

## Buffspotted Flufftail

### Gevlekte Vleikuiken

#### *Sarothrura elegans*

The Buffspotted Flufftail is a widely distributed, sometimes locally common flufftail of sub-Saharan Africa. It is generally absent from low-rainfall regions and occurs in western, central and eastern Africa, northeast to Ethiopia and south to the Cape Province (Urban *et al.* 1986). In southern Africa it occurs from sea-level to 2500 m (Irwin 1981; Taylor 1994), largely in the high-rainfall eastern regions. A terrestrial species of dense cover, it is rarely seen and is undoubtedly under-recorded, but factors such as its remarkable, largely nocturnal, breeding-season advertising call and its frequent occurrence close to human habitation contribute to its distribution being the most accurately mapped of any flufftail (Taylor 1994).

**Habitat:** It prefers forested and bushed habitats, tolerating a wide variety of vegetation types, including forest edge and secondary growth, dense evergreen or deciduous thickets, and old or overgrown cultivation (Keith *et al.* 1970; Urban *et al.* 1986; Taylor 1994). In KwaZulu-Natal, where it occurs as frequently in alien as in natural vegetation, suitable habitat characteristically contains cover of dense, low wood vegetation, a foraging substrate of leaf-litter or soft soil, and dense, low ground vegetation in which the nest is often situated (Taylor 1994). Over much of its range it is not typically associated with water, but in South Africa it frequently occurs near streams (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Taylor 1994). At higher altitudes in KwaZulu-Natal, its permanent residence depends on the presence of streams or permanently damp foraging substrates (Taylor 1994).

**Movements:** Although generally regarded as resident throughout its range (Urban *et al.* 1986), there are isolated records indicative of long-distance movements (Taylor 1994). Previous records from the Transvaal (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b) and the central plateau of Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981) have been interpreted as vagrants or migrants, and there were additional records from these regions during the atlas period. The low nonbreeding-season reporting rates largely reflect its unobtrusiveness when not calling, but in KwaZulu-Natal there is strong evidence for regular movements, both altitudinal and coastal, possibly over long distances and involving more first-year birds than adults (Taylor 1994).

There are records from the more xeric western parts of the subcontinent indicating long-distance vagrancy: Oranjemund (2816CB) in May 1976 (Winterbottom 1976); between Omitara and Gobabis (2218AA) in May 1994 (Simmons 1995); Maun (1923C) in December 1991 (Oake & Herremans 1992); and Sunday Pan in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (2123B) in April 1995 (Crous & Tebele 1995). All four were males and at least two were juveniles, but all died soon after being discovered (Crous & Tebele 1995). A single bird was recorded in a suburban garden at Langebaan (3318AA) in September 1995 (pers. obs.), well outside its known range in the southwestern Cape Province.

**Breeding:** In southern Africa, breeding occurs in the rainy season, September–March, and the atlas records from South Africa fall within this period, as do 44 of 45 breeding records obtained in KwaZulu-Natal 1988–92, the one additional record occurring in May (Taylor 1994). In KwaZulu-Natal the peak laying month is November and birds from coastal and mid-altitude regions may begin breeding 1–2 months earlier than those at high altitudes (Taylor 1994).

**Interspecific relationships:** In western and central Africa it is widely sympatric with the Whitespotted Flufftail *S. pulchra*, from which it is ecologically segregated in forested habitats by the latter's association with water (Snow 1978; Urban *et al.* 1986; Taylor 1994). It is not sympatric with any rallid in southern Africa, where it has expanded its foraging niche to include streams and wetland patches in forested habitats (Taylor 1994).

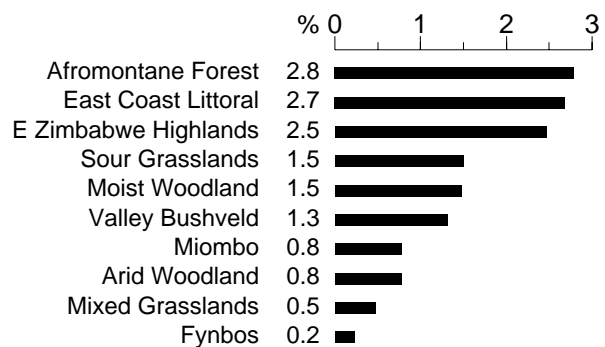
**Historical distribution and conservation:** The historical distribution is difficult to assess because of the paucity of information, but its arrival in the southwestern Cape Province is probably recent (Hockey *et al.* 1989). In KwaZulu-Natal it has probably increased in numbers and extended its range locally in the recent past, following the creation of suitable habitat associated with human habitation (Taylor 1994).

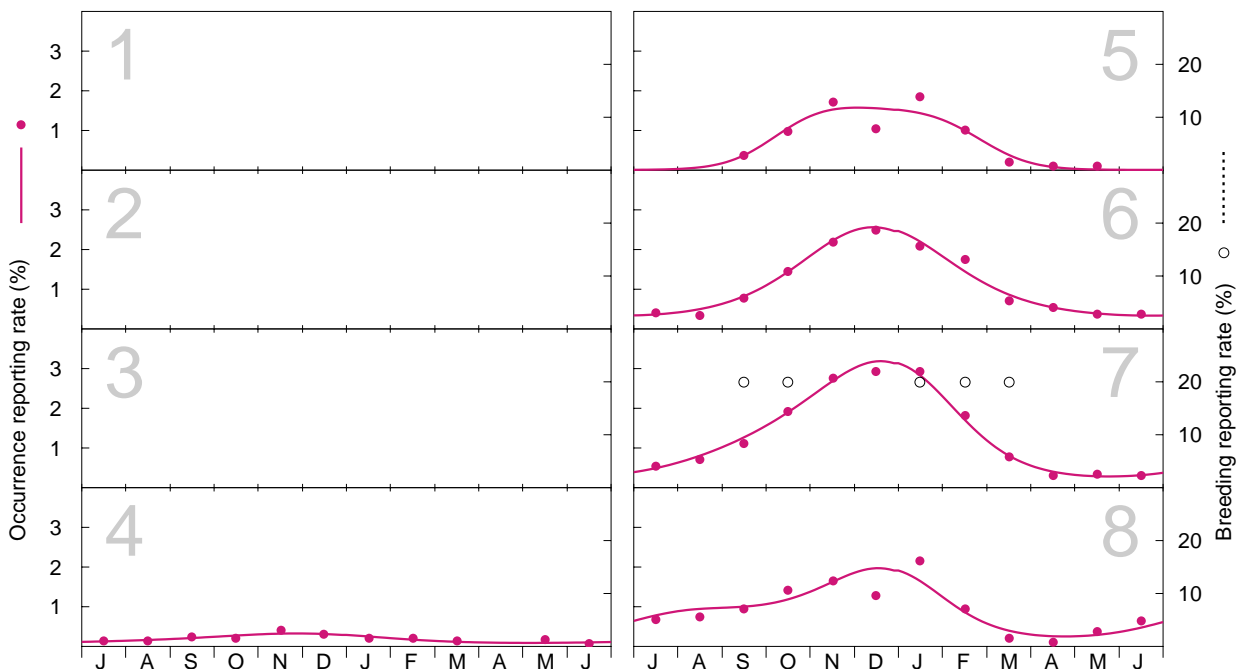
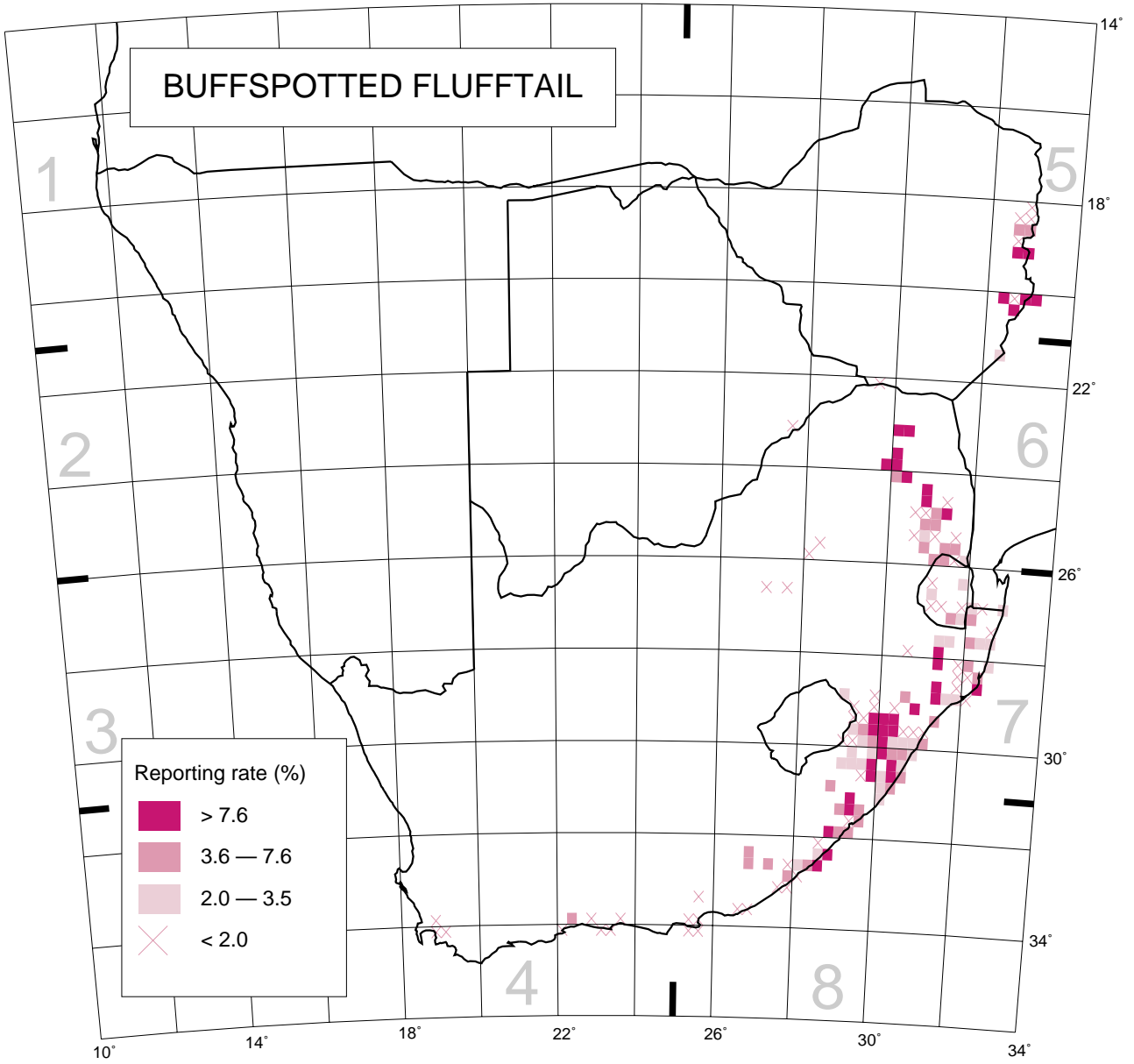
Although forest destruction must have adversely affected its numbers throughout its range, the Buffspotted Flufftail is not threatened, principally because it is a successful colonist of degraded natural habitats and some types of exotic vegetation (Taylor 1994). In residential areas, however, it suffers heavy predation from domestic cats, which may have serious local effects on its numbers (Taylor 1994).

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Recorded in 169 grid cells, 3.7%  
Total number of records: 1122  
Mean reporting rate for range: 3.9%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 0, 0, 0, 47, 71, 274, 616, 111; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 5, 0.