

## Black Harrier

### Witkruispaddavreter

#### *Circus maurus*

This small, striking 'dry country' harrier has the most restricted range of the world's 13 harrier species and is endemic to southern Africa (Nieboer 1973; Amadon & Bull 1988). Its breeding stronghold is southwestern South Africa (Van der Merwe 1981). An isolated resident population, comprising no more than five pairs, occurs in northwestern Namibia in the Hoanib (1912, 1913) and Uniab (2013A) river floodplains (S. Braine pers. comm.). The present map does not show any atlas records in Botswana, where six records exist (Penry 1994). With the present map as reference, the record from Lake Ngami (2022B) need not necessarily be considered dubious (*contra* Penry 1994). At suitable sites, high concentrations of breeding pairs can occur, some nests being only 50 m apart and with average densities of 1 nest/km<sup>2</sup> (Steyn & Myburgh 1989b; P. Chadwick unpubl. data).

It is unlikely to be confused with any other harriers because of its bold black-and-white plumage. Very rare melanistic forms of both Montagu's *C. pygargus* and European Marsh *C. aeruginosus* Harriers occur (Clark 1987; Clarke 1990) but differ from the Black Harrier in having no tail barring or white rump. The atlas data accurately represent the current world distribution.

**Habitat:** It hunts over dry and damp grasslands, fynbos and karoo. It also exploits cultivated lands. The known range of the Vlei Rat *Otomys irroratus* (Smithers 1983) coincides accurately with its present distribution (excluding Zimbabwe).

**Movements:** Movement away from fynbos breeding grounds *c.* March–June is apparent in the models and seasonal maps. This is in accordance with data in Van der Merwe (1981), and is unlikely to arise from greater visibility of young or foraging birds at this time. The destinations of nonbreeding birds appear to be the grasslands and Karoo to the north. However, it is known to breed as far northeast as the Kwa-Zulu-Natal Drakensberg (2829AC) (Van Jaarsveld 1986). The seasonal maps show little variation in the central part of the range (eastern Cape Province) and along the far southwestern coastal plain, but do show a marked movement into the far northeast during late summer and winter (March–August), and to the west coast in midwinter to early summer (July–December). Some local variations in abundance may reflect population fluctuations of its chief small mammal prey, the

Vlei Rat (P. Chadwick unpubl. data), which breeds in response to good rains (Taylor & Green 1976) and may prompt movements of harriers.

**Breeding:** The atlas data largely span August–December. Two December breeding records have come from KwaZulu-Natal (Van Jaarsveld 1986; P. Bishop unpubl. data). Previous breeding records from this area are thus probably accurate (Van der Merwe 1981). Young birds are regular in northwestern Namibia but nests have not been found (S. Braine unpubl. data).

**Interspecific relationships:** It occurs adjacent to African Marsh Harrier *C. ranivorus* in the western Cape Province where it nests in dry scrub next to reed marshes occupied by breeding Marsh Harriers (P. Chadwick unpubl. data). Few agonistic interactions have been recorded (Van der Merwe 1981). There is little overlap with the distributions of Montagu's and Pallid *C. macrourus* Harriers, although Kemp (1977) suggested that the Black Harrier became commoner as the migrant harriers became scarcer, but this remains unproven.

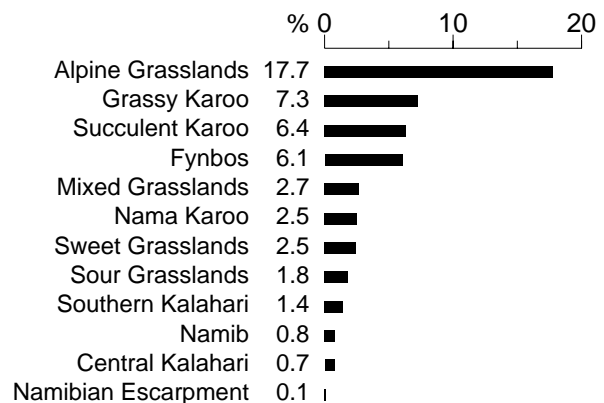
**Historical distribution and conservation:** Population trends (Van der Merwe 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b) suggest that it was rare in the 1920s and 1930s and has since become increasingly common. It has recently appeared in areas where it was previously not encountered (Uys 1978; Simmons 1989a). This may reflect land-use changes and an adaptation to cereal crop farming. However, its highly restricted range, tiny population inside protected areas (<100 birds), and a world population estimated at less than 1000 individuals (Siegfried 1992), suggest that it will always be inherently vulnerable to extinction. The Black Harrier is considered globally near-threatened (Collar *et al.* 1994) and its conservation status in South Africa should be raised from 'neither rare nor vulnerable' (Brooke 1984b) to 'rare', with appropriate conservation and research priority.

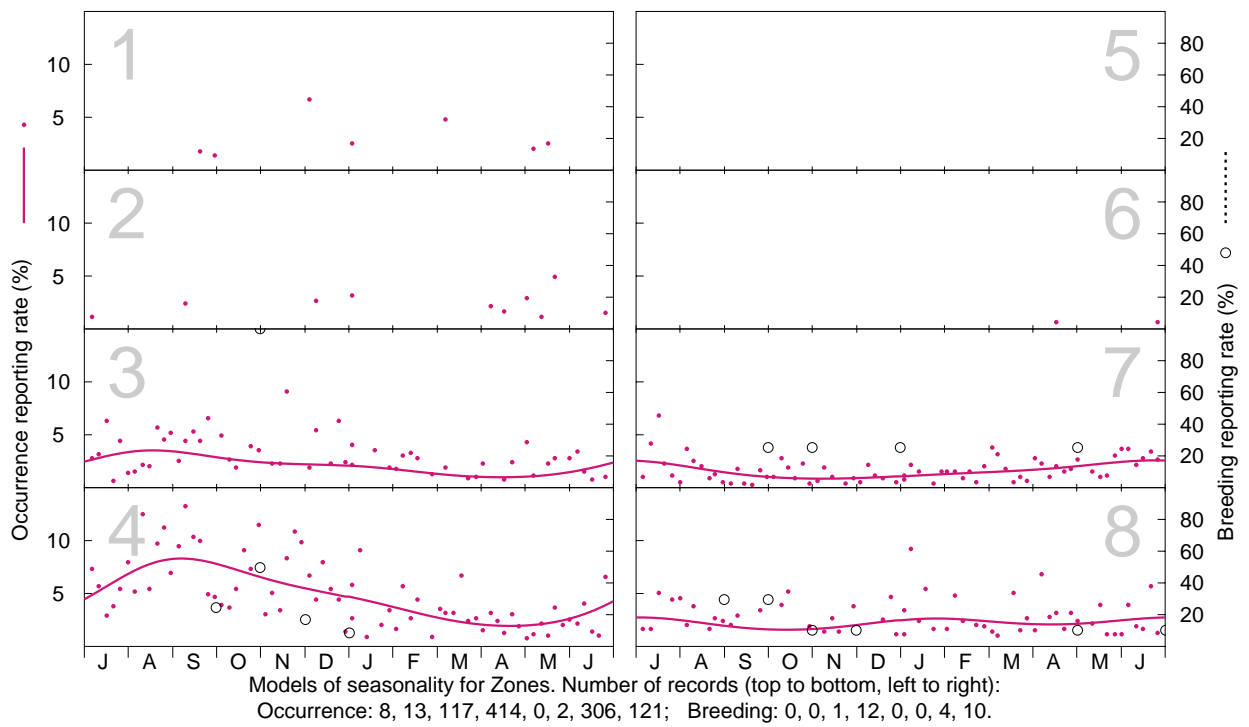
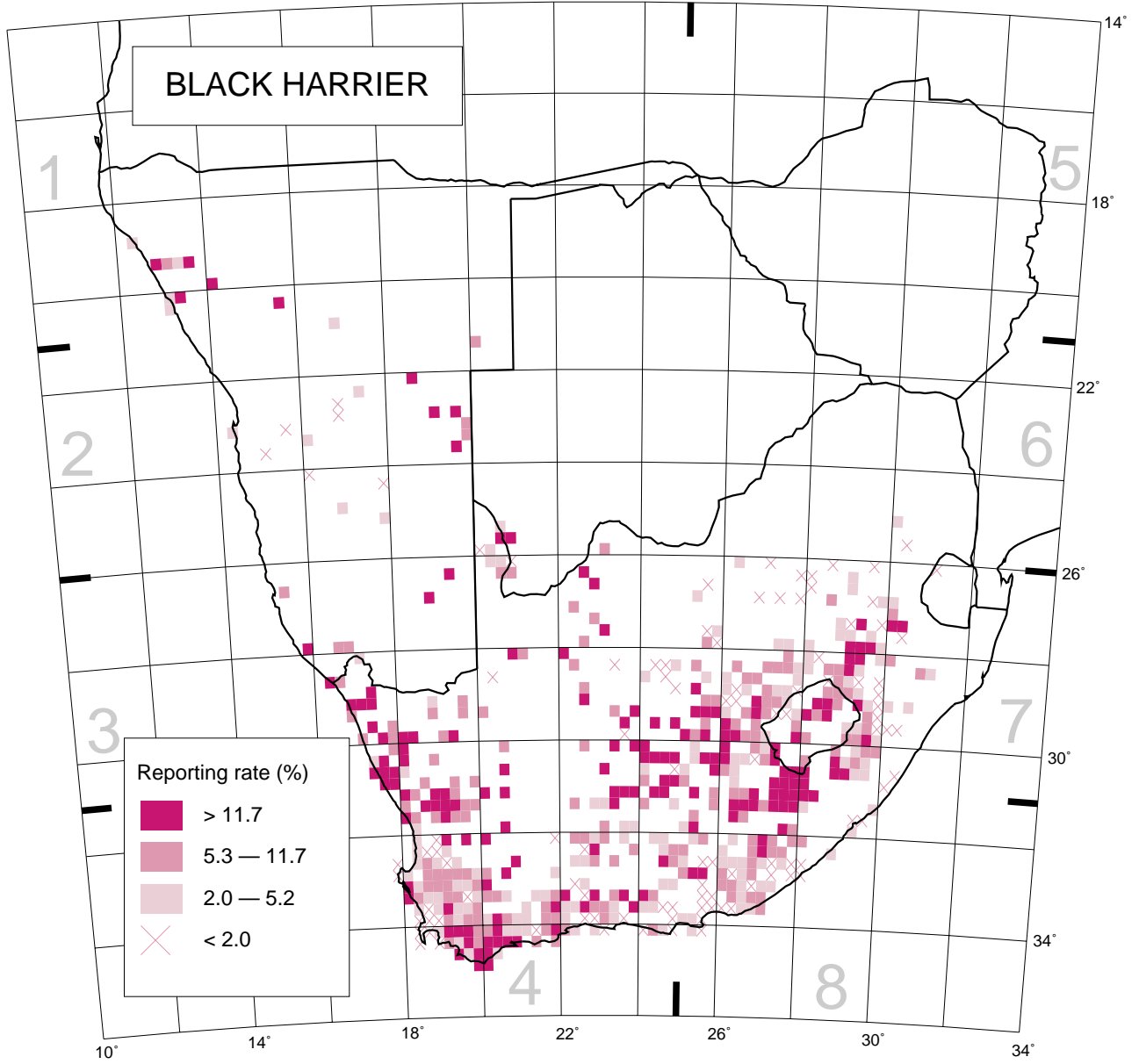
Direct threats include habitat loss (Steyn & Myburgh 1989b), fynbos and grassland fires, and cereal harvesting. Pesticide residues may be associated with relatively high non-hatching rates (Van der Merwe 1981; De Kock & Simmons 1988; P. Chadwick unpubl. data). Breeding success is nevertheless relatively high, especially when compared with the declining African Marsh Harrier (Van der Merwe 1981; P. Chadwick unpubl. data).

R.E. Simmons

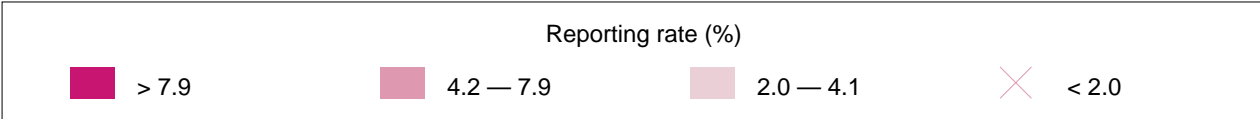
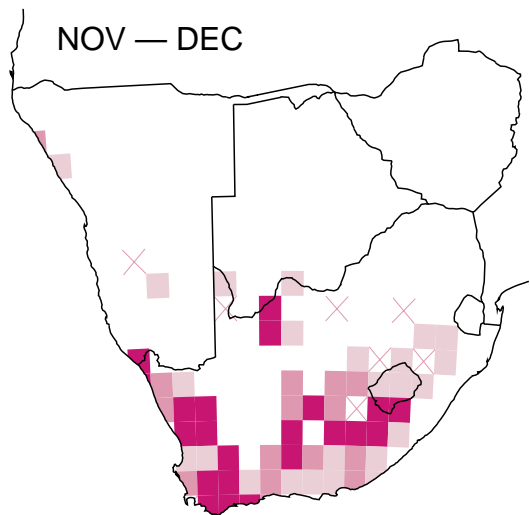
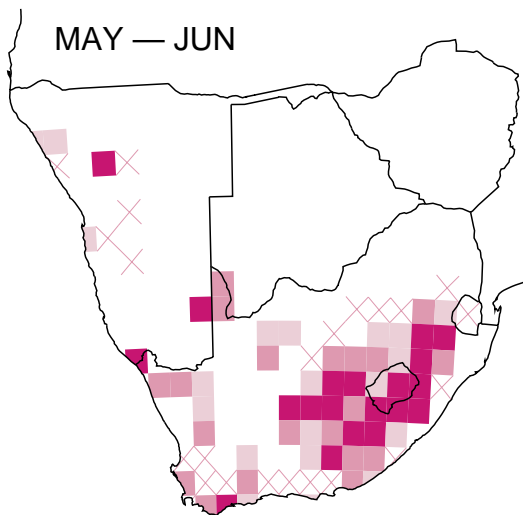
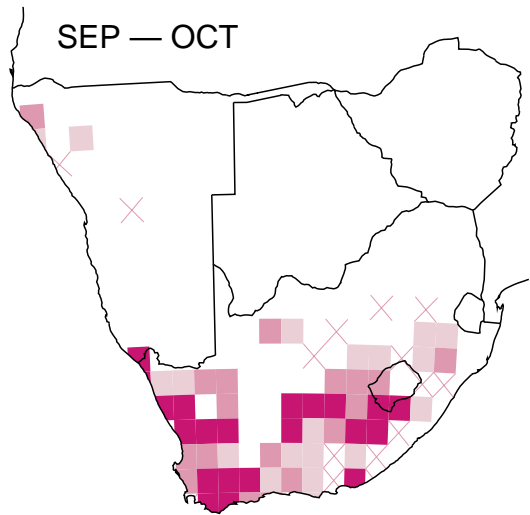
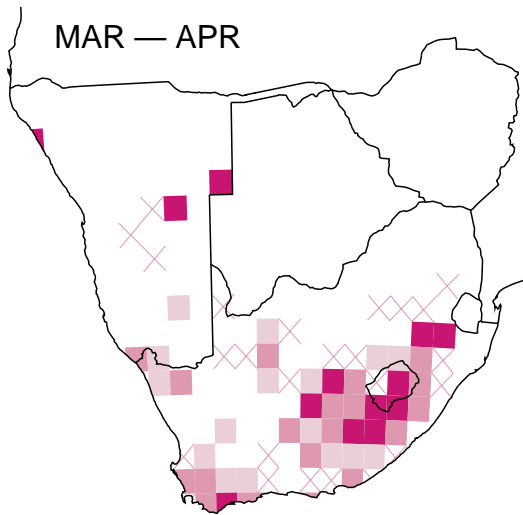
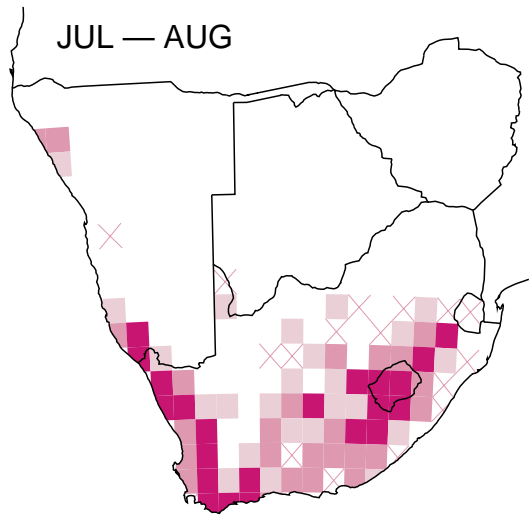
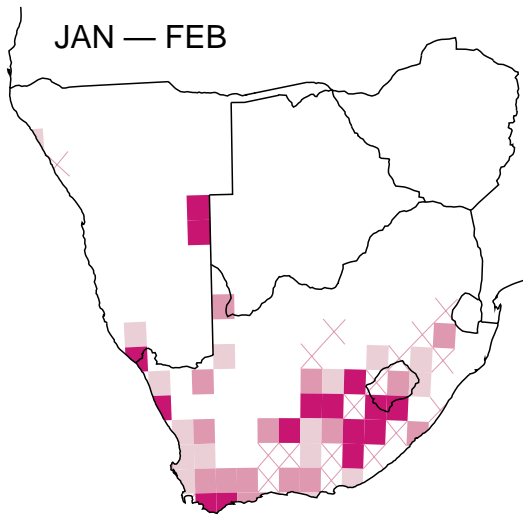
Recorded in 595 grid cells, 13.1%  
Total number of records: 3144  
Mean reporting rate for range: 6.2%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





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Seasonal distribution maps; one-degree grid.