

Blackwinged Pratincole

Swartvlerksprinkaanvoël

Glareola nordmanni

This nonbreeding Palearctic migrant is present in southern Africa from about October–April, mostly on the highveld of the Transvaal and Free State, as well as in northern and eastern Botswana, especially the periphery of the Okavango Delta and the Makgadikgadi region. Elsewhere in southern Africa it is a very rare straggler. It has been recorded as a vagrant in the western Cape Province (Hockey *et al.* 1989) and eastern Cape Province (A.J. Tree pers. comm.), but it seldom crosses the Karoo. It is irregular in the southern Free State (Earlé & Grobler 1987) and rare in northern Namibia (Clinning & Jensen 1976). Though it occurs every summer in the Transvaal, numbers fluctuate markedly from year to year, being higher in wetter years. It is uncommon and sporadic in Zimbabwe, occurring mainly in the west during drought years, and probably chiefly as a passage migrant (Irwin 1981).

Always gregarious, the Blackwinged Pratincole occurs in small groups or large flocks of hundreds or even many thousands of birds. It is therefore conspicuous when roosting or foraging at low altitudes, but birds are on the wing for most of the day, and even large flocks can be overlooked when foraging high in the sky.

It can be confused with the Redwinged Pratincole *G. pratincola*: in flight its black underwing coverts are diagnostic, but not always easy to distinguish from the chestnut underwing of the latter in poor light. The possibility exists that some reports could be misidentifications of Redwinged Pratincoles.

Habitat: It prefers open grassland (especially in the eastern highveld), edges of pans and cultivated fields, but it was most commonly reported from the Okavango region, and from the lacustrine grasslands and pan systems in the southwestern part of the Makgadikgadi. It is attracted to damp ground after rains, agricultural activities such as mowing and ploughing, and to newly flooded grasslands (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Du Plessis 1995). It responds quickly to insect gluts after storms and concentrates at swarms of grasshoppers and alate termites (Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1962; M.H. pers. obs).

Movements: It is present on the highveld (Zone 7) from about mid-November to mid-March (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). It arrives mainly in early November in Botswana (Herremans 1994d). The models show a peak of records in December–March. It is almost permanently nomadic throughout the summer in response to local rainfall and rarely stays in one place for long.

Interspecific relationships: It may occasionally form mixed flocks with the Redwinged Pratincole, but is usually found in drier grassland habitats and is less tied to the presence of water. Even where their distributions overlap, different habitat preferences usually keep flocks separate (Brewster 1991).

Historical distribution and conservation: It was formerly abundant in southern Africa but has become increasingly scarce in recent years. Its low numbers are reflected by the generally low reporting rates. It is no longer found in KwaZulu-Natal (Cyrus & Robson 1980), although Clancey (1964b) regarded it as a sporadic nonbreeding visitor, mainly in the interior, but also on the coast from late September–April. He added that it was even then ‘apparently not now as numerous as in former times’. Clancey (1971c) indicated that early records in Mozambique were probably misidentified specimens of the Redwinged Pratincole, since the Blackwinged Pratincole is mainly a bird of upland and inland localities. The contraction of the southern African range is suggested by the listing of localities by Stark & Sclater (1906) where it has not occurred for many years: Eerste River (3418BA), Grahamstown (3326BC), Queenstown (3126DD), Port Elizabeth (3325DC), East London (3327BB), Newcastle (2729DD), Ladysmith (2829DB) and Colenso (2829DD).

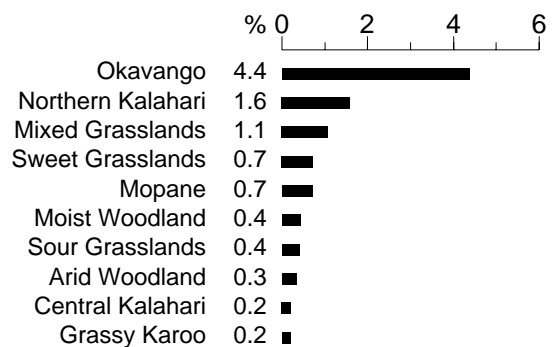
The reasons for the decline of the Blackwinged Pratincole are apparently due to loss of breeding habitat through extensive cultivation of the steppes in Russia (Cramp *et al.* 1983).

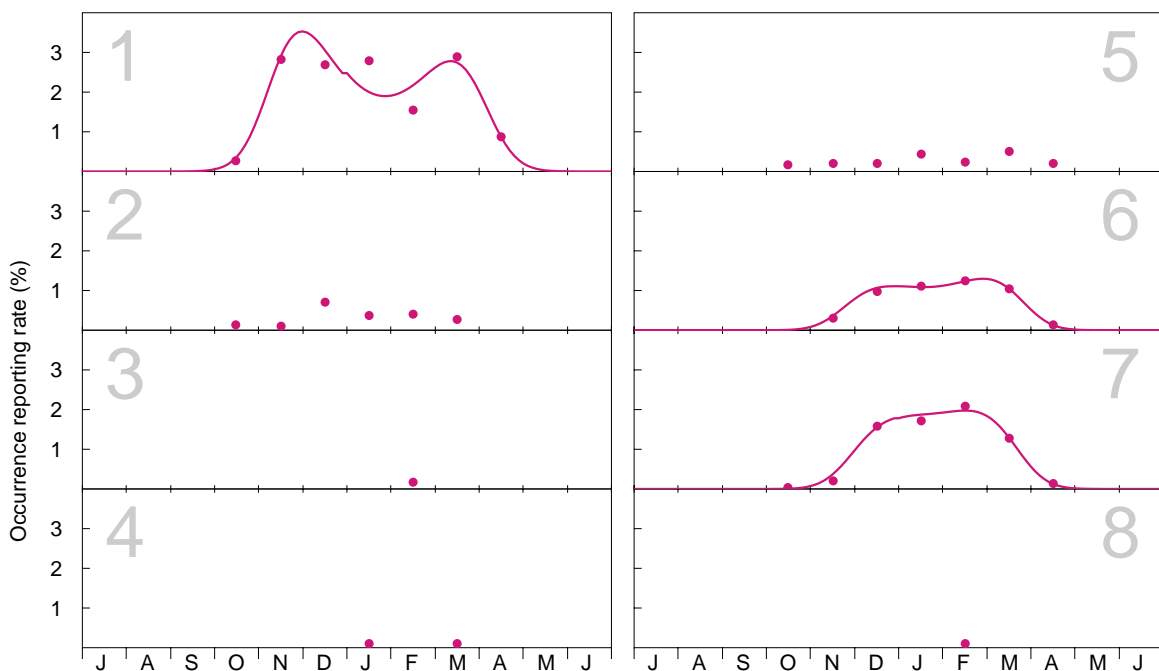
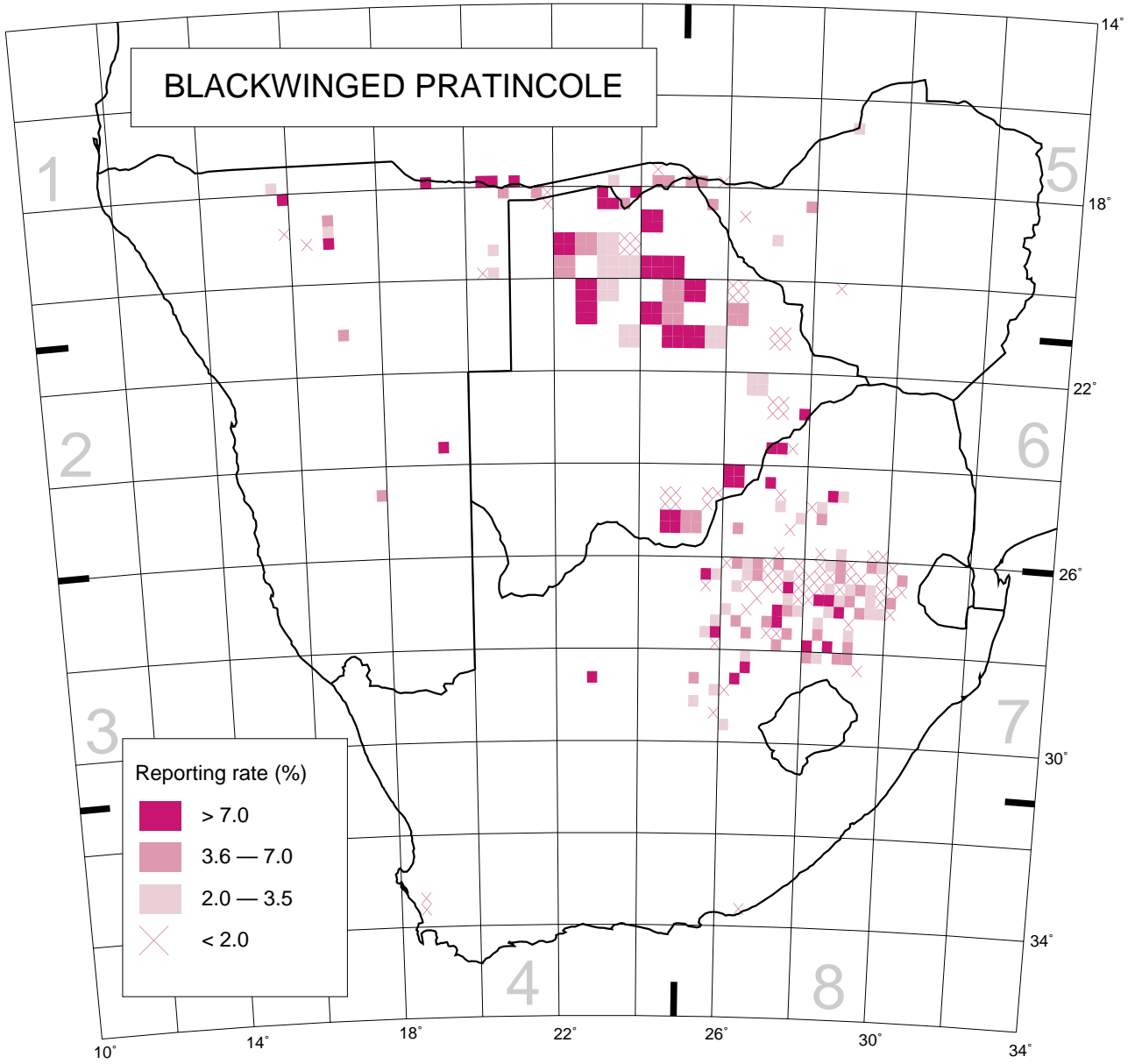
Because of its erratic occurrence, population trends are difficult to assess. The largest recent flocks were of several hundred thousand birds. Possibly the majority of the total world population occurs in a single flock at times. Despite a report of possibly a million birds in Zambia (Aspinwall & Conant 1977), Rose & Scott (1994) estimated the world population to be well below 25 000 birds. A single congregation of at least 250 000, but perhaps as many as 800 000 birds was, however, seen near Kruispad (2727DA) in the Free State in December 1991 (Du Plessis 1995).

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Recorded in 289 grid cells, 6.4%
Total number of records: 527
Mean reporting rate for range: 2.2%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 93, 16, 1, 4, 19, 97, 258, 1.