Squacco Heron

Ralreier

Ardeola ralloides

The Squacco Heron occurs in Africa both north and south of the Sahara Desert and in Madagascar; it is also distributed in southern Europe and western Asia as far east as the Aral Sea (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). It occurs in the Transvaal, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Zimbabwe and the northern and eastern areas of Botswana, where it is a common resident in the Okavango, Linyanti and Chobe river systems (Penry 1994). Reporting rates reveal further core areas in the highveld areas of the Transvaal, northern KwaZulu-Natal and parts of Zimbabwe. Elsewhere in southern Africa it is sparsely distributed, and it occurs as a vagrant in the south and west. In the Transvaal, the largest known concentration occurs on the Nyl floodplain (2428DA) where, in years of high rainfall, 300–500 breeding pairs have been recorded (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Clancey (1980b) and Maclean (1993b) recognized two subspecies in southern Africa: *A. r. paludivaga*, described as an uncommon to locally common resident with local movements linked to rainfall, and *ralloides*, an uncommon nonbreeding Palearctic migrant occurring in summer.

It is usually solitary, although small parties also occur. It is gregarious when roosting, often with other species. It has superficial resemblance to the Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* but has a dark back contrasting with white wings in flight, a dark bill and a streaked head. It is inconspicuous owing to its secretive habits and cryptic colouring, and is certainly underreported. The atlas data therefore might not provide a true indication of its abundance, but reliably describe its distributional limits.

Habitat: It uses freshwater habitats, preferring emergent vegetation in the quiet backwaters of ponds and the edges of slow-flowing rivers and streams, where it often perches on or amongst the riverine vegetation. Adequate reed cover and a few bushes or trees are prerequisites in habitat selection (Hancock & Kushlan 1994). It will also feed amongst the rank vegetation of seasonal pans and river floodplains.

Movements: The atlas data show a striking decrease in reporting rates during winter, May–August. Brown *et al.* (1982), who did not recognize the two subspecies, suggested that the Palearctic visitors from Eurasia and North Africa cross the Sahara Desert on a broad front, augmenting the resident populations only as far south as the equator. There is also some evidence of movements between the African continent and Madagascar (Hancock & Elliott 1978). The winter decrease probably represents both movement of *ralloides* to the Palearctic and *paludivaga* to tropical Africa. The seasonal distribution maps show that the Okavango and northern KwaZulu-Natal retain populations through the dry winter season. Further research is necessary to determine the extent of its migratory movements.

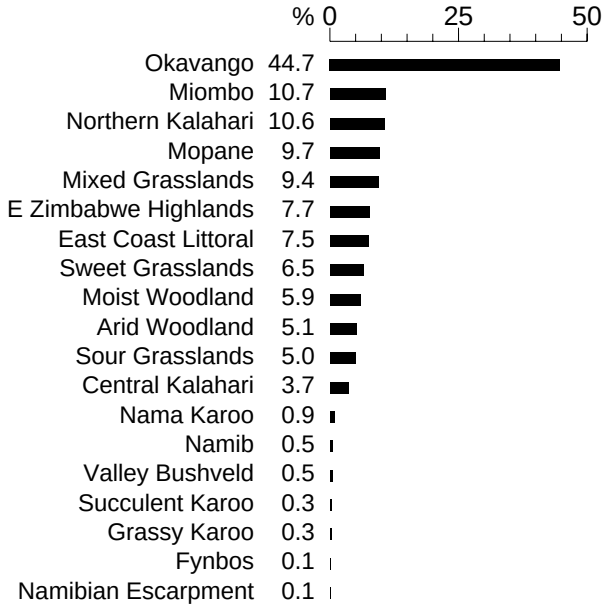
Breeding: It usually breeds colonially, often in heronries with other species. Breeding is mainly during the rainy season, or at the end of the rains, in inundated areas (Brown *et al.* 1982). Breeding is uncommon in southern Africa but has been recorded throughout the year, particularly in years when summer rains are far above average (Vernon 1978a; Maclean 1993b). It bred on the Makgadikgadi Pans in summer 1973–74, when water-levels were at their highest in a century (Tree 1978b). In Zimbabwe, egglaying occurs mainly December–March, and in the Transvaal mid- to late summer, mainly in February (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The small number of breeding records in relation to the number of sightings suggests that *paludivaga* is mainly a nonbreeding intra-African migrant to southern Africa.

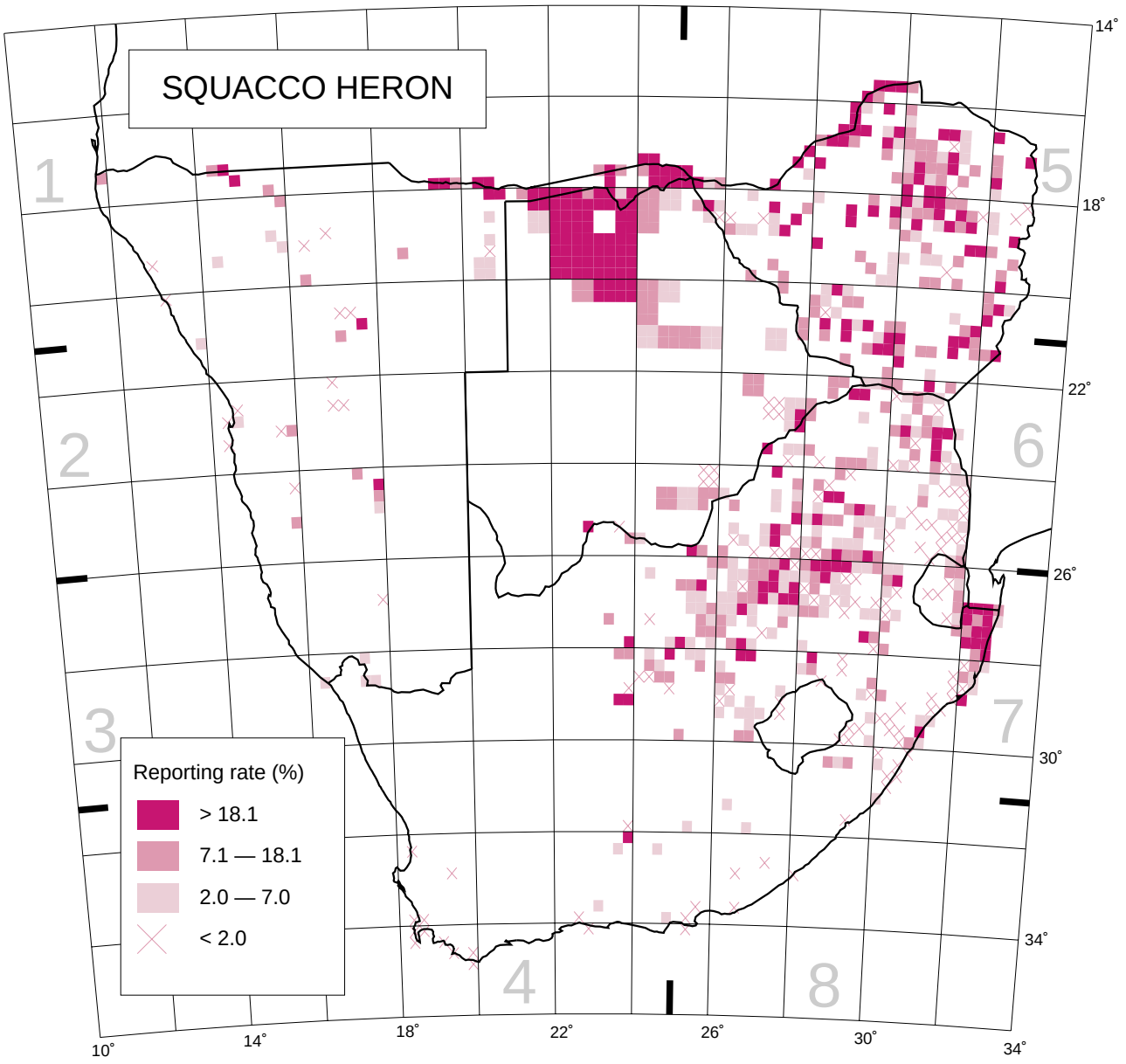
Historical distribution and conservation: There is no evidence that it had a wider distribution in the past, although at Potchefstroom (2627CA) it was once recorded as plentiful (Ayres 1873), but is now uncommon there (Brandt & Malherbe 1967). Populations in Europe decreased by more than 50% as a result of the plume-feather trade in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992), but there is no evidence that this form of impact took place in southern Africa. Destruction of its fragile wetland habitat and the use of pesticides negatively affect the Squacco Heron (Hancock & Kushlan 1994).

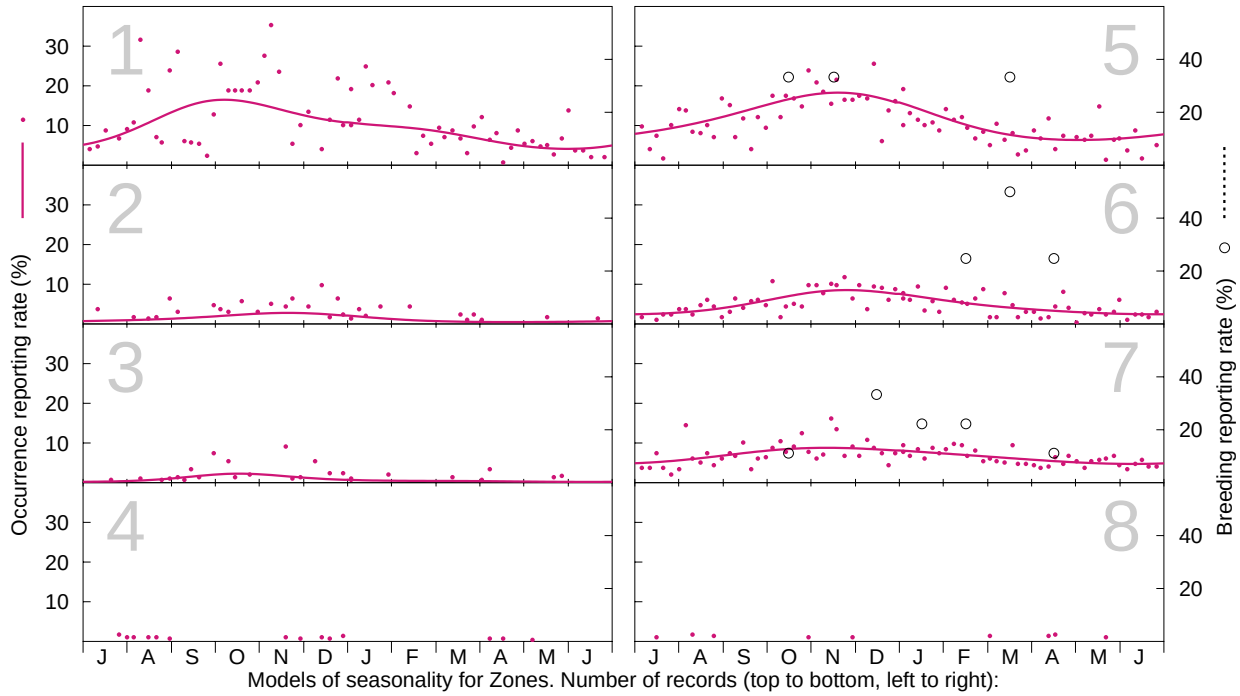
M.D. Anderson

Recorded in 822 grid cells, 18.1%
Total number of records: 7117
Mean reporting rate for range: 9.6%

Reporting rates for vegetation types

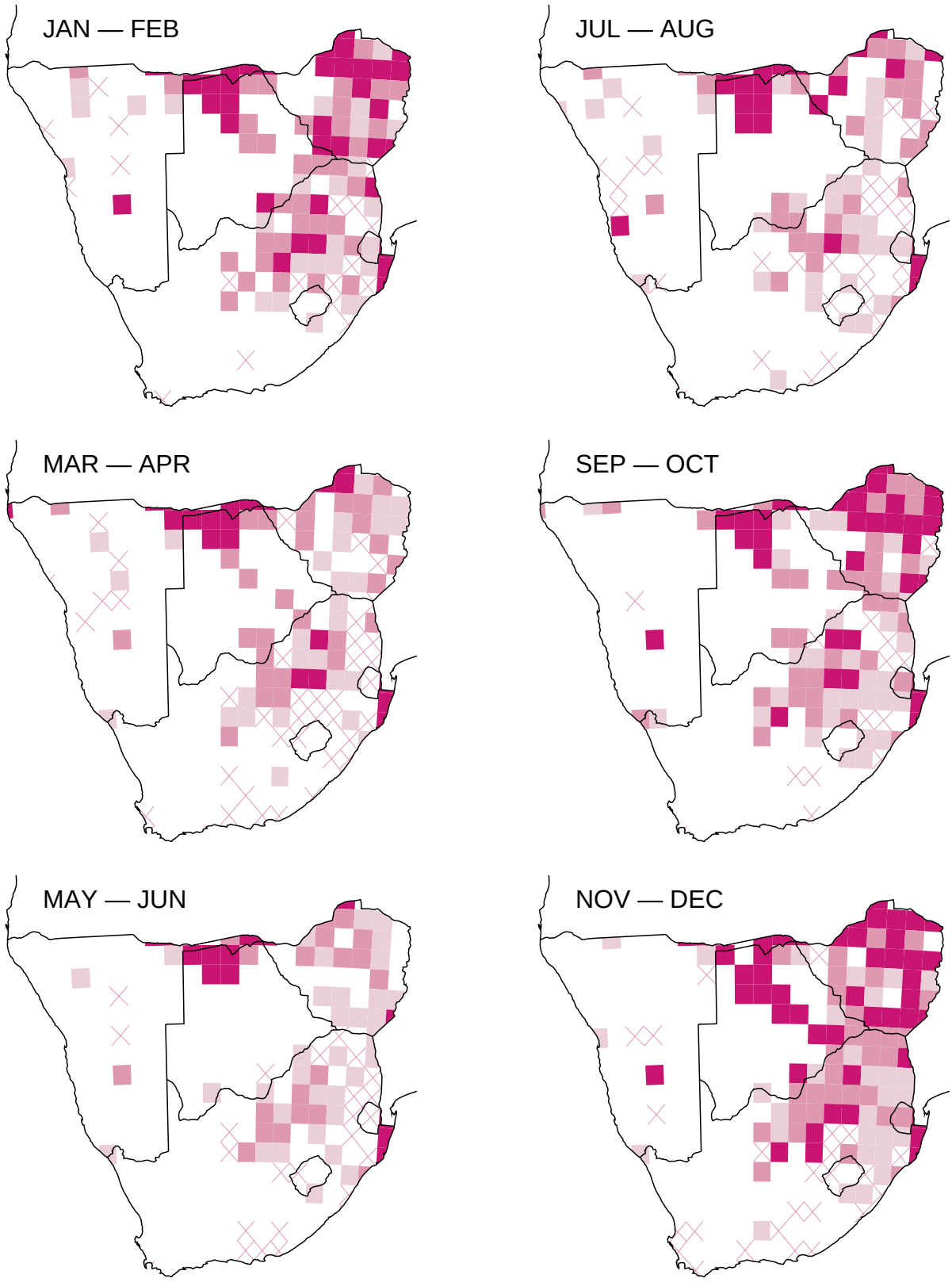






Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 301, 41, 41, 15, 1000, 560, 1315, 9; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 3, 4, 9, 0.

SQUACCO HERON



Seasonal distribution maps; one-degree grid.