

European Roller

Europese Troupant

Coracias garrulus

The European Roller is a Palearctic migrant which breeds in southern Europe, North Africa (Algeria and Tunisia) and western Asia; in the nonbreeding season it is widely, but exclusively, distributed throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Fry *et al.* 1988). It is relatively common in coastal northern KwaZulu-Natal, eastern Swaziland and the eastern Transvaal lowveld to the upper-middle Limpopo drainage, northcentral Namibia, the northern Kalahari in Botswana and the central plateau of Zimbabwe.

Almost throughout its southern African range, observations are scattered, indicating erratic occurrence. Although widespread, it is not abundant in southern Africa: average densities in roadside counts were 1 bird/55 km in central and northern Namibia and 1 bird/114 km in northern and eastern Botswana (Herremans *et al.* 1993b), which is 50–100 times less than on the principal wintering grounds in eastern Africa (Fry *et al.* 1988).

C. g. garrulus breeds in the western Palearctic and constitutes 60% of the southern Africa population, while *semenowi* (40%) breeds in the eastern part of the range and appears to migrate mainly to southern Africa (Clancey 1974; Fry *et al.* 1988). The world population has been estimated to be four million birds, just prior to breeding (Fry *et al.* 1992).

It is the most gregarious of the *Coracias* rollers in southern Africa: although apparently mostly solitary in mid-summer, birds are in fact usually in loose nomadic associations. It is conspicuous and easy to identify, resulting in reliable atlas data.

Habitat: It is a summer visitor to a variety of woodlands, bushveld and grassland vegetations. It avoids the open arid areas in the west. It is recorded over a wide range of altitudes and habitats, ranging from edges of evergreen forest to open grassland and Karoo. It is most common in open woodland; it is marginal in more open vegetation types with less-developed woody cover, such as the central Kalahari, Karoo and grassland biomes.

Movements: Southward migration is concentrated along the Nile and Great Rift valleys (Fry *et al.* 1988). It reaches the far north of southern Africa by October, but the majority only arrive December–January. Peak numbers are present in southern Africa in February, but movements of flocks may occur throughout the summer (Penry 1990b; Herremans *et al.* 1993b). In the southern half of the region, fewer birds are present, and they begin to arrive only in December. Departure is mainly in March; there is spectacular migration along the coast of northeastern Africa in April (Fry *et al.* 1988, 1992). Occasional birds remain into May and exceptionally stay throughout the austral winter (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). It is one of the latest Palearctic migrants to reach peak numbers in the region, and clearly shows the ‘classic’ pattern of slow arrival and rapid departure (Underhill *et al.* 1992b).

Upon arrival, just before departure and during migration, it forms larger flocks, sometimes of many hundreds (Hoesch & Niethammer 1940; Penry 1990b; Herremans *et al.* 1993b). During adverse weather, migratory flocks are grounded,



sometimes in concentrations over hundreds of square kilometres (pers. obs in northern Botswana). Numbers can fluctuate widely between summers and regions, with an apparent tendency for more individuals to move further south in wetter years (Tree 1987a; pers. obs).

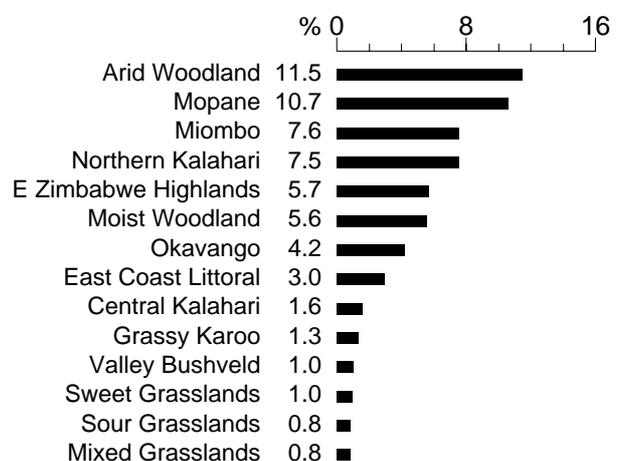
Interspecific relationships: During summer there are three *Coracias* rollers in southern Africa with somewhat similar feeding ecology and a broad overlap in habitat: European, Lilacbreasted *C. caudata* and Purple *C. naevia* Rollers. The European has the widest distribution and the greatest habitat tolerance, but is the least common in any biome, except in miombo, where it outnumbers the Purple Roller. Contrary to parts of eastern Africa where it outnumbers all Afrotropical rollers (Brown & Brown 1973), Lilacbreasted Rollers are 5–10 times more common and Purple Rollers 2–3 times more common than European Rollers in southern Africa (Herremans *et al.* 1993b; Herremans & Herremans-Tonnoeyr 1994g).

Historical distribution and conservation: It has declined dramatically over most of Europe (Cramp *et al.* 1985). Its status in southern Africa has previously been given as abundant, with the northern parts of Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe indicated as principal nonbreeding grounds (Fry *et al.* 1988). The much lower abundance presented here does not reflect any documented recent decrease in abundance in the region (Herremans *et al.* 1993b). The European Roller is not known to be threatened in southern Africa, and factors in this region (except perhaps for drought) are unlikely to be implicated in the decreases in Europe, also because most birds from the western parts of the range are not expected to migrate to southern Africa.

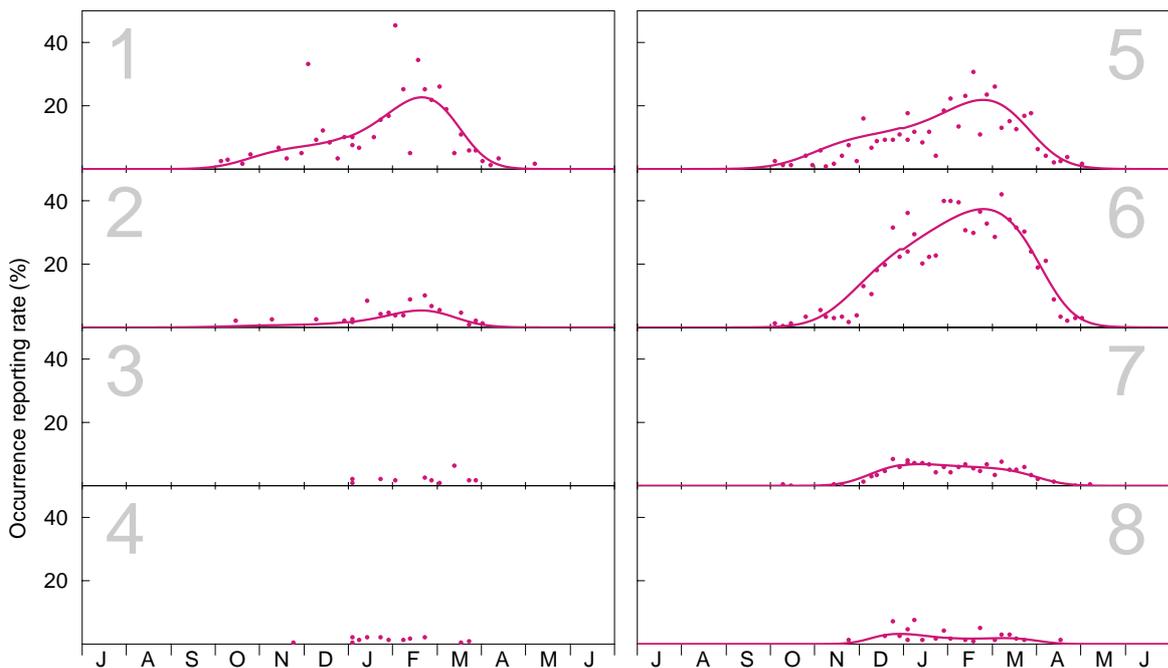
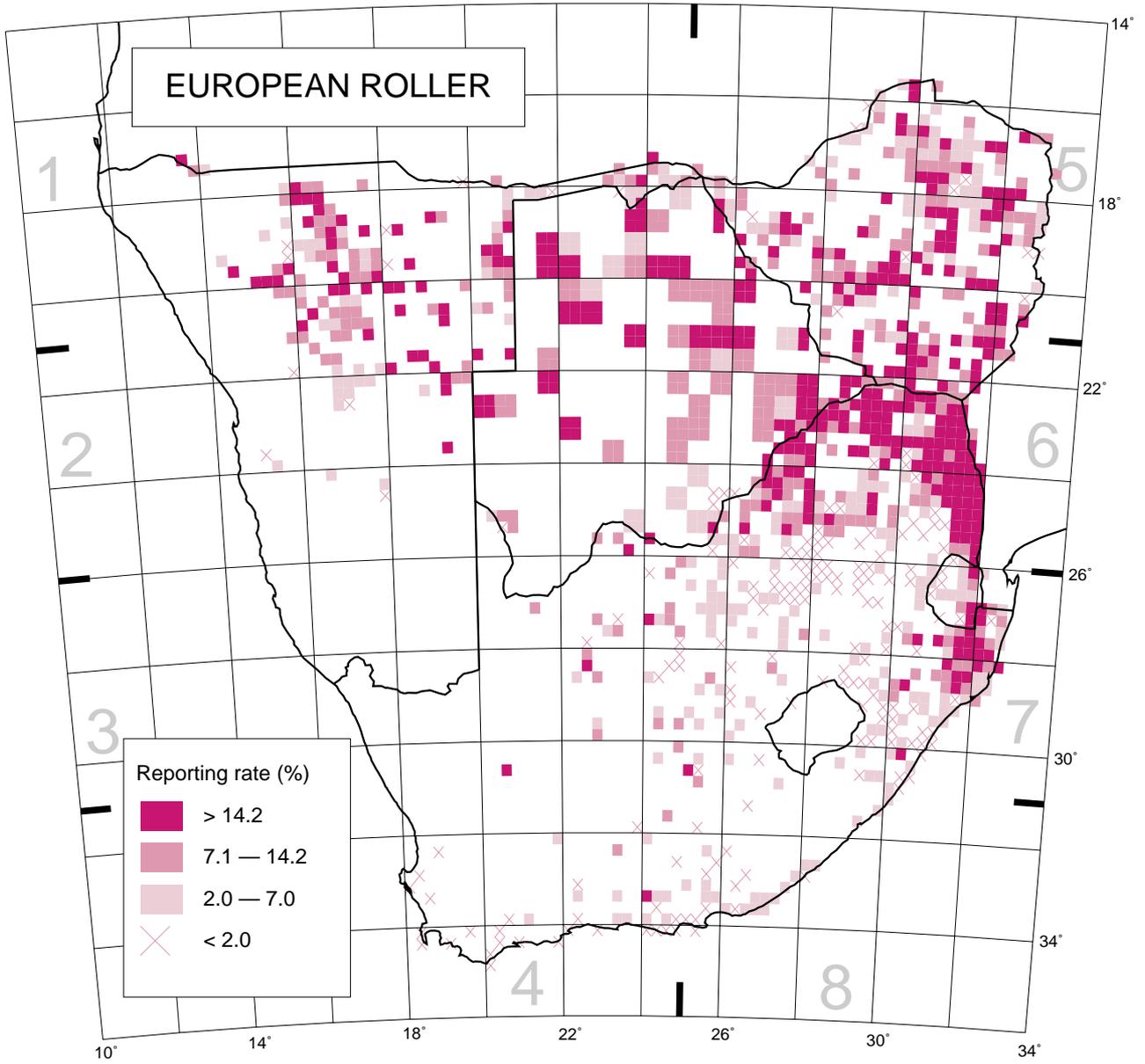
M. Herremans

Recorded in 1199 grid cells, 26.4%
Total number of records: 5058
Mean reporting rate for range: 6.3%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



Also marginally in Nama Karoo, Southern Kalahari, Namibian Escarpment, Fynbos, Alpine Grasslands, Namib and Succulent Karoo.



Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 142, 37, 18, 18, 552, 1296, 392, 39.