

## Greater Honeyguide

### Grootheuningwyser

*Indicator indicator*

The Greater Honeyguide is endemic to Africa south of the Sahara; it is distributed from Senegal to Ethiopia southwards, but absent from tropical forests and the arid southwest (Fry *et al.* 1988). In southern Africa it is scarce in or absent from those areas of Namibia, Botswana and the Cape Province with rainfall less than *c.* 400–500 mm p.a.

Most grid cells with high reporting rates lie in the tropics, and in the subtropical lowveld of the Transvaal and Swaziland. Reporting rates attenuate southwestwards towards the Cape. This reflects the tropical origins of the species.

It is probably more frequently heard than seen, and the two-note 'vic-torr' call is distinctive. It is the only member of the Indicatoridae in which males and females differ in plumage.

**Habitat:** It is found in a wide range of woodland habitats outside of dense forest, and has adapted readily to plantations of pine and eucalypts (Fry *et al.* 1988). The vegetation types with highest reporting rates were the Okavango, Miombo, Mopane and Arid and Moist Woodland.

**Movements:** Although individuals are known to be resident within their home range throughout the year, there is some evidence of local, seasonal and nomadic movements in some parts of the range, particularly in Ethiopia and the Sudan (Friedmann 1955). It is unknown to what extent birds may respond to local changes in the abundance of bees, but such changes may induce a degree of nomadism (Friedmann 1955). The seasonal variation in reporting rates shown in the models is more likely to reflect changes in visual and vocal conspicuousness than migratory move-

ments of southern African birds. In all Zones, reporting rates were highest during the spring–early summer breeding season when males are vocal at their 'call posts' and displaying; females are then likely to be actively searching for the nests of their hosts.

**Breeding:** Egglaying has been recorded September–January, with a peak in October in Zimbabwe, and November in KwaZulu-Natal and the Transvaal (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Atlas records spanned October–April.

**Interspecific relationships:** This is the honeyguide that has given the family its name: its habit of guiding humans to beehives is unique and no other honeyguide has been unequivocally demonstrated to guide. It has never been reliably observed to guide Honey Badgers *Mellivora capensis* or other mammals to hives (Dean & Macdonald 1981; Macdonald 1994). Guiding has not often been reported in southern Africa in recent decades.

The Greater Honeyguide is a brood parasite with 39 known hosts, including bee-eaters, kingfishers, Hoopoe *Upupa epops*, woodpeckers, barbets and 13 passerine species, especially the Pied Starling *Spreo bicolor* in the eastern Cape Province and KwaZulu-Natal (Friedmann 1955; Fry *et al.* 1988). The majority of these hosts breed in holes in banks; hosts nesting in tree holes are less frequently parasitized (Friedmann 1955).

**Historical distribution and conservation:** There is no evidence that the distribution has changed since the beginning of the 20th century when Stark & Sclater (1903) described it as 'widely spread all over Africa, from Senegambia to Abyssinia southwards to the Cape Colony, seems to be nowhere plentiful within our limits'. Friedmann (1955) suggested that elimination of wild beehives might cause local decreases in population sizes. Lack of response by humans to the guiding call may lead to the loss of this complex bird–mammal relationship (Dean & Macdonald 1981).

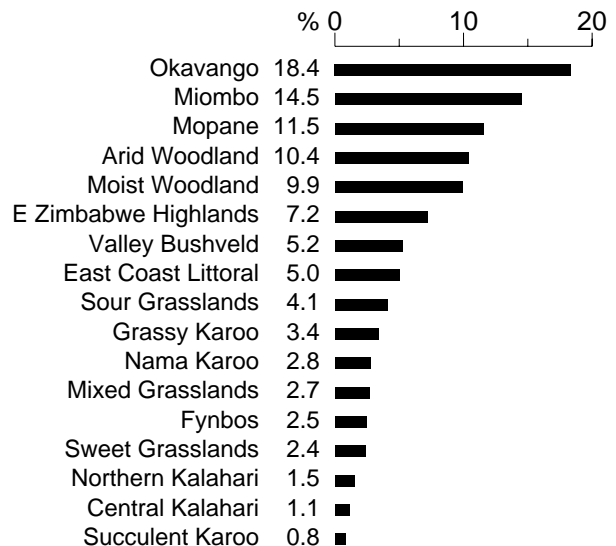
*C.J. Vernon and L.G. Underhill*

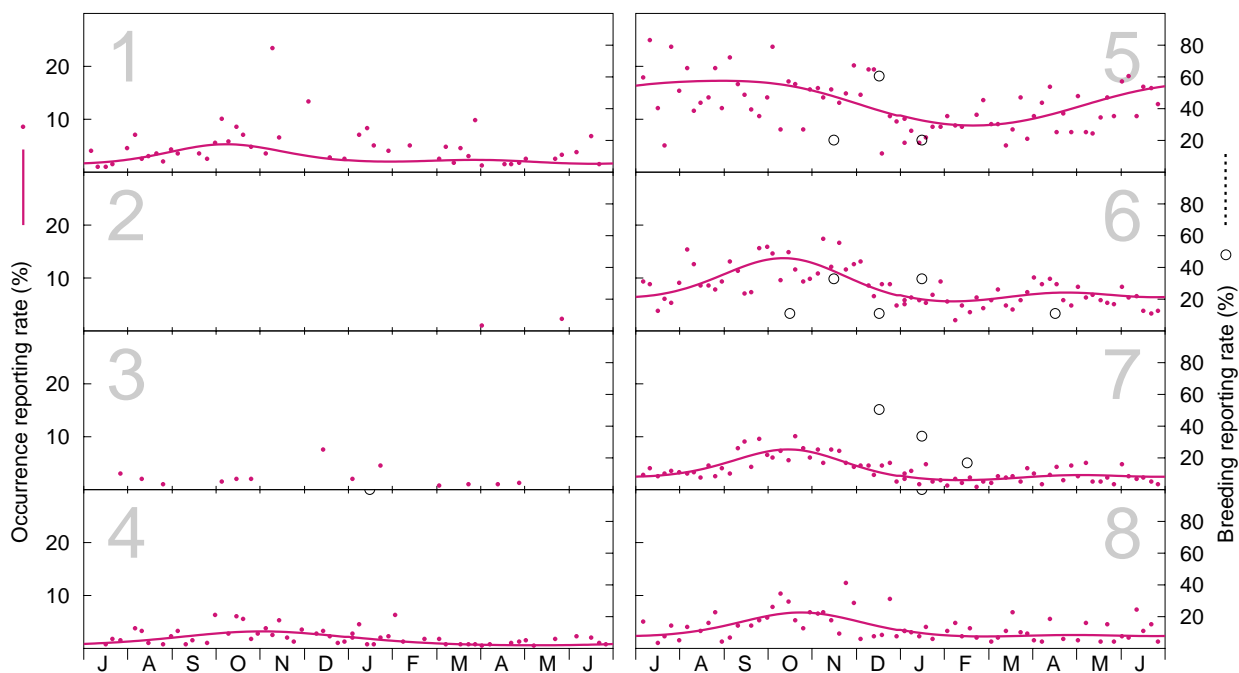
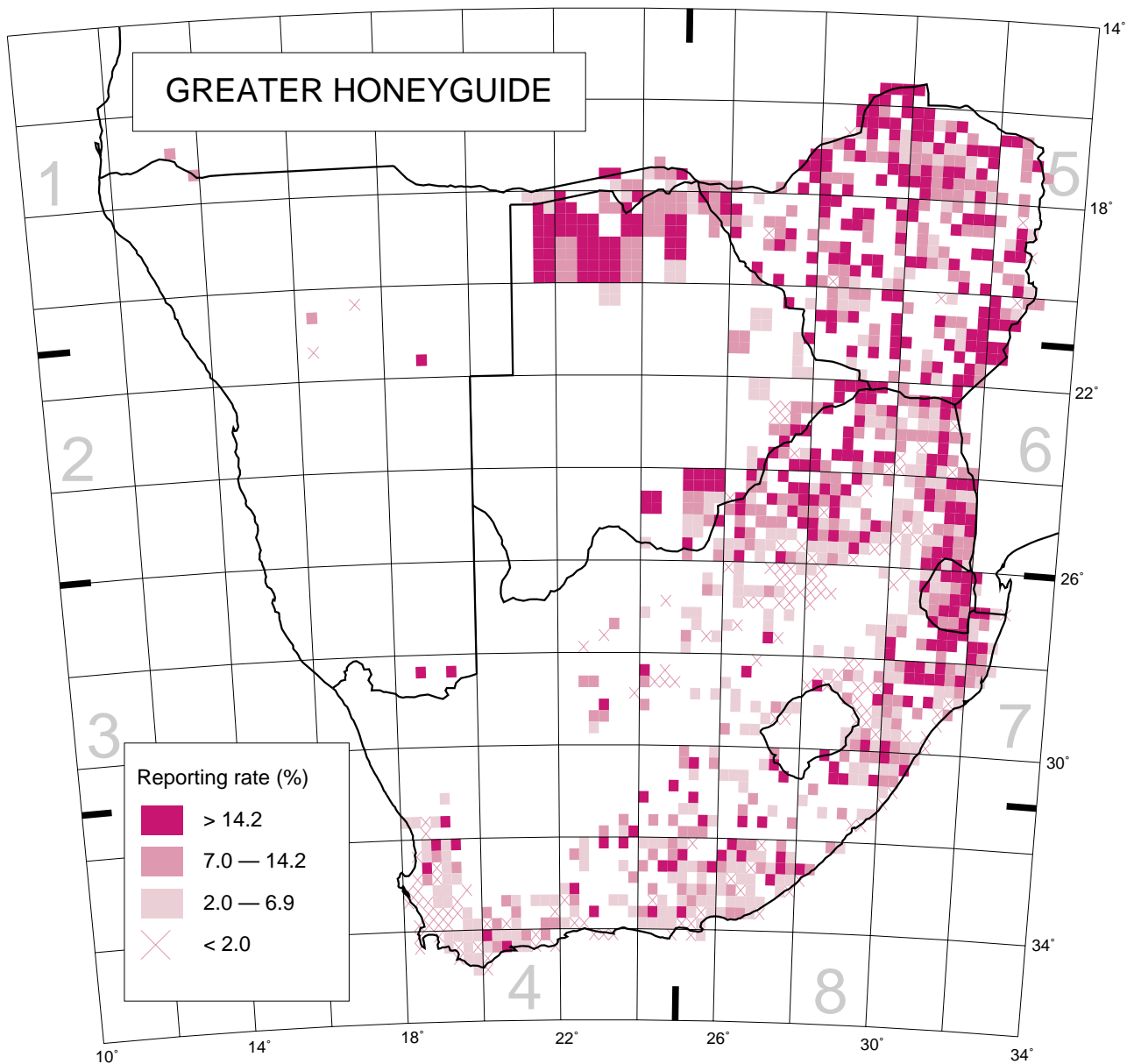
Recorded in 1204 grid cells, 26.5%

Total number of records: 7873

Mean reporting rate for range: 8.3%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 91, 2, 20, 140, 1194, 946, 708, 201; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 1, 5, 9, 6, 1.