

Bluecheeked Bee-eater

Blouwangbyvreter

Merops persicus

This Palearctic migrant breeds in Eurasia and North Africa, and spends the nonbreeding season in the tropics and subtropics of sub-Saharan Africa (Fry 1984; Williams & Arlott 1992; Maclean 1993b). The subspecies *M. p. chrysocercus* breeds on the fringes of the western Sahara and migrates to West Africa, whereas *persicus* breeds from the Nile Delta to the Caspian Sea in Kazakhstan (Fry *et al.* 1993). The nominate race spends the nonbreeding season in savanna habitats from southern Sudan and Ethiopia to subtropical South Africa, extending from Mozambique into northern KwaZulu-Natal (Cyrus & Robson 1980), south-eastern Zimbabwe and the Transvaal (Fry *et al.* 1993; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Its strongholds in southern Africa lie in northern Botswana and the Caprivi Strip, and to a lesser extent the upper Limpopo catchment; outside the atlas region, it is very common in southern Mozambique (V. Parker *in litt.*). Records in Zimbabwe are scattered and patchy, but it is probably widespread at low densities (Irwin 1981). It is found along the Kunene River, spreading south into Namibia's arid central woodlands. Although it was considered rare in Botswana (Fry 1984; Fry *et al.* 1992), atlas data refute this and Penry (1994) considered it a common Palearctic migrant to the northern third of the country. A party of 10 vagrants was recorded at Strandfontein (3419BA)

near Cape Town (Hockey *et al.* 1989) for a period of three months. Vagrants of this highly mobile species may occur anywhere in the region.

It is a high-flying migrant, and individuals could be confused with migrating European Bee-eaters *M. apiaster*; vocalizations are also similar, but calls of the latter are lower pitched. When perched, however, this brightly coloured species is unmistakable except for juveniles, which can be confused with Olive Bee-eaters *M. superciliosus*. It is normally gregarious and vocal and its habit of hawking from exposed perches near water makes it conspicuous.

Habitat: A bird of desert edge in the breeding areas (Fry *et al.* 1992), it prefers to hunt over or near water in southern Africa (Fry *et al.* 1992; Penry 1994). By far the highest reporting rates were in the arid woodland regions of the Okavango, and the Makgadikgadi Pans area of the Northern Kalahari. Large numbers occur in the Okavango Delta and on the Chobe, Kavango, Zambezi and Kunene rivers in Botswana, northeastern Namibia, and western Zimbabwe.

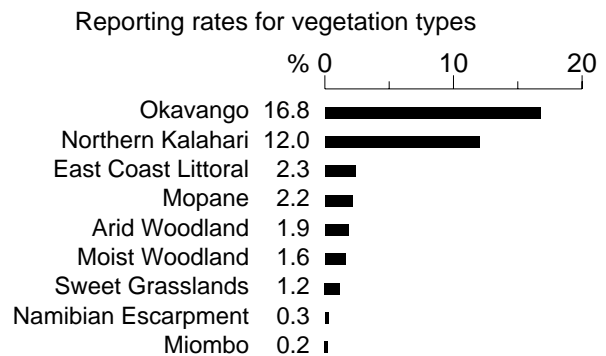
Movement: Arrival is fast and synchronized throughout the region, beginning in mid-October and peaking in early November (Herremans 1994d). Departure is also synchronized over the region from late March, but mostly during April, with some birds staying into May (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Herremans 1994d). There are no confirmed records from the region during the austral winter.

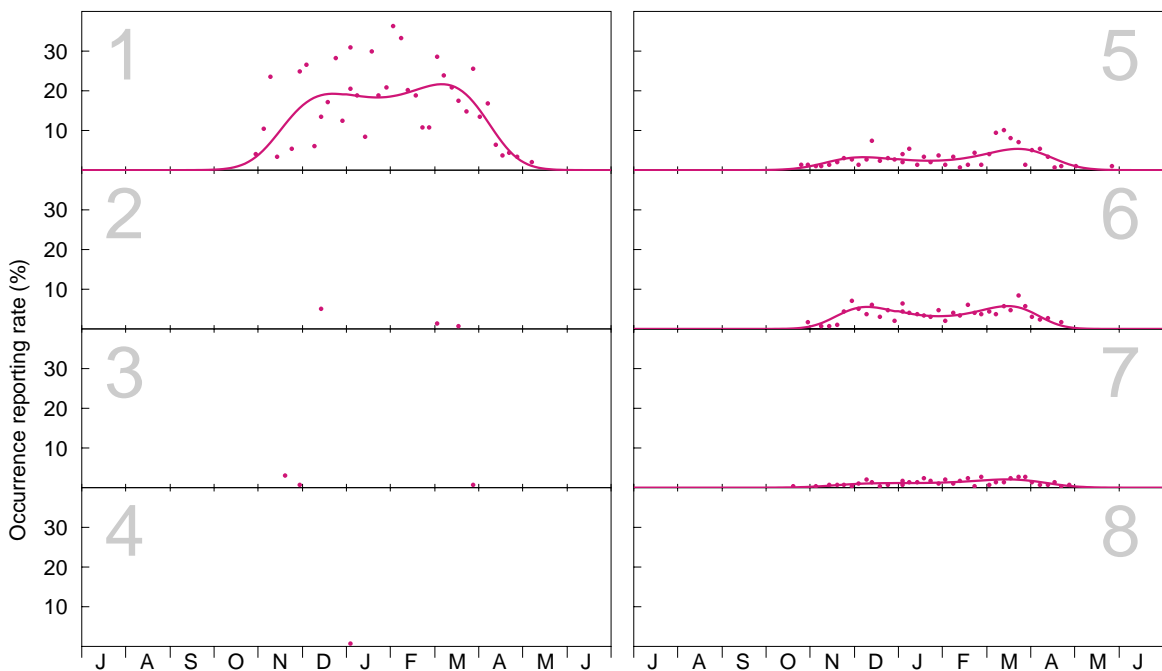
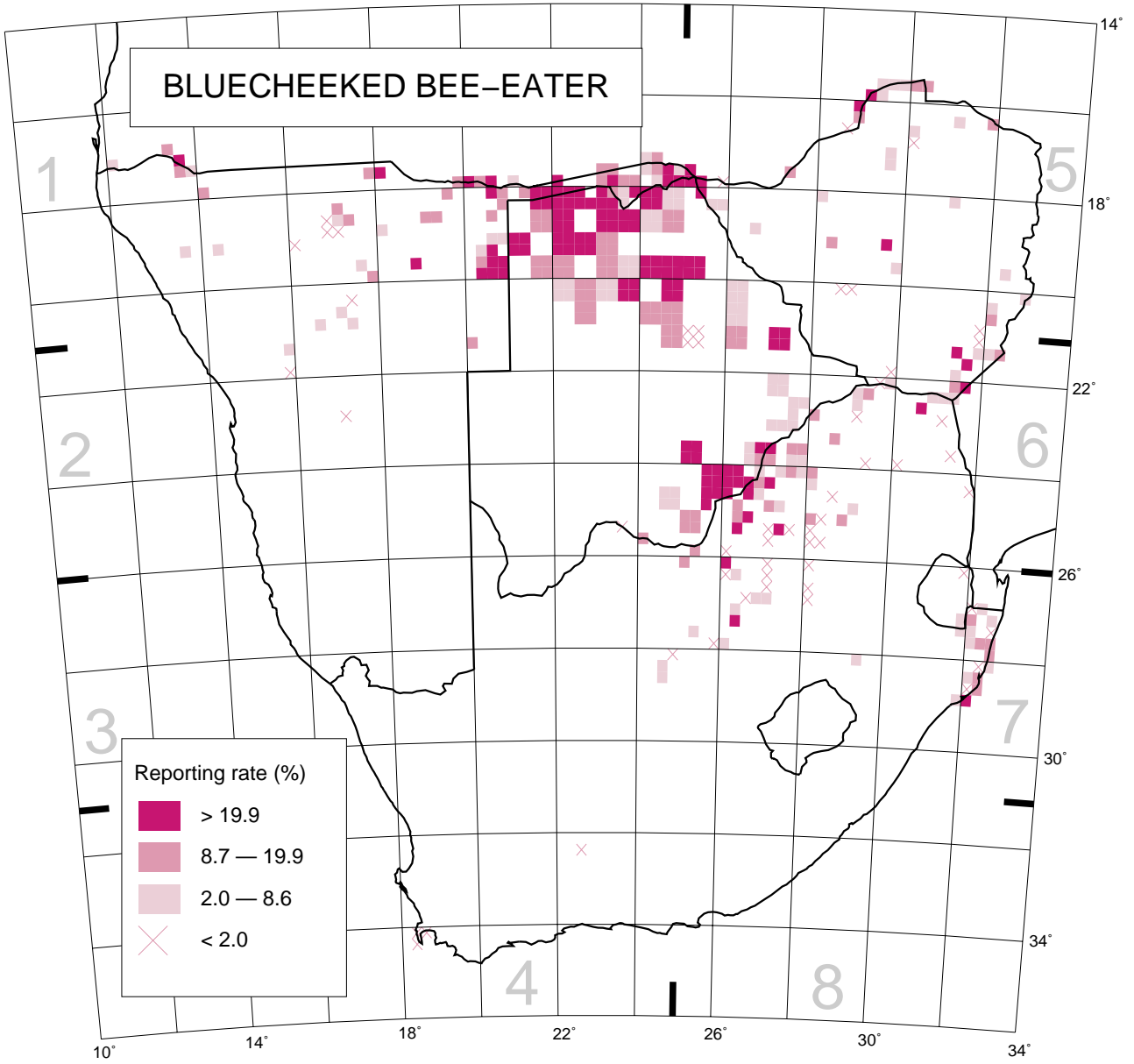
Interspecific relationships: Its range overlaps partially with all seven other bee-eaters in southern Africa. It is most likely to compete with Olive, Carmine *M. nubicoides* and Whitefronted *M. bullockoides* Bee-eaters, which also prefer riparian habitat. These species often occur together near larger rivers and swamps when feeding on flying insects. Contact with the European Bee-eater, which prefers dry woodland, is less frequent.

Historical distribution and conservation: The range does not seem to have changed, but that a population concentration is present in northern and eastern Botswana and the Caprivi is new information. The secondary concentration in the upper Limpopo River catchment benefits from artificial wetlands such as dams and sewage works. The Bluecheeked Bee-eater is widespread and common and is not known to be under any particular threat while in the region.

K.N. Barnes and M. Herremans

Recorded in 406 grid cells, 8.9%
Total number of records: 1425
Mean reporting rate for range: 6.5%





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 232, 3, 3, 1, 136, 217, 125, 0.