

Black Crow

Swartkraai

Corvus capensis

The Black Crow is an African corvid, with two subspecies having disjoint ranges (Goodwin 1986): *C. c. korofanensis* occurs only in northeastern Africa, centred on Ethiopia; the nominate subspecies occurs from Angola and Zambia southwards, extending across southern Africa in the remarkable pattern shown on the map. It is distributed almost continuously along the coast and adjacent interior from the Kunene River, through Cape Agulhas (3420CC) to Richards Bay (2832CC). An axis of distribution runs from the Etosha Pan through Botswana to the southern Transvaal and western Swaziland. It also occurs in the central plateau of Zimbabwe, mostly above 1000 m (Marshall 1979; Irwin 1981).

It is the only all-black crow in the atlas region. It is less aerial than other southern African corvids (Wilson 1993), but is a vocal and conspicuous species that is unlikely to have been overlooked. It may be confused with the White-necked Raven *C. albicollis* if seen in flight from below, otherwise unmistakable. It is an omnivorous species, usually seen feeding on the ground in pairs or groups of up to hundreds of birds (Skead 1952; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Habitat: It is most common in open habitats with scattered patches of trees or wooded watercourses (Goodwin 1986). It occurs commonly in areas where the natural vegetation has been cleared and replaced with cereal croplands. This applies particularly to the Valley Bushveld and to the Fynbos along the south coast. Generally, in the east of the atlas region this is a montane grassland species, and in the west it is a bird of open, arid areas. It is uncommon in the Karoo and well-developed woodlands.

Movements: There is no suggestion of seasonal movements in the literature. The models present some evidence for a north–south movement in the northwest of the atlas region, although this is poorly defined and is possibly unreliable because of the wide scatter of reporting rates.

Breeding: The models show that most breeding occurs July–January in all parts of the atlas region, except the northwest (Zone 1) where the season extends October–April. These data agree with previous information (Winterbottom 1975).

Interspecific relationships: The distributions of the Black and Pied *C. albus* Crows show both sympatry and

allopatry in southern Africa. The largest area of allopatry, where only the Black Crow is abundant, is in western Botswana and Hereroland, Namibia. The Black Crow is also common in the southeastern Transvaal grassland and in central Lesotho, where the distribution of the Pied Crow has striking gaps.

Disused crow nests are often taken over by raptors, especially Lanner Falcons *Falco biarmicus* and Greater Kestrels *F. rupicoloides*. The Black Crow is a host of the Great Spotted Cuckoo *Clamator glandarius* (Payne & Payne 1967).

Historical distribution and conservation: It is likely that the distribution of this adaptable species has been greatly influenced by human activities. Black Crows frequently build their nests on telephone poles and electricity pylons, and the erection of these structures has probably

facilitated the spread of breeding crows, and consequently falcons and kestrels, into otherwise unsuitable, treeless areas. Although it is less inclined to scavenge around human habitation than the Pied Crow, and is not frequently seen in urban areas, the spread of agriculture in many areas has been to its advantage. Persecution and incidental poisoning by small-stock farmers may have lowered populations in areas where the species occurs naturally, although it is not known to attack lambs in the manner of other, larger corvids. It is regarded as a pest by maize farmers (Winterbottom 1975).

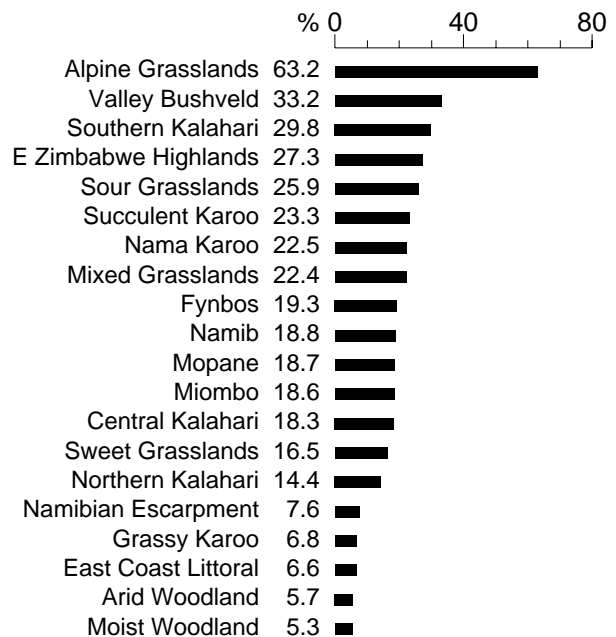
A.R. Jenkins and L.G. Underhill

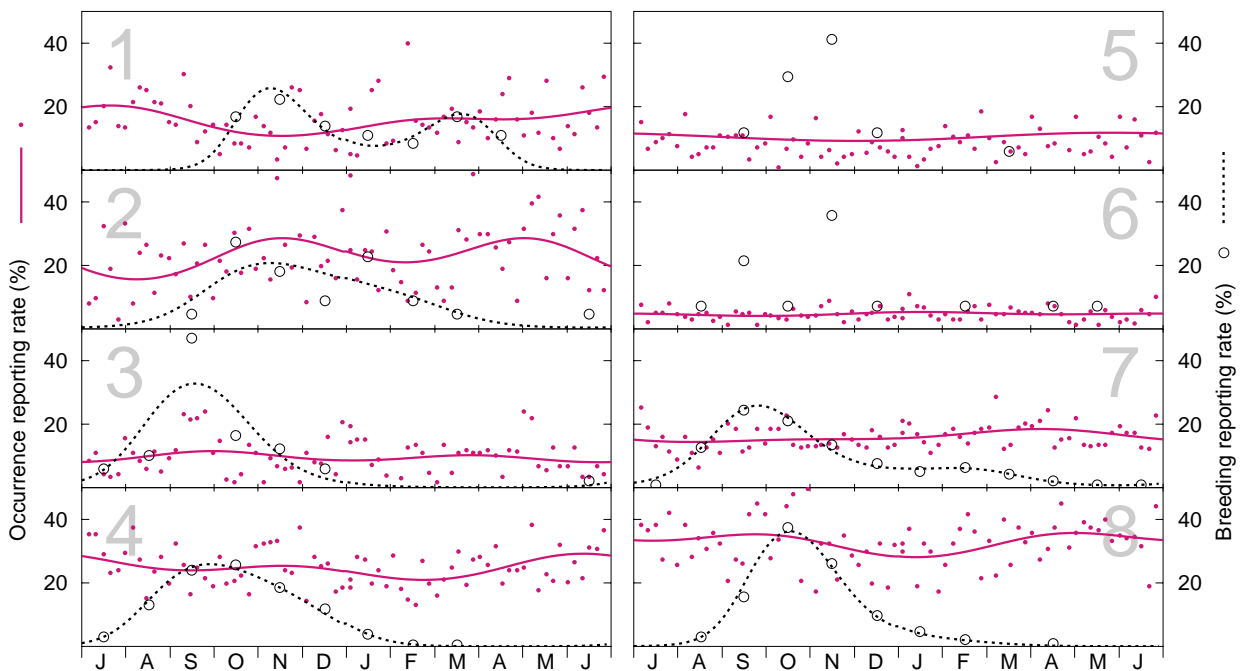
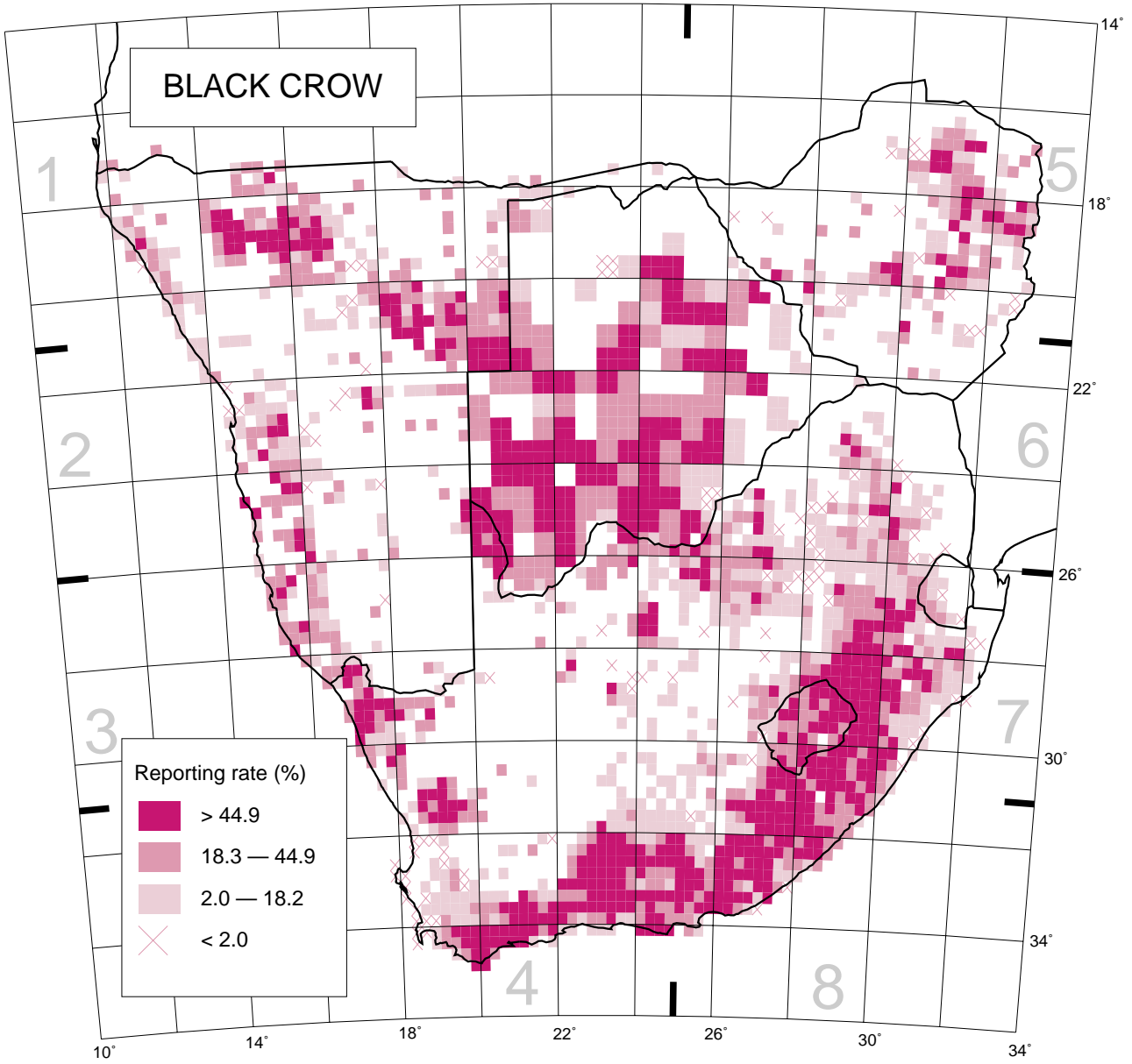
Recorded in 2209 grid cells, 48.7%

Total number of records: 26 467

Mean reporting rate for range: 23.9%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 532, 829, 529, 2172, 919, 537, 3135, 1810; Breeding: 36, 22, 49, 247, 17, 14, 95, 130.