

Bronze Mannikin

Gewone Fret

Spermestes cucullatus

Widespread in sub-Saharan Africa (Clement *et al.* 1993), the diminutive Bronze Mannikin is confined to the moist east of southern Africa; the distribution becomes sparser and narrower through the Transkei and fades out in the eastern Cape Province near Port Elizabeth. There are three distinct areas with highest reporting rates: the Mashonaland plateau, Swaziland and the eastern Transvaal escarpment, and southern KwaZulu-Natal. There is a distinct gap in distribution along the Limpopo Valley. Records from the Caprivi Strip in northwestern Namibia indicate a southwards range extension relative to previous records from 'southern Angola' (Sibley & Monroe 1990).

It is conspicuous and gregarious, and unlikely to be confused with any other species. Nests are frequently built in suburban gardens (Woodall 1975b; Koen 1988) where breeding activity, nestling and fledgling vocalizations, and flocking make it conspicuous.

Habitat: It is primarily a bird of edge habitats and it is dependent on water. It prefers moist, wooded habitats in the east of the region. It is largely absent from arid woodland in the upper Limpopo Valley, from semi-arid savanna in western and northwestern Zimbabwe, and from grassland areas of the eastern and southern Transvaal and eastern Free State. Where it is present in drier areas, occurrence is associated with water (Woodall 1975b). It is very common in suburban areas, frequently visiting gardens which replicate its preferred habitat and provide water (Woodall 1975b; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Presence in Afromontane Forest is along forest edges.

Movements: The nearly uniform reporting rates in the models suggest that it is resident. Ringing data generally show localized movements only, although a bird ringed in Malawi moved 60 km over a four-month period (Woodall

1975b; Irwin 1981; SAFRING). It is known to wander widely in other parts of the range, particularly West Africa, 'in search of ripening food' (Clement *et al.* 1993). There might be some northeasterly-southwesterly movement between Zones 7 and 8 during winter and summer, as occurs in other species distributed along the coast (Berruti *et al.* 1994a).

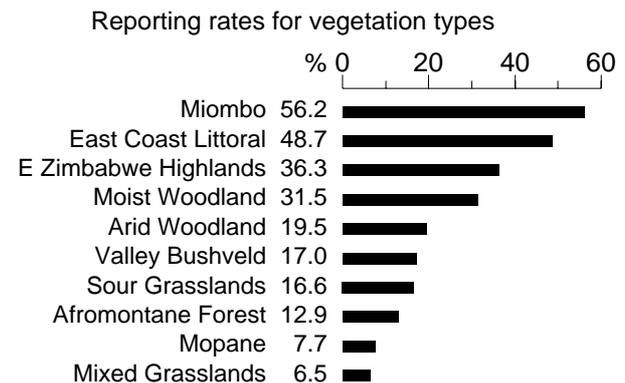
Breeding: Breeding occurs throughout the year, particularly in the northern areas, where favourable conditions exist for much of the year. Peak activity is earliest (November-January) in the south (Zone 8), and becomes progressively later and less synchronized to the north. In the north-east (Zone 5), breeding peaks January-March; Irwin (1981) recorded egg-laying in Zimbabwe in all months except June-July, with a December-March peak. It reacts quickly to favourable breeding conditions after rain (Hanmer 1988); green grass material is favoured for nest building (Woodall 1975b). In the southeast, conditions favourable for earlier grass and seed production occur earlier than in drier areas further north.

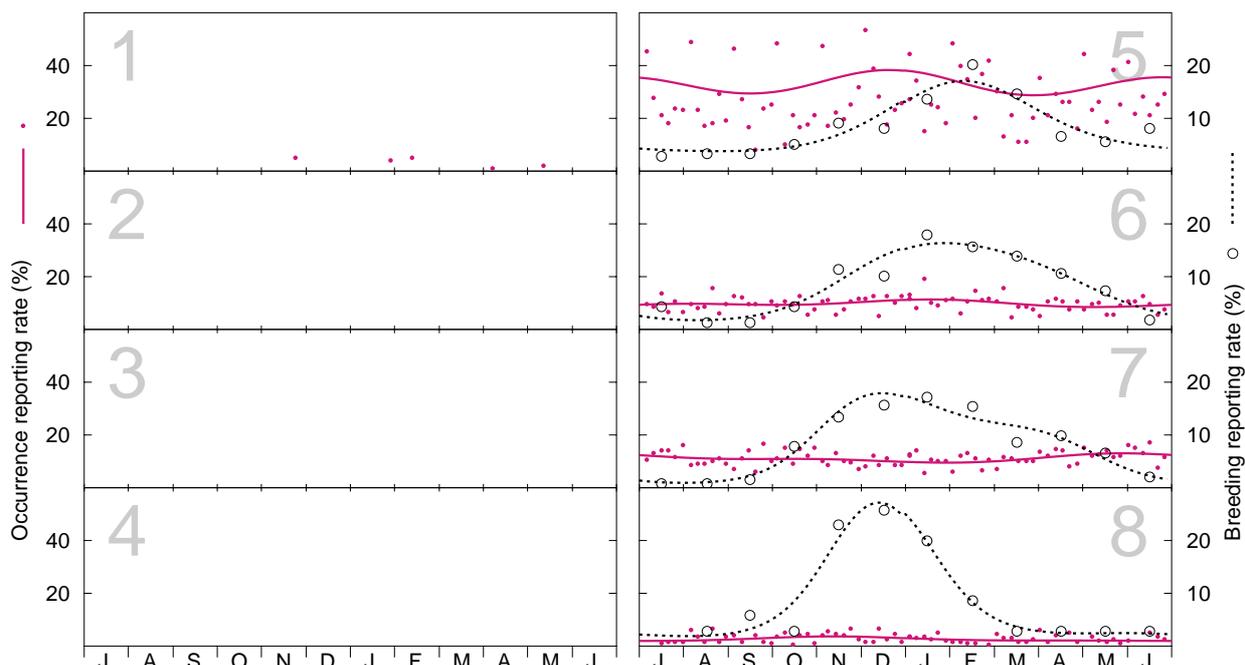
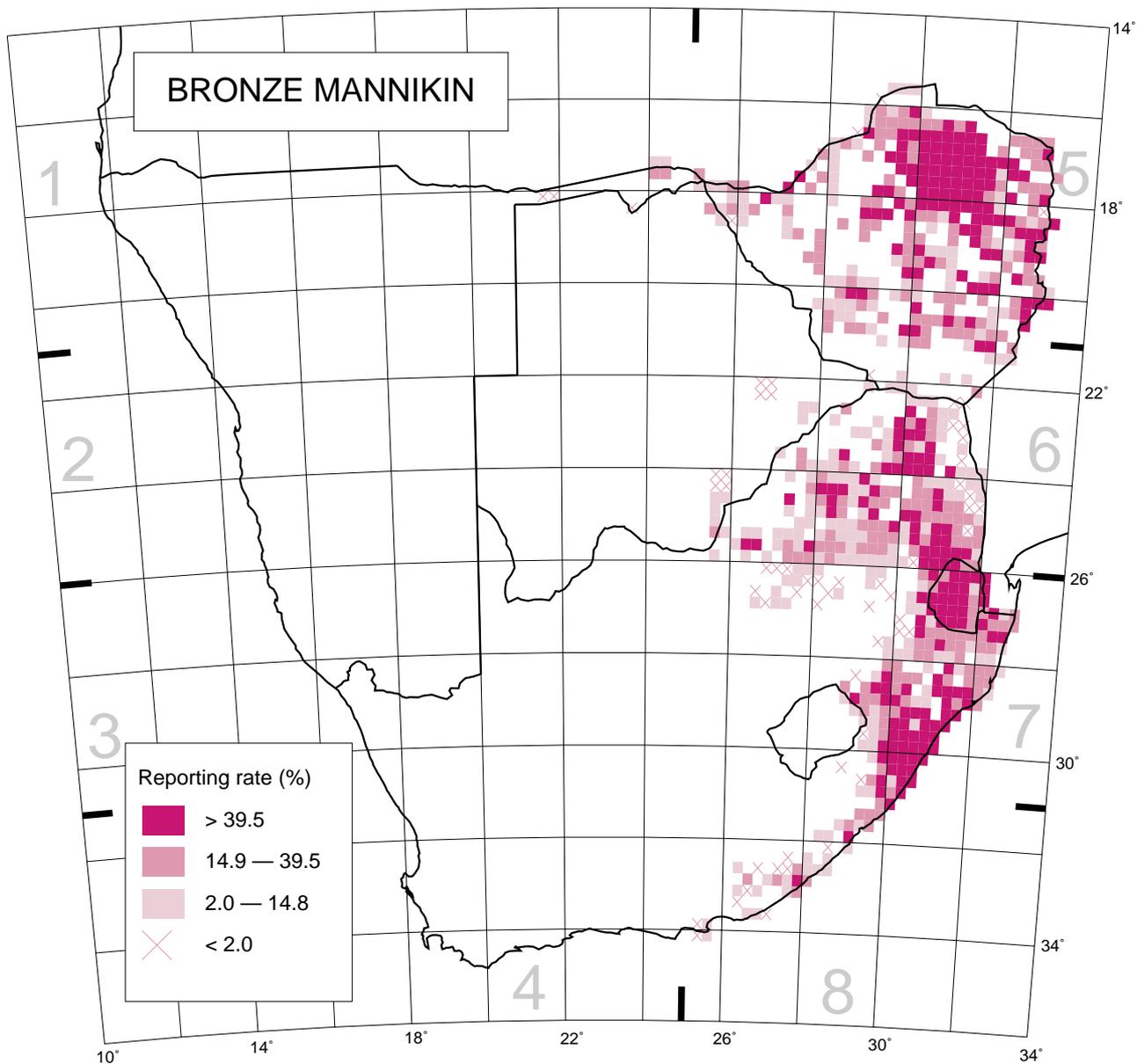
Interspecific relationships: The ranges of the other two southern African mannikins, Redbacked *S. bicolor*, and Pied *S. fringilloides*, are contained entirely within that of the Bronze Mannikin which is the most widespread. Although there is ecological separation, all three species may come together occasionally, for example at water (Masterson 1972). Where Redbacked and Bronze Mannikins occur together, they may compete for food on a local scale (Irwin 1981; Vernon 1990; pers. obs.). Flocking with other estrildids, particularly in winter, may also occur (Hall 1983).

Historical distribution and conservation: Localized range expansion, as recently as 1977, was reported at Nyanga, Zimbabwe (1832BD) (Snell 1978). Before 1980 it was unrecorded in southeastern Botswana (Penry 1994) where it is now locally common in Lobatse (2525B) and Gaborone (2425D), with several records from adjacent grid cells. Its expansion is possibly associated with the creation of artificial wetlands (Wilson 1984) and the establishment of watered gardens and parks. Groups were recorded occasionally in the 1930s in the Cradock district (3225BA) (Collett 1982), west of its current distribution. Its occurrence along the Vaal River (2626) suggests a range extension (see Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The Bronze Mannikin is considered a grain pest in parts of West Africa (Thompson 1989).

R.J. Nuttall

Recorded in 795 grid cells, 17.5%
Total number of records: 20 759
Mean reporting rate for range: 30.7%





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 5, 0, 0, 0, 2863, 1110, 2170, 141; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 184, 217, 254, 35.