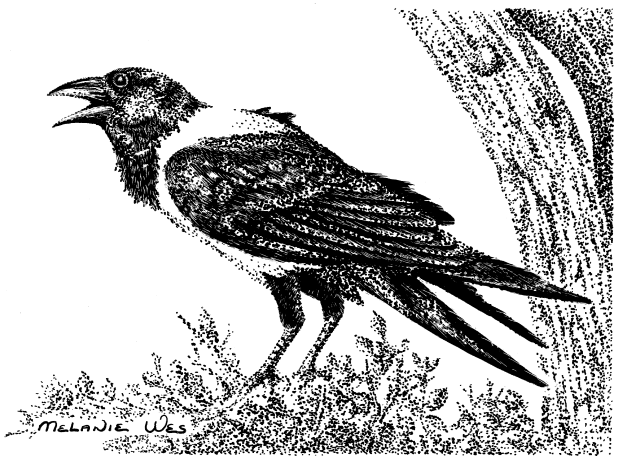


Pied Crow

Witborskraai

Corvus albus

The Pied Crow is the commonest corvid in Africa (Wilson 1993). It is found in most areas south of the Sahara Desert, and on Madagascar and Indian Ocean islands, but is absent from or rare in the central and western forests and the dry southwest (Goodwin 1986). It is a widespread and generally common resident in southern Africa, apart from the eastern two-thirds of Namibia, western Botswana and the northern Cape Province. There is a gap in the southeastern Transvaal, and only scattered records from the middle Zambezi River valley. The distribution map shows an unusual pattern; discrete areas having high reporting rates are fragmented across the climatic extremes of southern Africa.

It is an unmistakable, vocal and conspicuous species, unlikely to have been overlooked or misidentified. An omnivorous bird, it is usually seen in pairs or small groups, but it congregates in large numbers at communal roosts and at good food sources, e.g. refuse dumps and large mammal carcasses (Goodwin 1986). It is a more aerial species than the Black Crow *C. capensis* (Wilson 1993), often soaring for long periods (Goodwin 1986). Reporting rates may have overestimated abundance in areas where it scavenges along major roads but is uncommon or absent away from them.

Habitat: The vegetation analysis shows that it occurs in a wide variety of biomes; the distribution intersects significantly with every vegetation type except the Southern Kalahari. The areas with high reporting rates appear to be unrelated to vegetation.

Movements: Although there is evidence for migratory movements in other parts of its African range (Goodwin 1986), there is little to suggest that it has seasonal movements within the atlas region. Reporting rates fluctuate seasonally but synchronously in most parts of the atlas region, suggesting seasonal changes in conspicuousness, perhaps associated with the onset of breeding. The movement of a ringed bird from Bulawayo (2028BA) to Dete (1826DB) (Elliott & Jarvis 1973) is now believed to refer to a pet (A.J. Tree *in litt.*).

Breeding: Breeding activity occurred primarily August–January in Zones 3–8; this agrees with the September–October period which Winterbottom (1975) considered to be the peak of clutch completion throughout southern Africa. However, breeding peaks later in the dry northwestern Zones 1 and 2; peak egglaying in Namibia is in December (Brown & Clinning in press).

Interspecific relationships: The overall distributions of Pied and Black Crows overlap in many areas but, to a large extent, the areas of highest reporting rates do not coincide. Like those of the Black Crow, disused Pied Crow nests are taken often over by Lanner Falcons *Falco biarmicus* and Greater Kestrels *F. rupicoloides.*

The Pied Crow is a host of the Great Spotted Cuckoo *Clamator glandarius*; in a study by Payne & Payne (1967), 16% of Pied Crow nests in Zimbabwe were parasitized, and 19% in the Transvaal.

Historical distribution and conservation: It benefits extensively from some activities of humans. It scavenges around urban centres, rural villages and along roads; e.g. in the Beaufort West district (3222B), the reporting rate on farms within 16 km of the main road and rail route was double that on more distant farms (Siegfried 1963).

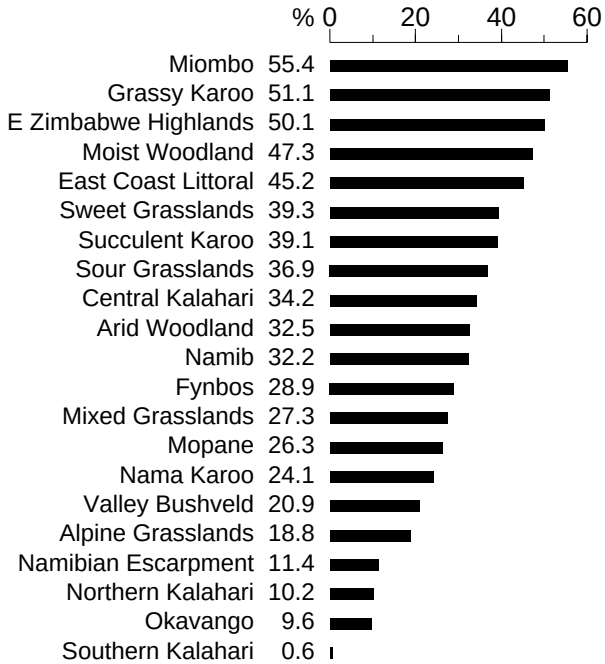
Originally mainly a tree-nester, it now also nests on structures such as buildings, telephone poles, windpumps and electricity pylons; this must have resulted in range expansions into otherwise treeless habitats. Planting of trees, particularly eucalypts, in originally unsuitable areas has similarly aided its expansion, particularly in Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981) where it was scarce until the 1950s (Tree in press), and the range has increased still further from that shown by Marshall (1979). In Zimbabwe it is particularly abundant in cities; for example, Perlmutter (1977) counted 900 at a roost in a suburb of Harare (1731CC) in April 1976.

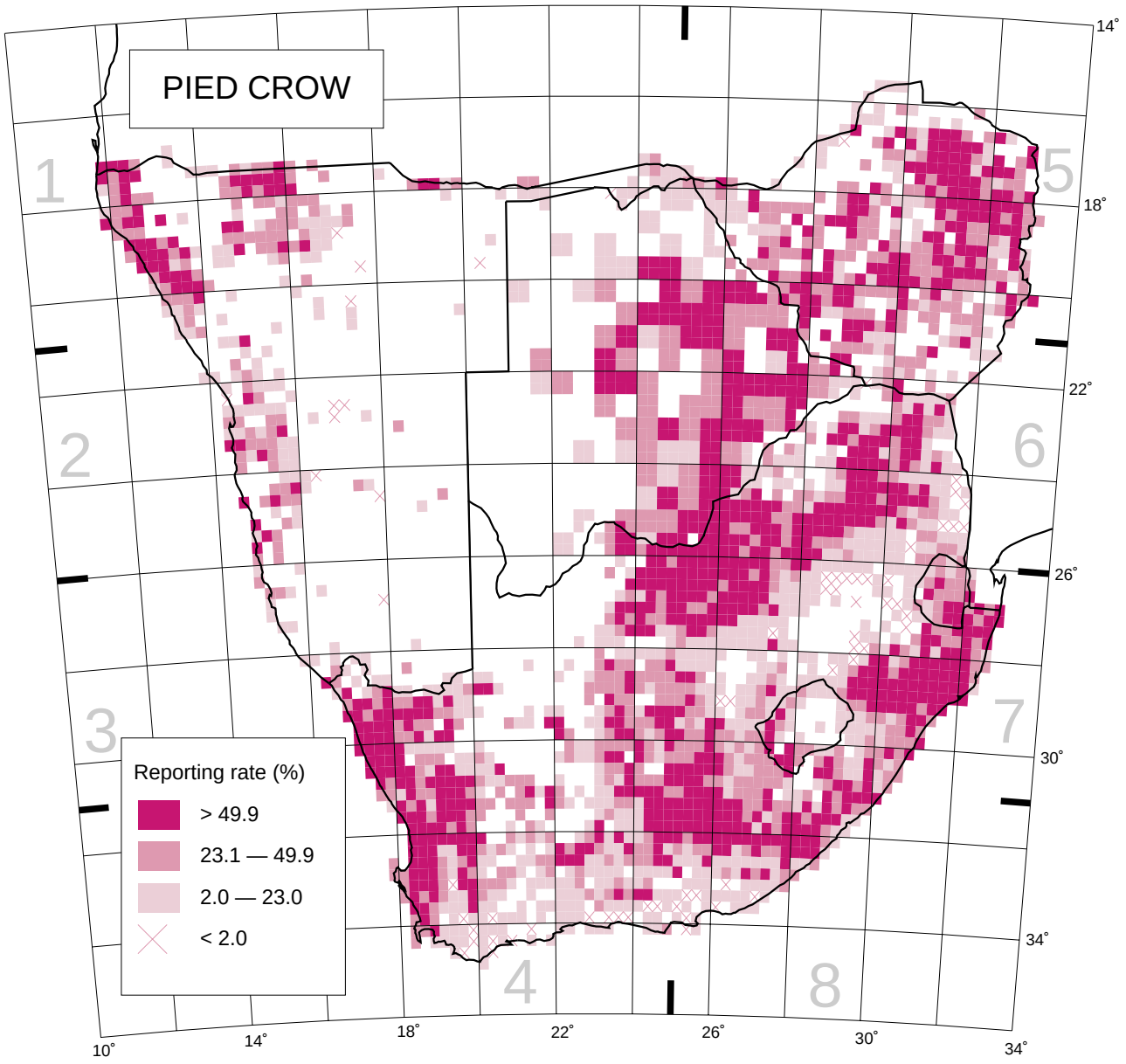
In small-stock farming areas it is persecuted for harassing and killing sheep, mainly new-born lambs and adult sheep weakened by disease. Siegfried (1963) estimated the loss of sheep to crow predation in the Karoo at less than 1% of the population per year, and speculated that they benefit farmers by eating the Karoo Caterpillar *Loxostege frustalis*, a pest of the fodder bush *Pentzia incana*, and by consuming carrion in which blowflies *Chrysomya* and *Lucilia* breed.

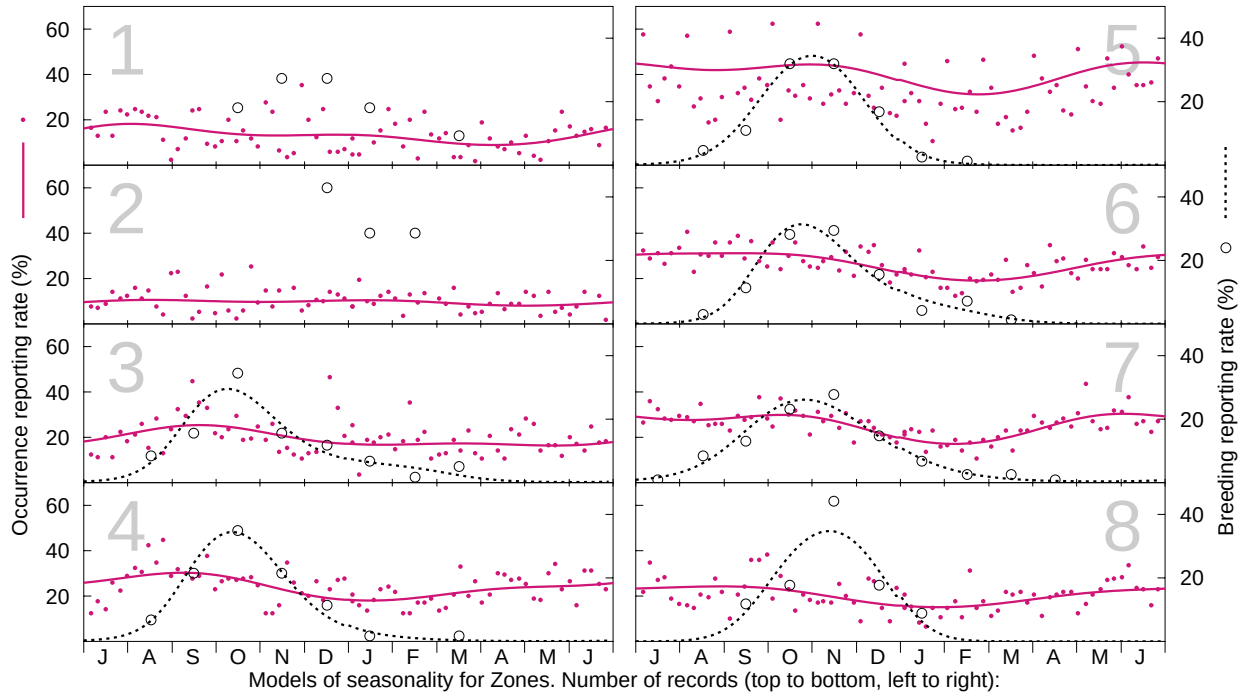
A.R. Jenkins and L.G. Underhill

Recorded in 2600 grid cells, 57.3%
Total number of records: 49 062
Mean reporting rate for range: 37.4%

Reporting rates for vegetation types







Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 433, 344, 1072, 2112, 3516, 3000, 4966, 1115; Breeding: 11, 7, 58, 60, 84, 71, 130, 34.