

Ashy Tit

Acaciagrismes

Parus cinerascens

The Ashy Tit is endemic to southern Africa, occurring outside the atlas region only in far southwestern Angola. It is widespread in Namibia, Botswana and the northern parts of South Africa, but has a clearly defined heartland in the central Kalahari. The Zimbabwean population is confined to a relatively narrow region along the central watershed and appears to be isolated from the Kalahari population.

Clancey (1980b) claimed that the race *P. c. orphnus* occurs in the 'Lowlands of northern Lesotho, central and eastern O.F.S. and Transvaal east of [the nominate] race. Occurs on Natal–O.F.S. border, and identified [in] Natal in winter.' There is no evidence from the present data, or from other published sources, that the Ashy Tit occurs in, or even close to, either Lesotho or KwaZulu-Natal (Cyrus & Robson 1980; Earlé & Grobler 1987; Osborne & Tigar 1990; Bonde 1993). It would appear that the confusion arose from a misidentification of a race of the Southern Grey Tit *P. afer arens* for Ashy Tit. The map does suggest the possibility of a distributional discontinuity to the east of the Limpopo Valley, parallel to it and extending southwards into the northern Cape Province. This may represent the limits of the nominate race to the west and *orphnus* to the east.

It occurs singly or in pairs. A density of *c.* 1 pair/50 ha was measured in *Acacia* thornveld at Nylsvley (2428DA) (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). In Botswana, results from 15 transect counts in suitable habitat indicated densities ranging from *c.* 1 bird/6 ha in *Acacia*-dominated Kalahari mixed woodland, to 1 bird/28 ha in pure *Acacia* bush or tree savanna and 1 bird/58 ha in mixed arid woodland on rocky substrates (M. Herremans unpubl. data).

Although Ashy and Southern Grey Tits are easily distinguishable on plumage, call and habitat preference, they were sometimes misidentified; the data were carefully vetted in this regard and are reliable.

Habitat: It was previously known as the Acacia Grey Tit owing to its close association with *Acacia* trees and thickets. This association may be an obligate one, making the Ashy Tit a true habitat specialist. Acacias are widespread, however, and are frequently interspersed with broadleaved trees in mixed

woodlands. Hence the vegetation analysis shows it occurring in a range of woodland types and also penetrating the grassland and Karoo biomes where it occurs along wooded watercourses, but there is a clear bias towards woodlands in drier areas and on Kalahari sands. Suitable *Acacia* woodland varies from relatively dense thickets of *Acacia* scrub to open parkland savanna in Botswana where large Camelthorn *A. erioloba* trees are widely separated (Penry 1994).

Movements: The models show seasonal fluctuations in reporting rates with apparently complementary patterns between Zone 1, where there is a midsummer increase, and Zones 2 and 3 where there are midsummer decreases. There is too much scatter in the reporting rates to attach significance to these patterns but, like many arid-country birds, the Ashy Tit is likely to move widely in response to rain.

Breeding: Egg-laying has been recorded October–December in the Transvaal; April, November, December in Botswana; November, December and February in Namibia; September–November in Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Skinner 1995a; Brown & Clinning in press). The atlas data broadly conform to this pattern of breeding in the wet season, but also with several records March–May.

Interspecific relationships: It is parapatric with the Southern Grey Tit (see text for that species) and there is a clear difference in habitat preference. Ashy and Southern Black *P. niger* Tits are sympatric over extensive parts of their ranges in Botswana, Transvaal and Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, it is clear that the cores of their respective distributions are non-overlapping as a result of the Southern Black Tit's preference for moister woodlands, usually with a broadleaved element. The Ashy Tit also overlaps with the Northern Grey Tit *P. griseiventris* in Zimbabwe and Carp's Black Tit *P. carpi* in Namibia; the former is a miombo specialist and the latter prefers mopane and *Acacia* savanna.

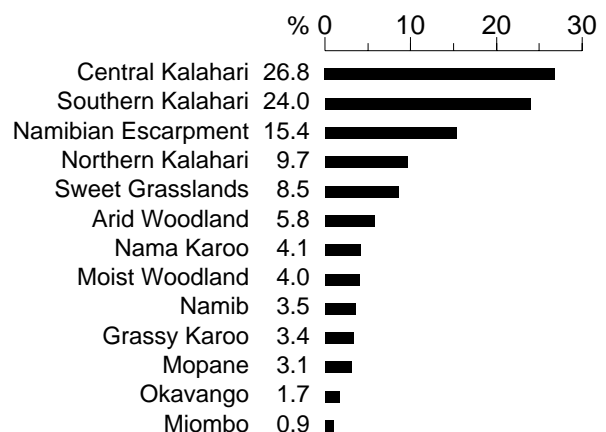
It has been observed roosting in the nests of Sociable Weavers *Philetairus socius* (Macdonald 1983) and the burrows of Brownthroated Martins *Riparia paludicola* (Maclean 1993b).

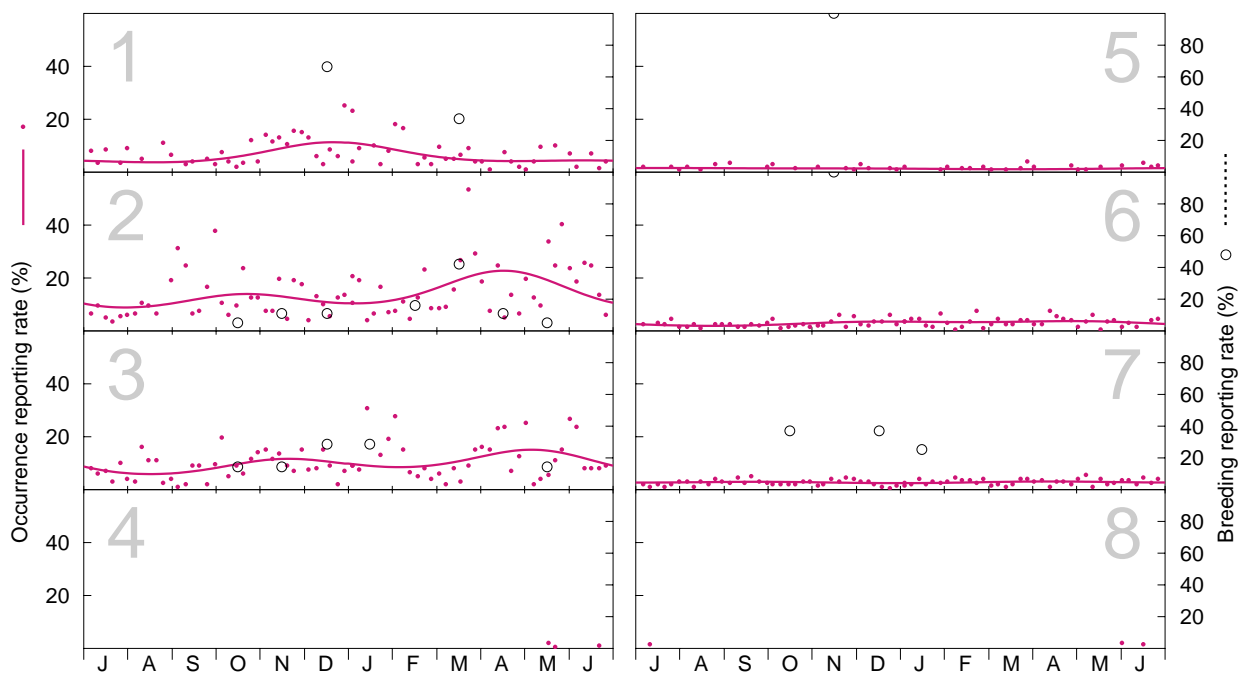
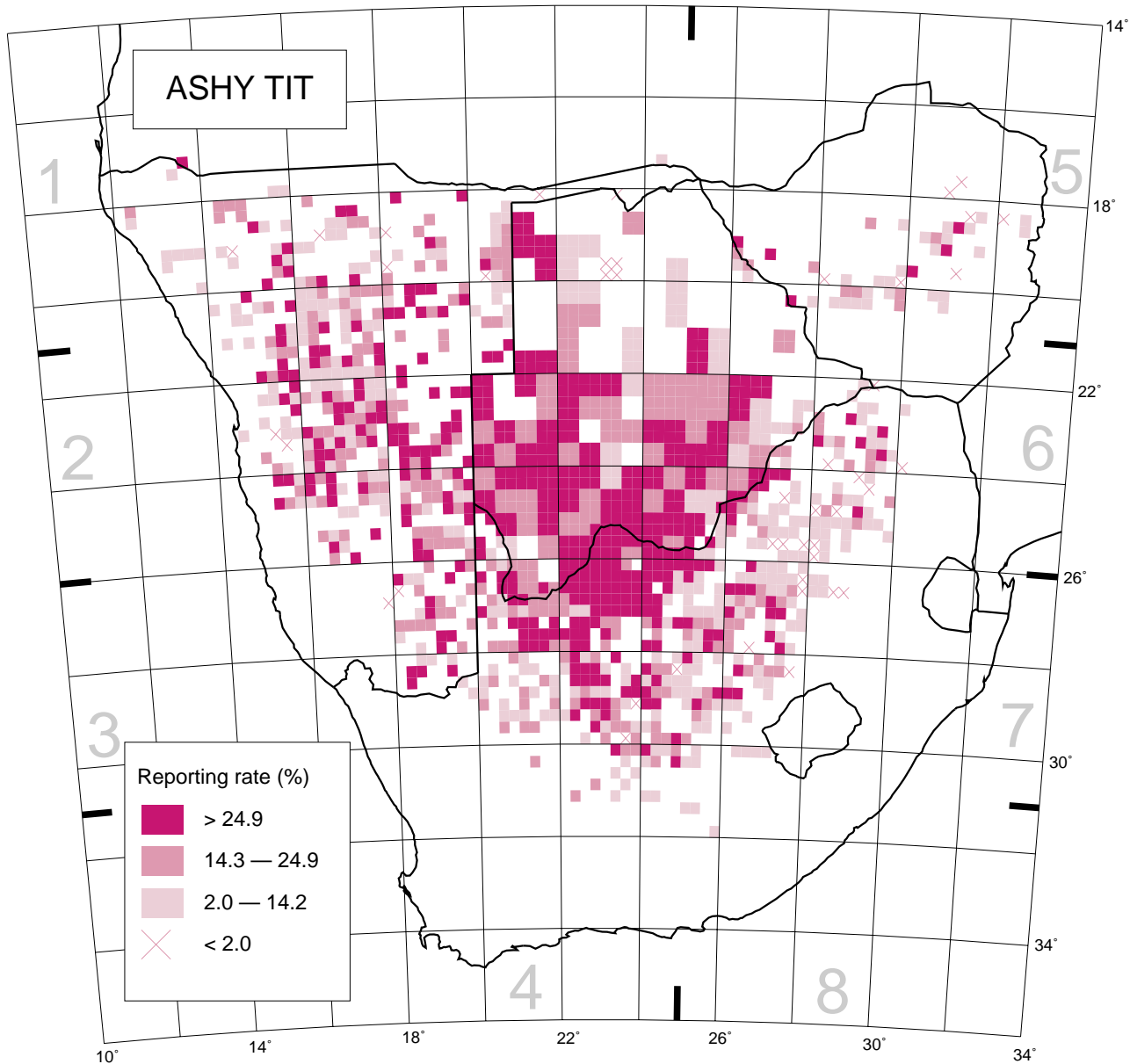
Historical distribution and conservation: Major historical changes in distribution are unlikely, although it may have benefited from local bush encroachment resulting from overgrazing. The Ashy Tit is widespread and common; currently it poses no conservation problems.

J.A. Harrison

Recorded in 1399 grid cells, 30.8%
Total number of records: 5807
Mean reporting rate for range: 14.5%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 183, 521, 558, 4, 119, 344, 547, 4; Breeding: 3, 19, 7, 0, 1, 2, 8, 0.