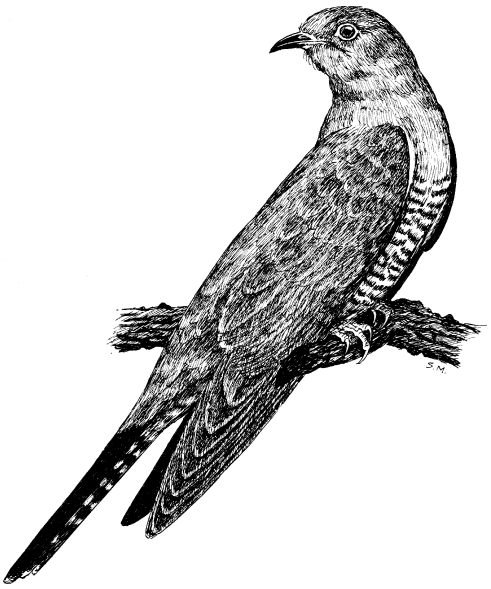


European Cuckoo

Europese Koekoek

Cuculus canorus

The European Cuckoo is a nonbreeding Palearctic migrant to western, central and southern Africa. In southern Africa it occurs mainly east of 25°E, extending westwards into northern Botswana, northern Namibia and the southern Cape Province. It was described as 'seasonally common or abundant' with 'most wintering in southern African savannas' by Fry *et al.* (1988). However, the distribution map shows that it is sparsely reported from scattered places, with a low overall reporting rate.

Until recently the African Cuckoo *C. gularis* was treated as a race of the European Cuckoo and accordingly it is difficult to evaluate the published record of the status of either species (Cyrus & Robson 1980; Rowan 1983; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Bill colour is most frequently stressed as a distinguishing feature, but except for the pattern of the undertail coverts (usually very hard to see in the field), the species are difficult to separate with certainty in the field. Also, nonbreeding and juvenile African Cuckoos from the northern savannas could also occur in the region (Fry *et al.* 1988), further confusing the picture. It has not been possible to verify all records and some may be erroneous. European Cuckoos are silent in Africa and there is consequently no subset of the data that can be considered proven correct on the basis of territorial vocalizations, which are diagnostic.

Habitat: It occurs in savanna–grassland and savanna–woodland, and apart from avoiding forest, it is catholic in its habitat choice (Seel 1984). The prime requirement is the presence of trees. In naturally treeless biomes, it is found in plantations and trees around human habitation. Its distribution coincides largely with that of the savanna biome (Rutherford & Westfall 1986). The preferred vegetation types are the moister woodlands: Okavango, Eastern Zimbabwe Highlands, Northern Kalahari and Miombo, in that order.

Movements: The entire European and part of the Asiatic population spend the nonbreeding season south of the equator, mostly south of 10°S (Seel 1984; Cramp *et al.* 1985). Asian birds probably cross the Indian Ocean to make landfall on the African east coast, and there is regular vagrancy to southern ocean islands (Irwin 1989).

The models show that first arrivals are in October; unexpectedly, this is similar regardless of latitude or longitude. The main arrival period, as shown by the time of steepest increase in reporting rates, is in early November in Zone 5 and it appears to be later further south, where the period of peak occurrence is January–February. The last birds leave in April. The time of arrival and the movements about the nonbreeding grounds are thought to be in response to rainfall and availability of food supplies (Seel 1984; Cramp *et al.* 1985; Fry *et al.* 1988).

Breeding: This cuckoo, breeding in the northern hemisphere, parasitizes over 50 passerine species, and there exist gentes which specialize in different hosts (Fry *et al.* 1988).

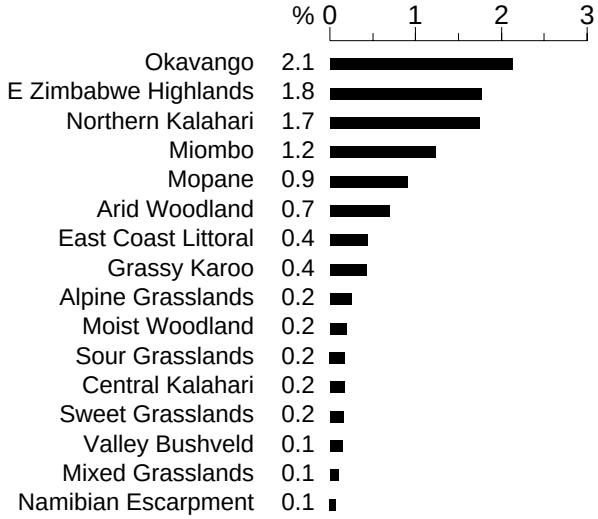
Interspecific relationships: In Zimbabwe the European Cuckoo apparently considerably outnumbers the African Cuckoo (Irwin 1981) and in randomly collected museum material the European Cuckoo is about twice as numerous as the African Cuckoo; in contrast, in the Transvaal, the African Cuckoo has been collected about five times as often as the European Cuckoo (Rowan 1983). The atlas reporting rates for the species cannot be compared meaningfully because they depend entirely on conspicuousness, which is vastly different between an unobtrusive nonbreeding migrant (European) and a breeding visitor with territorial advertisement (African). The low reporting rates of European Cuckoo do, however, suggest that it may have been widely overlooked, or that observers have confused the two species.

Historical distribution and conservation: There is no evidence for any decline in distribution. However, as the European Cuckoo has declined in numbers on its breeding grounds (Cramp *et al.* 1985), it is likely that it is now less numerous and less widespread in its nonbreeding quarters than before. Conservation problems that beset European Cuckoos probably occur on the breeding grounds and migratory routes rather than in their nonbreeding range.

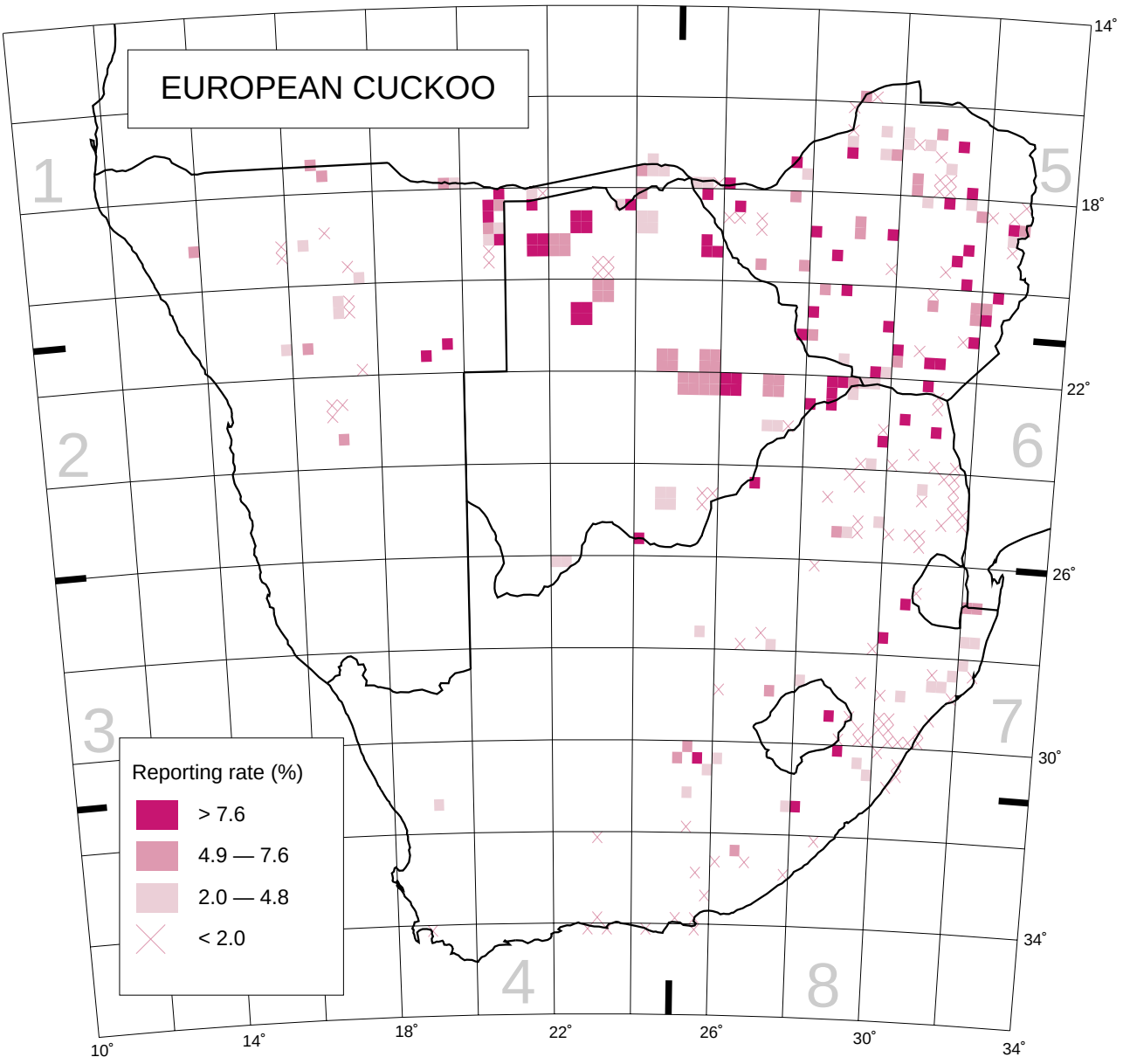
C.J. Vernon and M. Herremans

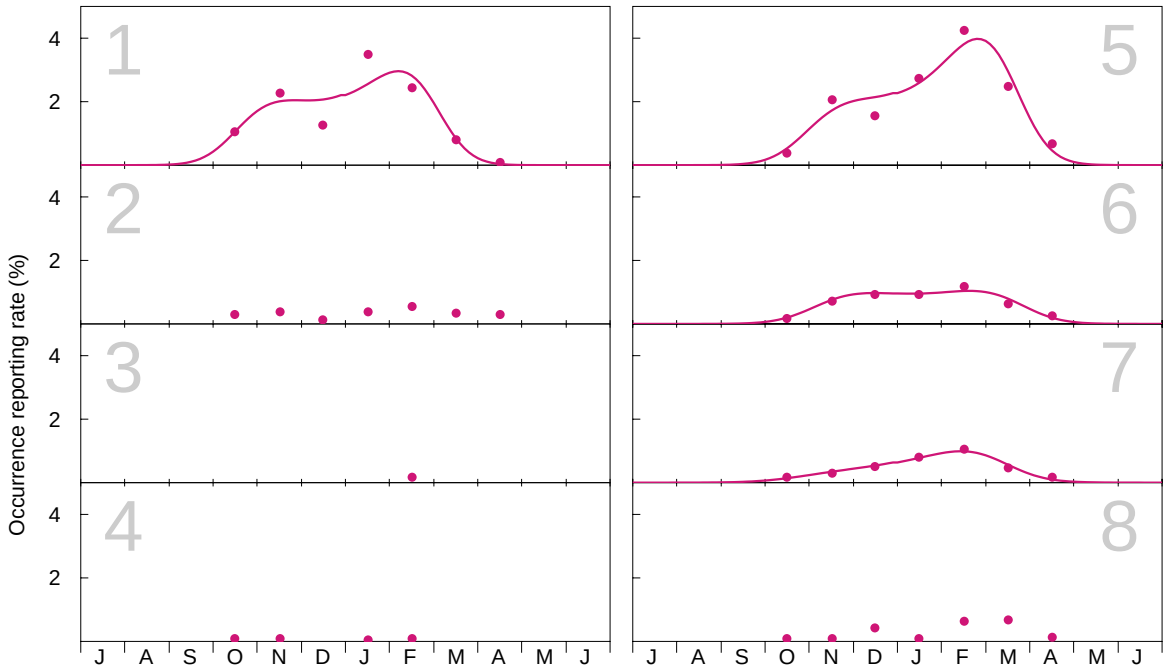
Recorded in 315 grid cells, 6.9%
Total number of records: 491
Mean reporting rate for range: 1.5%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



Also marginally in Fynbos, Nama Karoo and Succulent Karoo.





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 70, 20, 1, 7, 132, 98, 126, 20.