al.* 1992). In one incident in the Namib, 86 birds died of poisoning, representing 10% of the total Namibian population and more than half of the birds in the Namib stronghold (Simmons 1995b). Publicity against the careless use of poisons must be maintained, and legislation enforced.

P.J. Mundy

Recorded in 1396 grid cells, 30.8%
Total number of records: 7673
Mean reporting rate for range: 21.1%





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 589, 480, 104, 0, 728, 1083, 283, 0; Breeding: 49, 58, 0, 0, 1, 14, 4, 0.