

## Black Cuckoo

### Swartkoekoek

#### *Cuculus clamosus*

The Black Cuckoo is an Afrotropical species (Fry *et al.* 1988). In southern Africa it is a summer-breeding visitor with a largely tropical distribution, which extends to about 26°S in the Transvaal, but extends further south through KwaZulu-Natal to the southwestern Cape Province (Rowan 1983; Hockey *et al.* 1989). It also occurs south of 26°S in the dry woodlands of the northern Cape Province, but only reaches about 24°S in central Namibia.

It is mostly identified on call and the atlas data are likely to be reliable and comprehensive, although its presence may have been overlooked outside the period of territorial advertisement.

**Habitat:** Its habitat preference varies regionally. In the southwestern Cape Province it is found mainly in plantations (Hockey *et al.* 1989). In the eastern Cape Province it is found in forest, valley bushveld and around habitation, while further north it prefers *Acacia* woodland, riparian thickets and mixed-thornveld (Rowan 1983). In KwaZulu-Natal it is 'largely absent from the coastal forest north of Durban' (Cyrus & Robson 1980).

The vegetation analysis shows that the preferred habitats are both broadleaved and *Acacia* woodlands, with the highest reporting rate in Moist Woodland, Miombo, Valley Bushveld, Okavango and Arid Woodland.

**Movements:** Its main arrival period, as indicated by the period of steepest increase in reporting rates, is during October in all eastern Zones 5–8, and in Zone 1. Peak reporting rates, reflecting the period of most intense vocalization, is in November in these Zones. The atlas data do not support the notion that calling begins earlier in the south (Rowan 1983), but arrival is clearly later in the dry interior (Zone 2), a phenomenon which was also observed within Botswana (Herremans 1994d). Calling tends to tail off in the latter part of summer, earlier in the south than in the north. After calling ceases, the species becomes highly inconspicuous and no firm conclusions can be drawn about departure dates from the seasonality analysis.

**Breeding:** It is a brood parasite whose prime hosts are shrikes of the genus *Laniarius* (Rowan 1983; Maclean 1993b). Atlas records support egg-laying data which span October–

March in South Africa and Zimbabwe (Zones 4–8) (Irwin 1981; Rowan 1983; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), but are later, November–April, in Namibia (Zone 2) (Rowan 1983). Breeding may be more dependent upon the onset of rain (Fry *et al.* 1988) further west in drier areas, and the fact that the records from the winter-rainfall area (Zone 4) are early should also be noted.

**Interspecific relationships:** The range of the cuckoo superficially matches a composite of the distributions of its brood hosts, the shrikes of the genus *Laniarius*. For each of the four host species (though less convincingly for Swamp Boubou *L. bicolor*), there is an area where it is the only *Laniarius* species which overlaps the distribution of the cuckoo, providing indirect evidence that the Cuckoo might parasitize all four species of the genus in the region. Particularly Crimsonbreasted Shrike *L. atrococcineus* and Southern Boubou *L. ferrugineus* have far more extensive ranges than the cuckoo, while the

ranges of Tropical Boubou *L. aethiopicus* and Black Cuckoo overlap completely in the region.

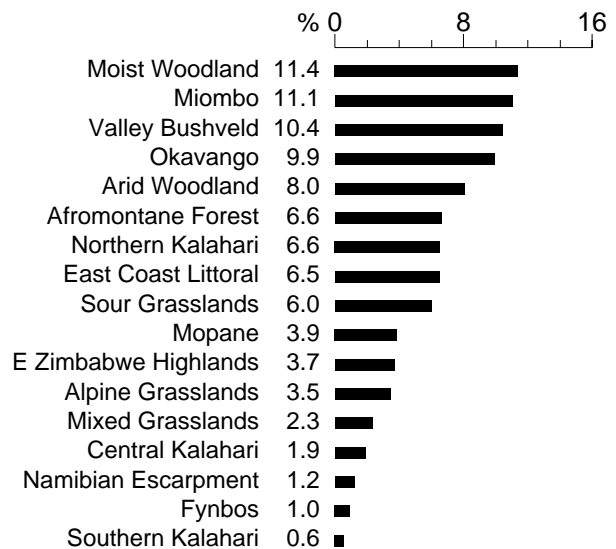
There are similarities with the two other cuckoos of the genus *Cuculus*, the Redchested *C. solitarius* and African *C. gularis* Cuckoos: all three are elusive and their adults draw attention primarily by calling, but would otherwise tend to be overlooked. The three species are to some extent segregated by different habitat preferences and by the utilization of different host species.

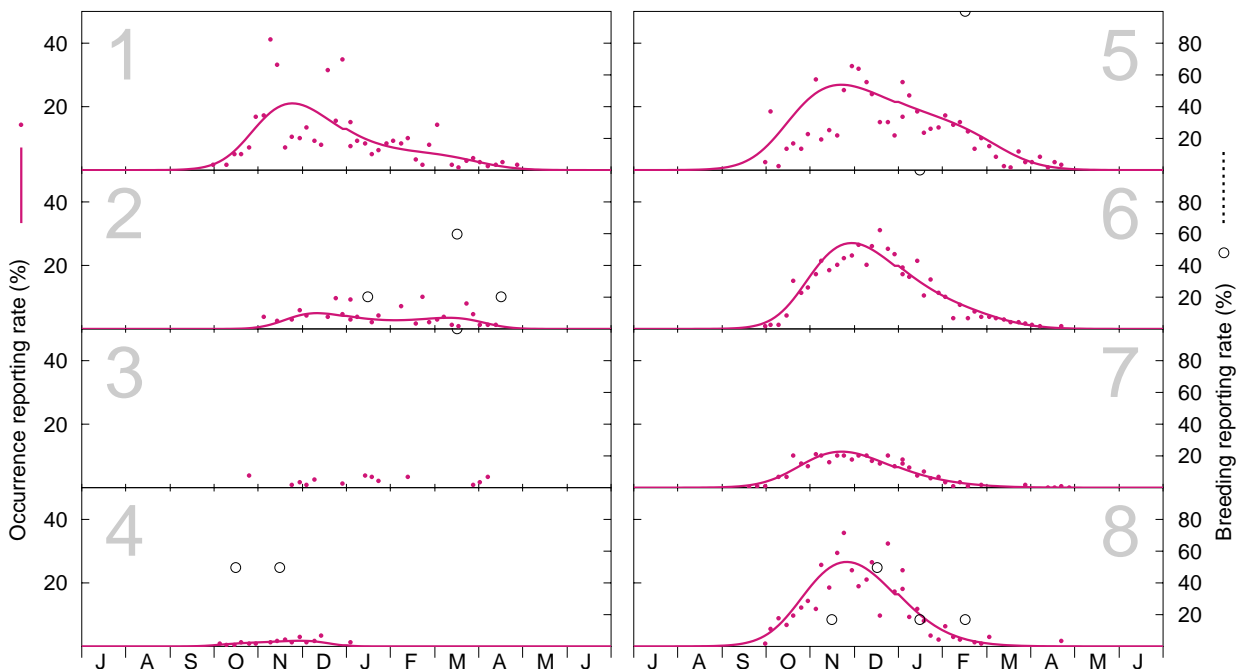
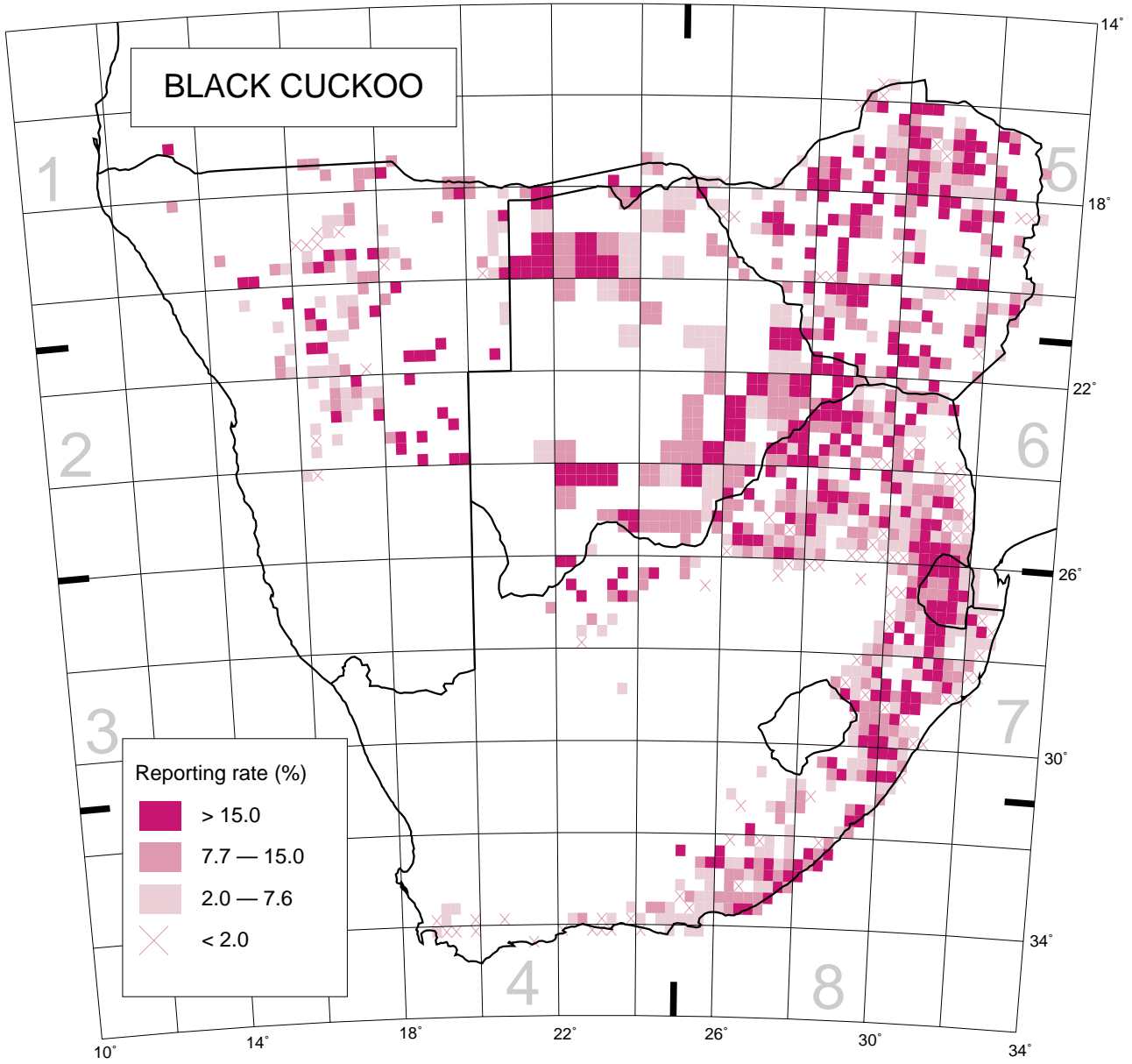
**Historical distribution and conservation:** There is no historical evidence that the distribution of the Black Cuckoo has changed dramatically, but it is probable that plantations of alien trees and the growth of trees around human habitation have allowed it to extend its range. For example, there are now regular records from several places in the southwestern Cape Province, where it has become regular only in the past two decades (Rowan 1983; Hockey *et al.* 1989).

C.J. Vernon and M. Herremans

Recorded in 1183 grid cells, 26.1%  
Total number of records: 7041  
Mean reporting rate for range: 9.0%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 131, 51, 18, 26, 742, 765, 524, 327; Breeding: 0, 5, 1, 4, 1, 1, 0, 6.