

Grey Plover

Grysstrandkiewiet

Pluvialis squatarola

The Grey Plover is a nonbreeding Palearctic migrant in southern Africa. It breeds in arctic tundra from the White Sea in northwestern Europe, across Asia to Canada, but is absent from Greenland and Fennoscandia (Hayman *et al.* 1986). Those breeding in Siberia spend the northern winter in Europe, Africa, Asia and Australasia; the size of this population has been estimated at *c.* 250 000 birds (Rose & Scott 1994).

In southern Africa it is largely coastal, and is most abundant on estuaries on the west coast. Although it was recorded from widely scattered inland localities, most of these records are of birds on passage. Thus the estimate of 14 500 birds on the coastline (Summers *et al.* 1987a) must be close to the total population, so that *c.* 6% of the Siberian population migrates to southern Africa (Underhill 1995b).

Even in nonbreeding plumage, it is among the easiest shorebirds to identify, with its conspicuous black 'armpits'.

Habitat: It occurs at highest densities on estuaries and lagoons. On the open coast, it prefers sheltered sandy beaches, shorelines composed of alternating rocky and sandy sections, or wave-cut rocky platforms backed by sandy beaches. It gathers in roosts at high tide, sometimes forming mixed roosts with other large waders. Inland it can occur near any open water, but it prefers waterbodies with sandy beaches or exposed mud.

Movements: The birds reaching southern Africa are thought to come from the Taimyr Peninsula, Siberia, because breeding productivity is correlated with species that are known to breed there (see text for Curlew Sandpiper). There are three noteworthy ring recoveries: a juvenile ringed at Walvis Bay (2214CD) in March 1975 was recovered in Crimea (45°N 34°E) in August 1975, and an adult ringed at Langebaan Lagoon (3318AA) in February 1981 was recovered at the Savio River mouth (45°N 12°E) in August 1985, both on southwards migration; the third bird was ringed in the Danube Delta (45°N 29°E) in October 1969 and recovered at Cape Recife (3425BA) in August 1970 (SAFRING). The late date of ringing and the winter recovery date suggest that this was a juvenile which overwintered after its first southwards migration. These recoveries indicate a migration route passing through the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

Birds occurring on wetlands in the interior are mostly young individuals on their first southwards migration. As in other parts of Africa, most inland records in southern Africa are for late spring and early summer when first-year birds are on passage (Dowsett 1980a; Irwin 1981).

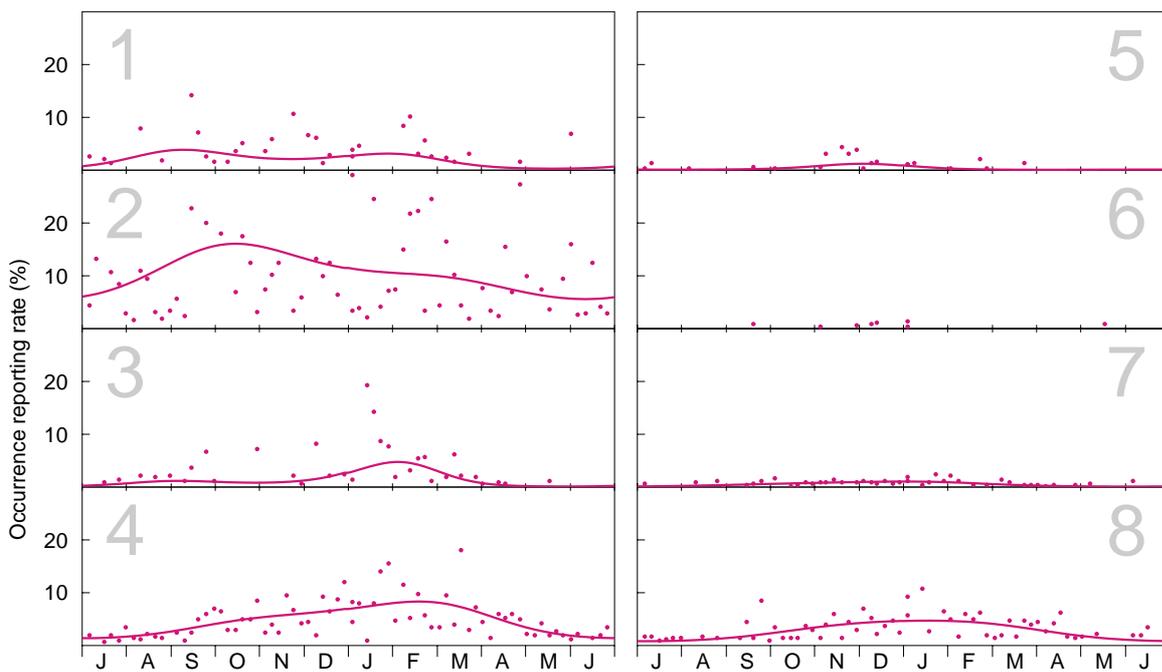
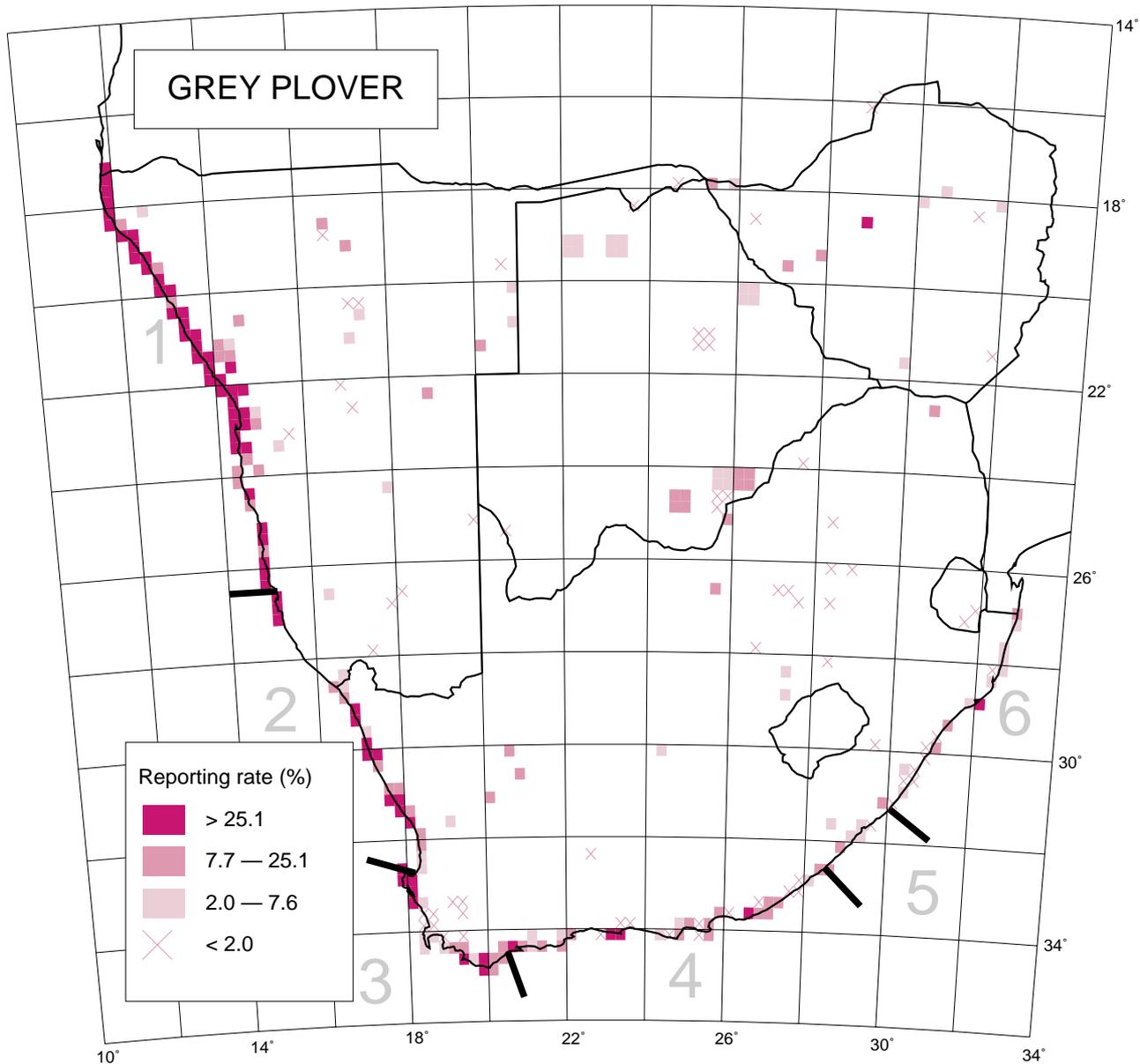
Because the proportion overwintering in southern Africa is one of the highest of all waders (Summers *et al.* 1995), and a few are present during the austral winter at most estuaries where they occur in flocks in summer, the models do not depict the relative seasonal densities well. Regular counts at estuaries and on the shore show that arrival in the region is in September and departure in April (e.g. Pringle & Cooper 1977; Martin & Baird 1987; Spearpoint *et al.* 1988; Velasquez *et al.* 1991).

Large-scale overwintering has been attributed to the risk of death during migration outweighing the benefits of reconnoitring the breeding grounds before being mature enough to breed at 2–3 years (Summers *et al.* 1995).

Historical distribution and conservation: On a flyway scale, the numbers migrating from Siberia to western Europe have increased dramatically in recent decades and there have been range expansions (Smit & Piersma 1989). For example, in Britain the species was almost unknown at the start of the 20th century, but reached 46 000 by 1992, with a sixfold increase 1971–91 (Prýs-Jones *et al.* 1994; Cayford & Waters 1996). However, there is no strong evidence that numbers in southern Africa have increased in these two decades. Numbers at Langebaan Lagoon (3318AA), one of the most important localities, have shown no trend (Underhill 1987a; Western Cape Wader Study Group unpubl. data). However, it is possible that numbers at this site were already at carrying capacity when comprehensive counts started in 1975, with recent increases occurring at sites that represent suboptimal habitat. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Grey Plover was described as 'uncommon' on the Swartkops Estuary (3325DD) by Brown (1905), but by 1984 it was the commonest wader (Martin & Baird 1987).

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Recorded in 264 grid cells, 5.8%
Total number of records: 4057
Mean reporting rate for range: 11.9%



Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 59, 350, 66, 395, 29, 11, 101, 149.