

## African Fish Eagle

Visarend

*Haliaeetus vocifer*

An Afrotropical species, the African Fish Eagle is fairly widespread in the higher-rainfall east and extreme south and southwest of southern Africa. Concentrations of high reporting rates were associated with the eastern and southern coastal regions (estuaries), major rivers, such as those in the Transvaal lowveld and the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers, and on the main floodplain systems, such as the Okavango, Linyanti and Chobe rivers. In the dry west, it extends along the entire length of the Orange and Vaal rivers, and into the central regions of Namibia, where it is presumably associated with large dams, such as Hardap Dam (2417BD). The association with high rainfall and wetlands is due to its diet of fish and waterbirds. Locally its occurrence is patchy, owing to the nature of its habitat.

It is usually recorded singly or in pairs, but occasionally in flocks of up to 75 birds, e.g. in the Okavango Delta (Pryce 1990). It can occur at high densities under suitable conditions. The highest recorded density in the atlas region is along the Boro River in the Okavango Delta where breeding pairs are about 400–500 m apart (Brown 1980). In a wider survey of 761 km of the Okavango, Linyanti, Chobe and Boteti rivers in northern Botswana, an average density of 1 bird/1.9 km of river frontage was measured (M. Herremans unpubl. data). At Lake Kariba, densities of 1 bird/3–6 km have been recorded (Irwin 1981; Eriksson & Skarpe 1989), while occupied nests were 1.9–3 km apart (Douthwaite 1992c). On the Zambezi River, linear densities of 1.1–3 km were observed, and territories were 2.8 km

apart on average (Ewbank 1991; Francis *et al.* 1992). In the Transvaal lowveld, inter-pair distances ranging from 5–11 km have been recorded (Tarboton & Allan 1984). It is conspicuous and adults are easily identified.

**Habitat:** It is associated with estuaries, coastal and inland lakes, larger rivers and pans, floodplains and artificial impoundments. Immature birds have been recorded at smaller dams, marshes and even sewage works. It can occasionally be found far away from water. When temporary rivers of the Okavango dry up (e.g. Boteti, Kunyere, Thamalakane, Boro), Fish Eagles remain for prolonged periods with no standing water, and prey on birds (e.g. doves and sandgrouse) or feed on livestock carcasses (M. Herremans pers. comm.).

**Movements:** The models show increased reporting rates in the north of the range coinciding with the breeding season when the eagles are territorial and conspicuous. Immatures and subadults disperse widely from their natal areas (Brown *et al.* 1982). A late-summer/early-winter influx of immature birds has been recorded in the southern Cape Province (Boshoff & Palmer 1988a); this may represent an annual congregation.

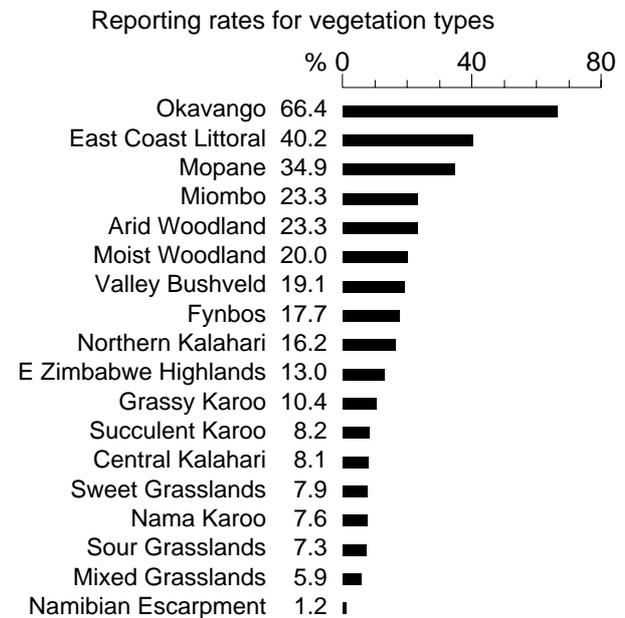
**Breeding:** Atlas records came from throughout the range, mainly during the period May–February, with a variable late-winter/early-summer peak. The models suggest a slightly later season with increasing latitude. Egg-laying peaks have been recorded for April–June in Zimbabwe, May–June in Botswana and the highveld and lowveld areas of the Transvaal, and June–August in the south (Brown *et al.* 1982; Tarboton & Allan 1984; N.J. Skinner *in litt.*).

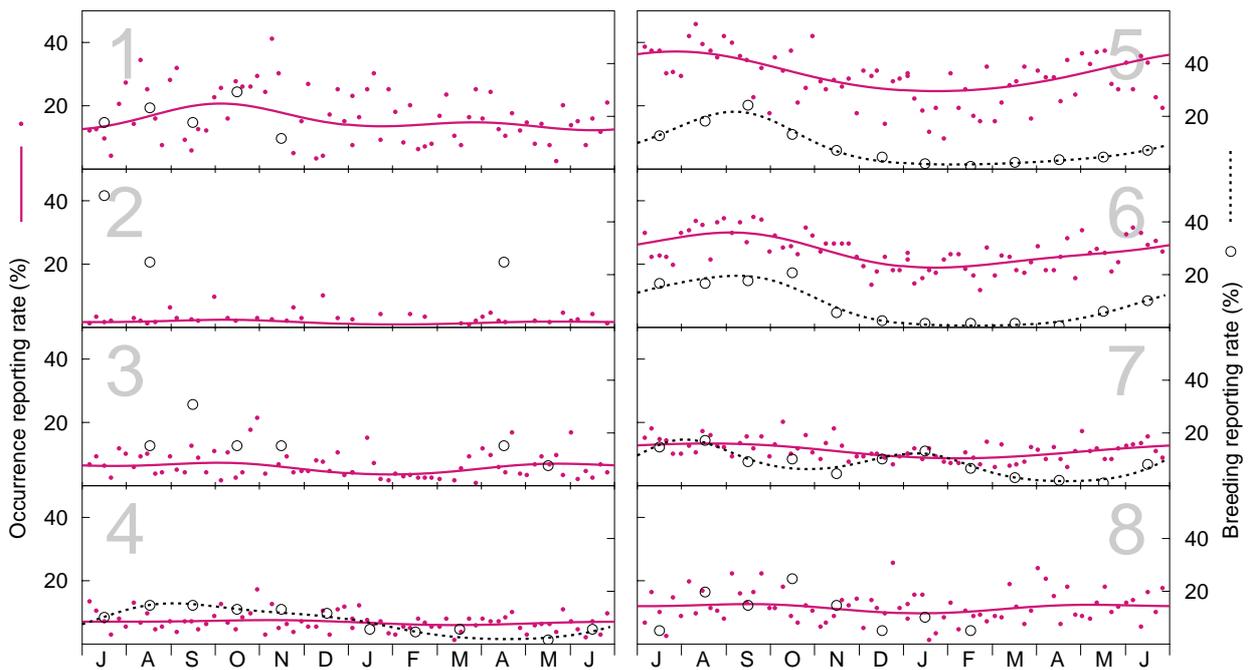
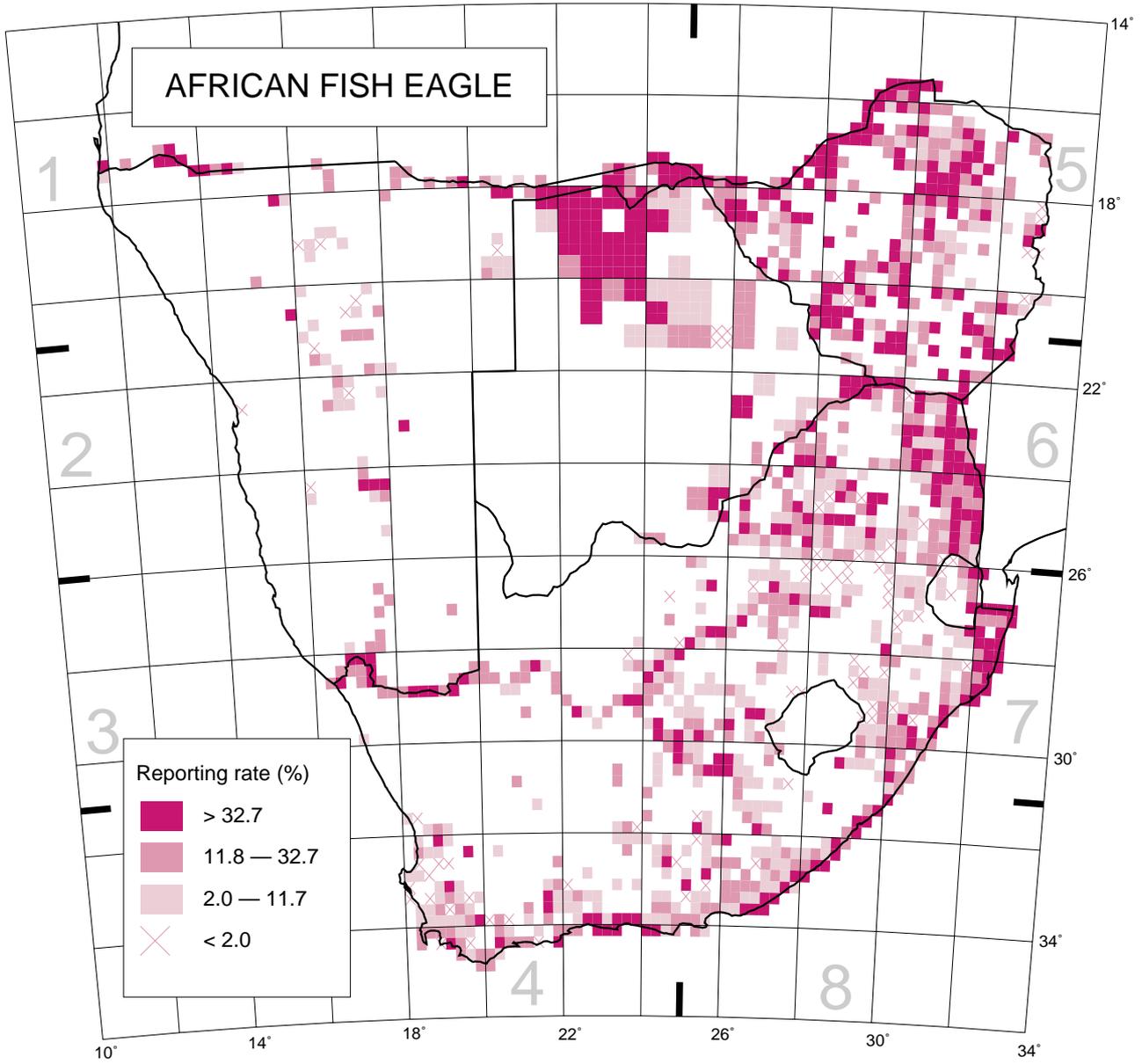
**Historical distribution and conservation:** There has not been any apparent change in distribution in the Cape Province (Boshoff *et al.* 1983) but it is now more widespread, especially in arid areas, as a consequence of the building of large dams. Overall, the current distribution is considered to reflect the historical distribution.

Recorded in 1379 grid cells, 30.4%  
Total number of records: 23 967  
Mean reporting rate for range: 23.1%

The conservation status of the African Fish Eagle is reasonably sound. Some populations have been negatively impacted by disturbance, development and wetland degradation, especially in coastal areas and along lakes and rivers (e.g. Douthwaite 1992c). Balancing this, artificial impoundments have provided additional habitat. Critical levels of eggshell thinning, caused by the ingestion of DDT, have been exceeded in certain localities (e.g. Douthwaite 1992c). As yet there is no firm proof that it is threatened by organochloride residues (Davies & Randall 1989), but the situation should be monitored. Breeding populations may be limited by the availability of safe nest sites (Douthwaite 1992c).

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Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 510, 59, 327, 599, 2667, 2726, 2162, 635; Breeding: 17, 4, 13, 69, 112, 150, 89, 20.