Red Bishop

Rooivink

Euplectes orix

In its scarlet and black breeding plumage, this is probably one of the most familiar southern African birds. The Red Bishop is found virtually throughout South Africa, Swaziland and Lesotho. It is generally common to abundant, with centres of particularly high reporting rates in the central highveld and the southwestern Cape Province. It is sparse to absent in large parts of the Limpopo Valley, the Lebombo range in eastern Swaziland, and the northern Cape Province, except along the Orange River. It occurs throughout Zimbabwe, especially in the central, higher-lying regions. In Botswana it is locally common in the southeast and east, but occurs sparsely in the Okavango and along the Boteti; it is strikingly absent from areas without permanent surface water, as in parts of the Kalahari. In Namibia it is common along the Kunene River and in the Caprivi region, and is otherwise localized in the central and southern parts. Although it is typically a lowland bird, there are records from river valleys in Lesotho at 2900 m (Bonde 1993).

Red Bishops are common throughout southern Mozambique (Clancey 1971c) and they extend north through Angola, southern Zaire and Zambia to eastern Kenya and southern Uganda. From central Kenya and northern Uganda across to West Africa, this species is replaced by the Northern Red Bishop *E. franciscanus* (Hall & Moreau 1970; Lewis & Pomeroy 1989).

While male Red Bishops in breeding plumage are unmistakable, females and nonbreeding birds are frequently overlooked or misidentified, even as museum specimens (cf. Craig 1992a). This problem is compounded by the communal flocking and roosting of this species with other similar nonbreeding *Ploceus, Euplectes* and *Quelea* species.

Habitat: Red Bishops are primarily grassland birds, but are rarely found far from water. In other vegetation types with high reporting rates they are likely to be found in areas cleared for cultivation, e.g. in the southwestern Cape Province. They are closely associated with agriculture in many areas. Nesting is chiefly in reedbeds, rarely in other vegetation. Their relative absence from the Transkei may reflect a shortage of untrampled reedbeds and a lack of food because of overgrazing.

Movements: Seasonal changes in reporting rates are obviously related to seasonal moult, with the conspicuous and readily identifiable breeding plumage of the males boosting reporting rates in the summer. Nevertheless, although individual birds return to the same breeding sites (Rowan 1964), they may move away during the nonbreeding season. Ringed birds have been recovered up to 200 km from the ringing site (Craig 1982a), and one ringed in KwaZulu-Natal was recaptured 1215 km to the southeast, near Cape Town (Oatley 1996).

Breeding: In the winter-rainfall region of the southwestern Cape Province, the breeding season is largely August–December, but is mainly October–March over much of the summer-rainfall region in South Africa. Most breeding is later still (December–April) in Namibia and Zimbabwe. The same pattern emerges from nest record data (Craig 1982b).

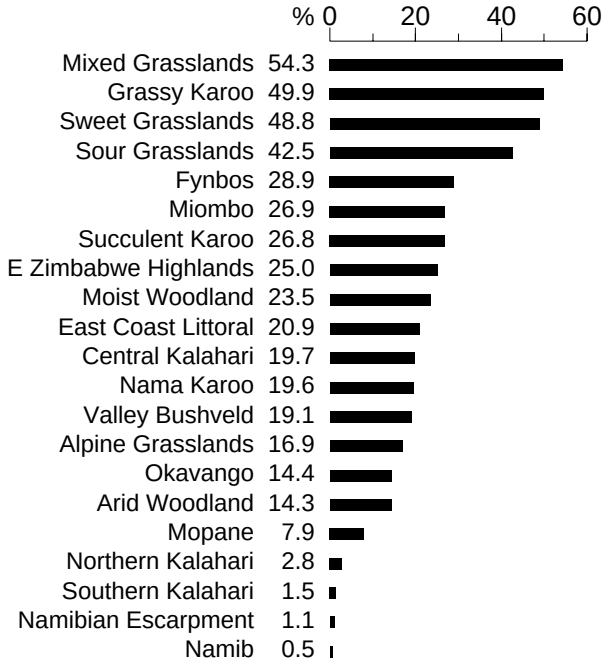
Historical distribution and conservation: Crop farming and the building of dams have certainly modified its distribution and led to an increase in numbers, although the draining of wetlands and the loss of reedbeds have no doubt caused some local reductions in numbers. Such changes have seldom been documented (e.g. Brooke 1965b).

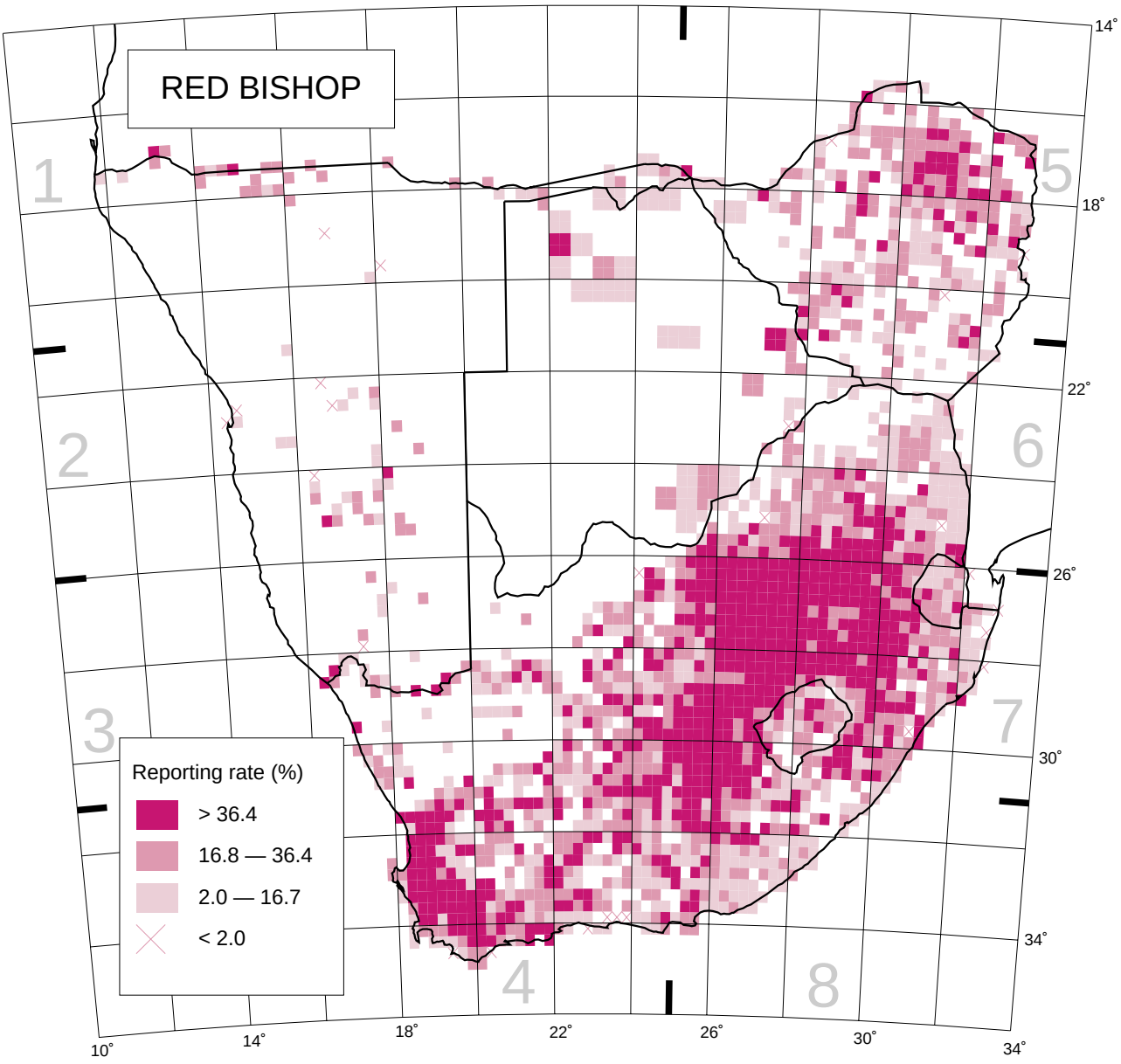
The crop-raiding habits of the Red Bishop can bring it into conflict with agricultural interests (e.g. Jarvis 1985) and it is an unprotected pest species in the Cape Province. It is destroyed in large numbers in cereal-growing areas where selective control using mist-nets has proved successful in many instances (McVeigh 1987).

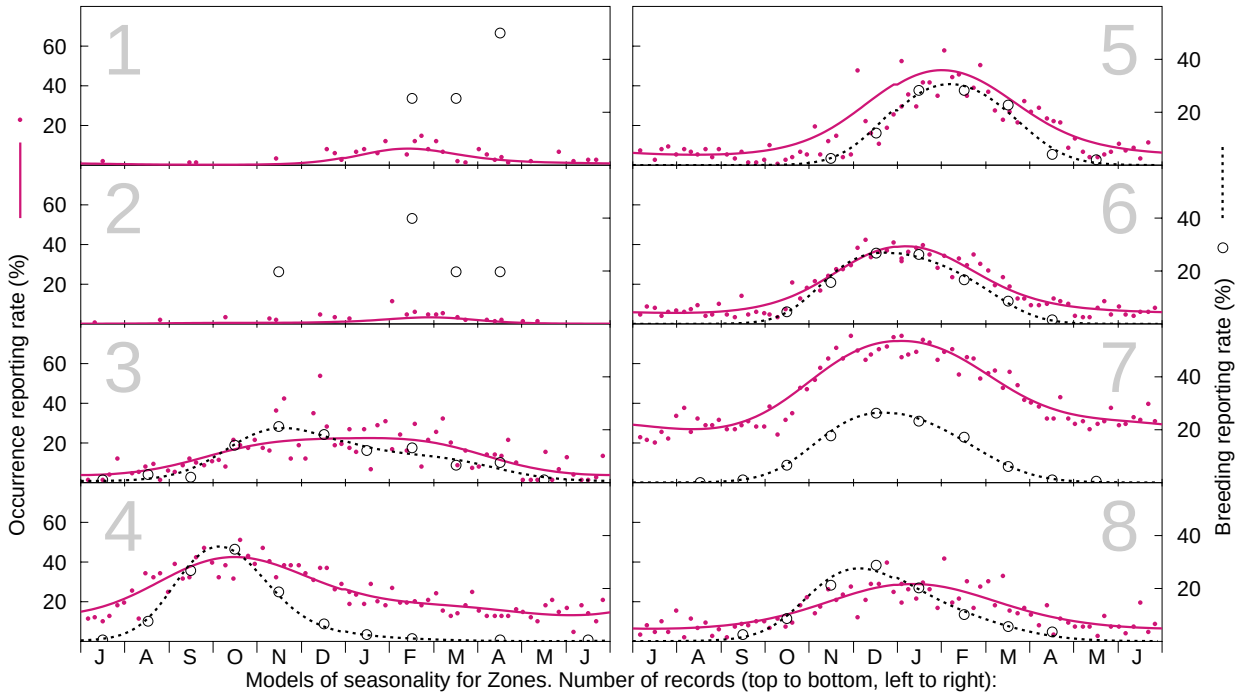
A.J.F.K. Craig

Recorded in 1942 grid cells, 42.8%
Total number of records: 40 240
Mean reporting rate for range: 32.4%

Reporting rates for vegetation types







Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 73, 37, 699, 2149, 1693, 1921, 8815, 837; Breeding: 4, 5, 93, 436, 114, 283, 1303, 178.