



Redbacked Shrike

Rooiruglaksman

Lanius collurio

The Redbacked Shrike breeds in the Palearctic and the majority migrate to southern Africa (Curry-Lindahl 1981; Pearson & Lack 1992). It has a strong preference for dry *Acacia* thornveld and there are marked strongholds in the Kalahari, the Limpopo drainage, the Transvaal and Swaziland lowveld, and northern KwaZulu-Natal (Bruderer & Bruderer 1993). Records from broadleaved woodlands in the relatively mesic northeast pertain mainly to birds on passage. The three subspecies overlap widely in the region (Clancey 1980b; Irwin 1981).

It is abundant in the thornbelt, with average densities of 5–15 birds/10 ha and reaching 2–8 birds/ha (Herremans 1993c; Bruderer & Bruderer 1994). The total population in the region could be a few tens of millions.

It defends solitary territories; males are dominant over females and perch and behave more conspicuously.

Habitat: It primarily inhabits medium dense thornveld (Bruderer & Bruderer 1994). Males prefer more open habitats with fewer and smaller trees, compared with females which skulk in taller woodland (Bruderer & Bruderer 1990, 1994; Herremans 1997). Some localities therefore have a higher ratio of males to females, other sites the reverse (Swynnerton 1908; Hoesch & Niethammer 1940; Becker 1974). It also occurs frequently on fallow land with coppicing *Acacia* bushes and along the ecotone between arable land and bushveld. The core distribution is on the periphery of the Kalahari and in *Acacia* and pockets of scrub in adjacent broadleaved woodland. It drinks regularly when water is available (pers. obs), but can go without drinking (Irwin 1956a; Skead 1975a).

Movements: Arrival is strikingly synchronized throughout the region (Underhill *et al.* 1992b). The first birds arrive in late October, the majority from mid- to late November (Underhill *et al.* 1992b; Herremans 1994d). Departure is even faster and more synchronized: in the first ten days of April (usually in a few nights only), the region is vacated. Higher reporting rates in the north-west (Zone 1) upon arrival, and in the northeast (Zones 5–6) upon departure, suggest that more birds come in from the west and leave via the east, extending the known loop-migration (Zink 1975; Cramp *et al.* 1993) into southern Africa.

Site fidelity to the nonbreeding grounds or passage routes has been demonstrated by recaptures of ringed birds (Skead 1973; Irwin 1981; Hanmer 1989b; Medland 1993b; Herremans *et al.* 1995b). Ringing recoveries are from Germany to Zimbabwe and Malawi (2); a bird ringed in Zambia was reported from Czechoslovakia, and one from the Transvaal was on passage in Yemen in May (Irwin 1981; Harris & Arlott 1988; Oatley 1996; SAFRING).

Interspecific relationships: It forages mainly by pouncing; the potential competitors in this guild are flycatchers rather than most Afrotropical shrikes (Herremans 1992a; Bruderer 1994). Niche specialization is evident in the guild (Bruderer 1994), but the complementarity between the core distributions of the Palearctic *Lanius* shrikes, and the 'Kalahari hole' in the range of the resident Fiscal Shrike *L. collaris*, is noteworthy. The Marico Flycatcher *Melaenornis mariquensis* is similar in size to the Redbacked Shrike (and in appearance to the female), and both species overlap widely; the former is most abundant at the edge of its range in the southern Kalahari, where Redbacked Shrikes are uncommon, while it is virtually absent from the Transvaal lowveld, a stronghold of the latter. The Redbacked Shrike prefers taller and denser bushveld than the Lesser Grey Shrike *L. minor*, and more males than females are found alongside the latter species (Herremans 1997) which may actively displace the Redbacked Shrike (Loske 1984–85; Ginn *et al.* 1989; pers. obs). It is less common towards the drier southwest where the Lesser Grey Shrike is more abundant (Loske 1984–85; Ginn *et al.* 1989).

Historical distribution and conservation: It has declined dramatically over the western part of the breeding range (Cramp *et al.* 1993; Tucker & Heath 1994), and occurs at higher densities in southern Africa than on the breeding grounds. Loske (1984–85) found markedly fewer birds in Namibia than Becker (1974, 1975) a decade earlier, and suggested that prolonged droughts could be a cause of decline. Drought sensitivity may be enhanced by high site-fidelity (Herremans *et al.* 1995b). Overgrazing by livestock reduces prey, e.g. grasshoppers (Barker 1985), and therefore probably habitat quality, but ultimately results in thornbush encroachment and expansion of the Redbacked Shrike's preferred habitat.

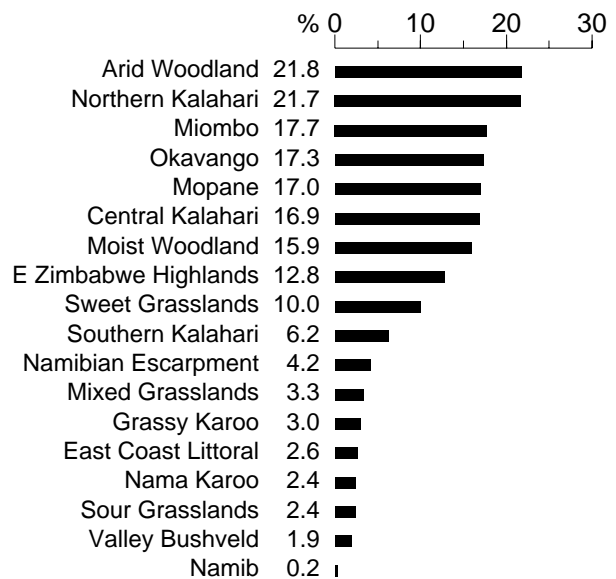
M. Herremans

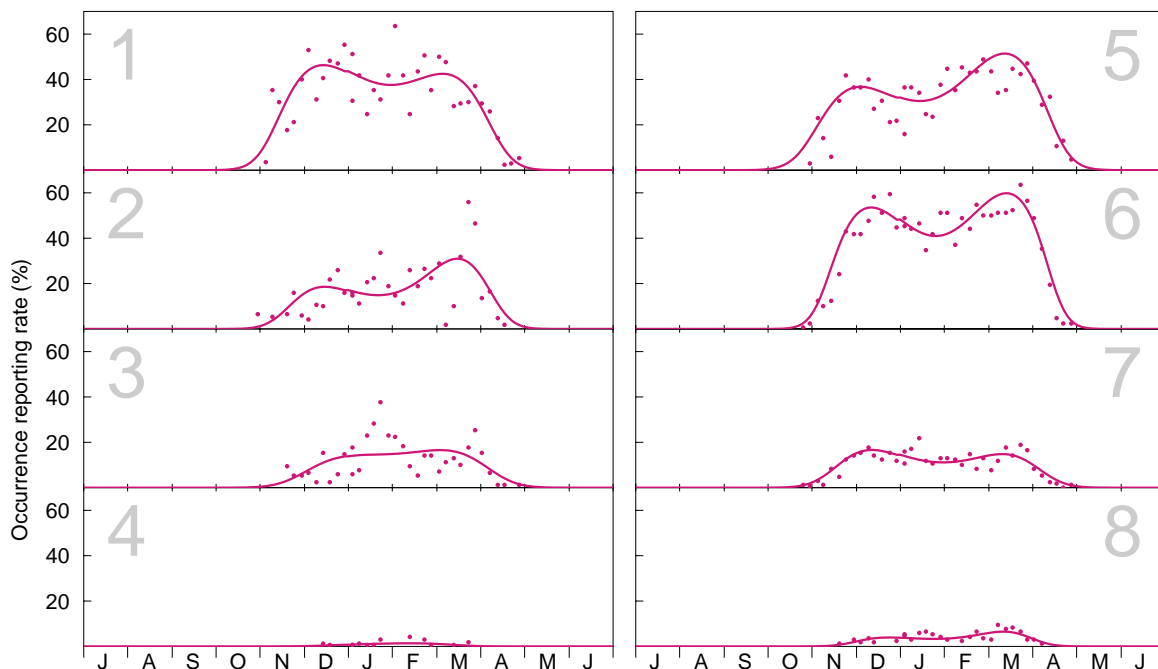
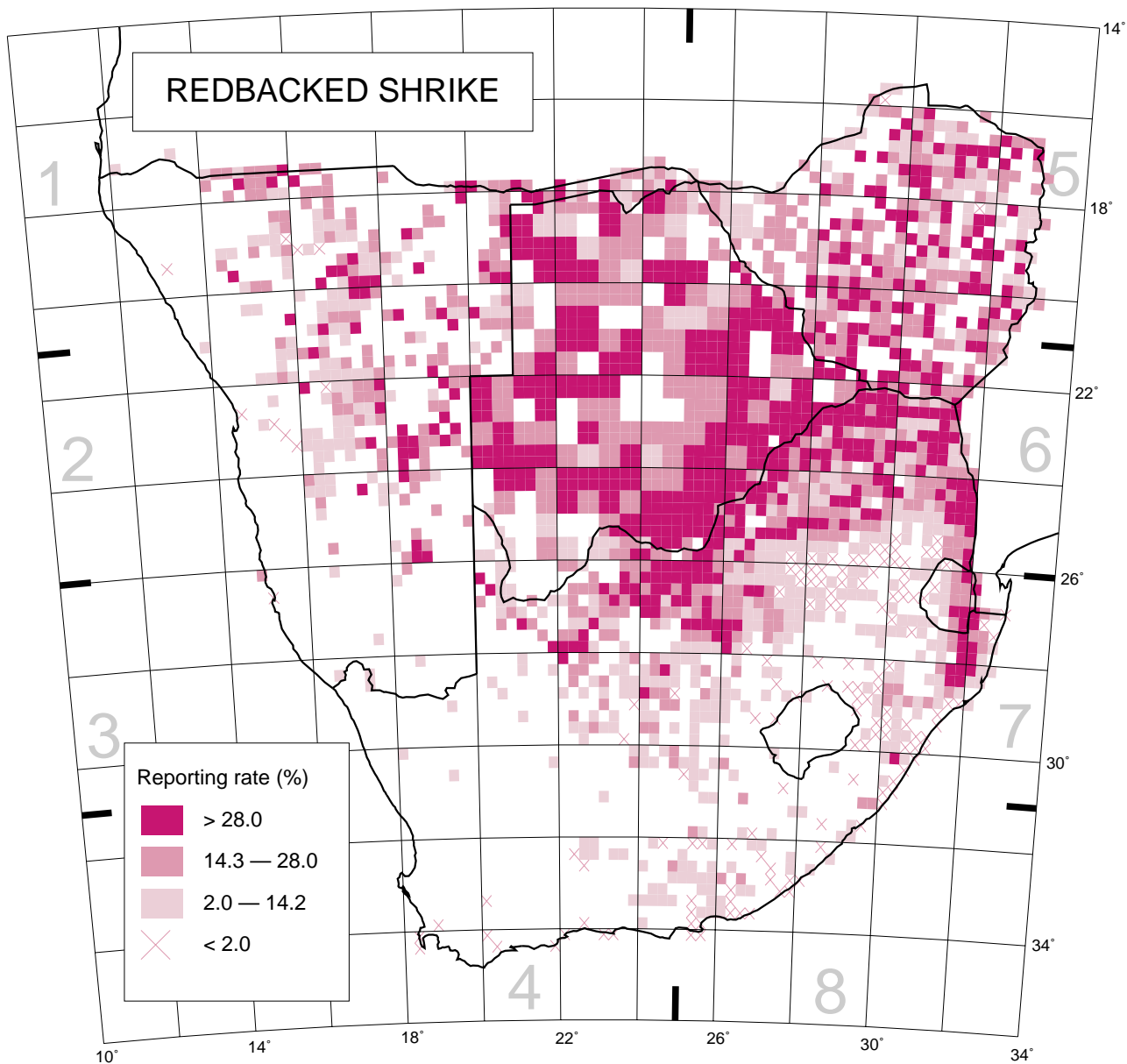
Recorded in 2233 grid cells, 49.2%

Total number of records: 11 664

Mean reporting rate for range: 11.5%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 465, 327, 268, 22, 1448, 2408, 1142, 84.