

Whitewinged Tern

Witvlerkmeerswael

Chlidonias leucopterus

The Whitewinged Tern is a nonbreeding Palearctic migrant. It breeds May–July on freshwater wetlands in southeastern Europe and eastern Asia (Cramp *et al.* 1985; Malling Olsen & Larsson 1995). The core of the distribution in southern Africa is the ‘panveld’ or endorheic pan region (Allan *et al.* 1995c) of the southern Transvaal and Free State. There are high reporting rates along the Zambezi River, in the Okavango Delta, in the southwestern Cape Province and along the northern KwaZulu-Natal coastal plain, from where the distribution extends into southern Mozambique.

Local maxima are 20 000 birds in December at Welkom (2826BA), 10 000 in April and 8 000 in December at Lake Ngami (2022B) (A.J. Tree *in litt.*); 3000 at Bloemhof Dam (2725DA) on the Vaal River (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b); 3000 at Paarl Sewage Works (3318DB) (Y. Weiss pers. comm.); 2000 in KwaZulu-Natal (Clancey 1964b); and 1000 birds near Upington (2821AC) (Rudebeck 1956).

It may be confused with nonbreeding Whiskered Terns *C. hybrida* inland and with Black Terns *C. niger* at coastal wetlands, although the latter are distinguished by their evenly grey rumps.

Habitat: It occurs at inland and, to a lesser extent, coastal wetlands in southern Africa. It makes extensive use of artificial wetlands such as sewage works, impoundments and saltworks. Food taken is primarily insects, but small fish, ostracods, arachnids and crustaceans are also eaten (Cramp *et al.* 1985). Prey are captured by skimming the water surface, ground or vegetation, by dipping to the surface and by aerial pursuit. Shallow vleis formed by summer rains in grassland habitat are a favoured habitat.

Movements: The population, which has nonbreeding quarters in Africa, migrates via the eastern Mediterranean Sea before crossing into sub-Saharan Africa largely via the Nile Valley (Goodman & Meininger 1989). The main southward passage along the Nile Valley is mid-August to mid-October (Hogg *et al.* 1984). In Zambia most passage is late September–November (Benson *et al.* 1972). Near Cape Town (3318CD) the main influx is reported to be in December (Blaker & Winterbottom 1968). Atlas reporting rates indicate initial arrival in southern Africa in August with September–October being the main arrival months. In Zone 7, mostly the central highveld, modelled reporting rates increase through summer

to a February peak; in most other Zones reporting rates start decreasing earlier in summer, suggestive of a pre-migratory concentration on the highveld. Departure is mainly in April. Northward passage in Zambia begins in February and lasts until early May. Along the Nile Valley, passage is March–May. Some individuals, presumably young birds, do not migrate in autumn but overwinter throughout southern Africa. Winter reporting rates were highest in Zone 5 where the largest winter concentrations are at Lake Kariba (Irwin 1981).

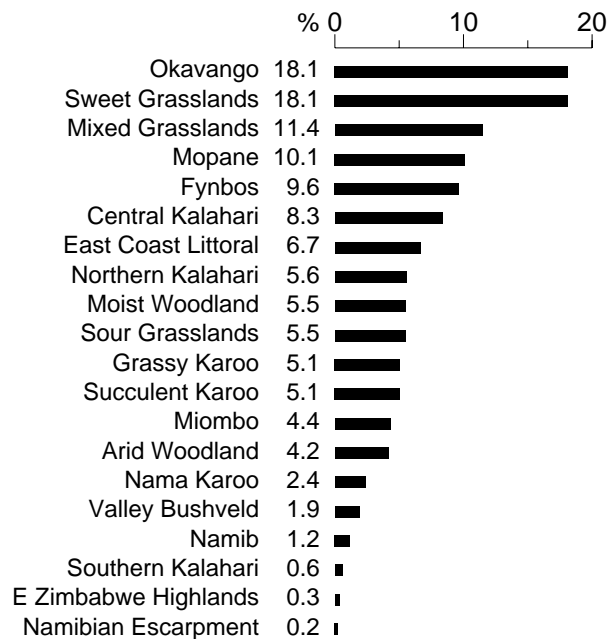
A bird ringed at Rietvlei (3318CD), in December 1972, was recovered in Armenia (44°N 45°E) in April 1978, probably still on northwards migration (SAFRING). A bird ringed as a Black Tern near Grootfontein (1918CA) in December 1957 (Sauer & Sauer 1960) was almost certainly a Whitewinged Tern (see Borello *et al.* in press), and was recovered in Kazakhstan (52°N 62°E) in July 1959 (Becker 1974). (The recovery lies within the breeding range of both tern species.)

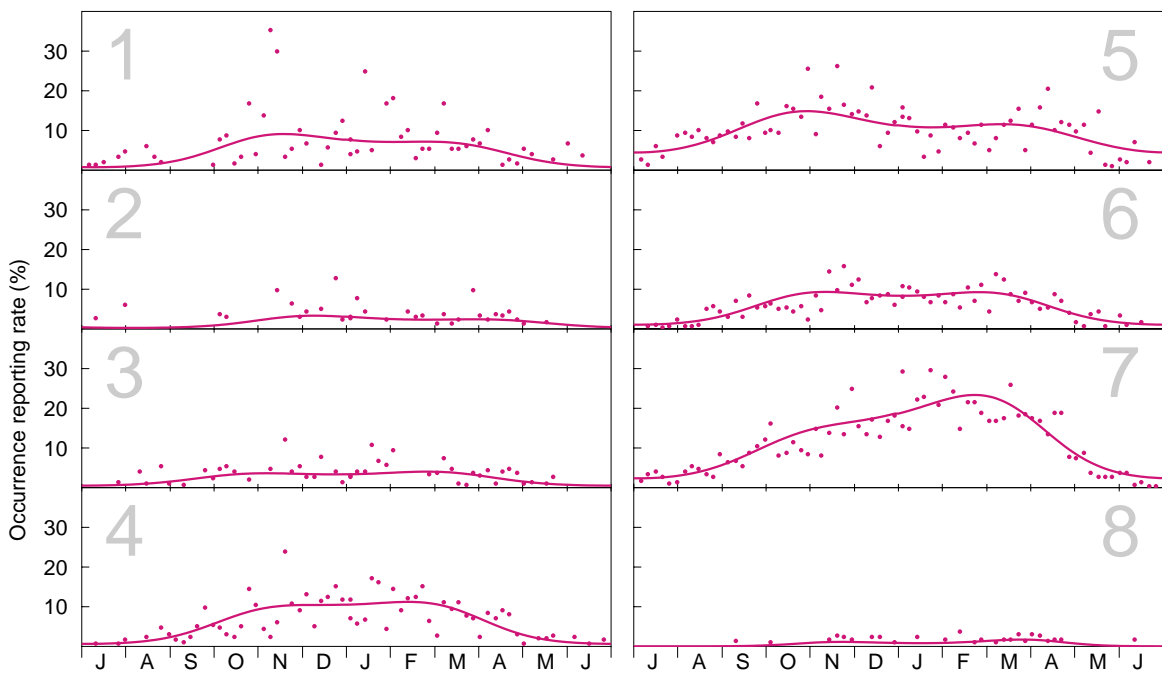
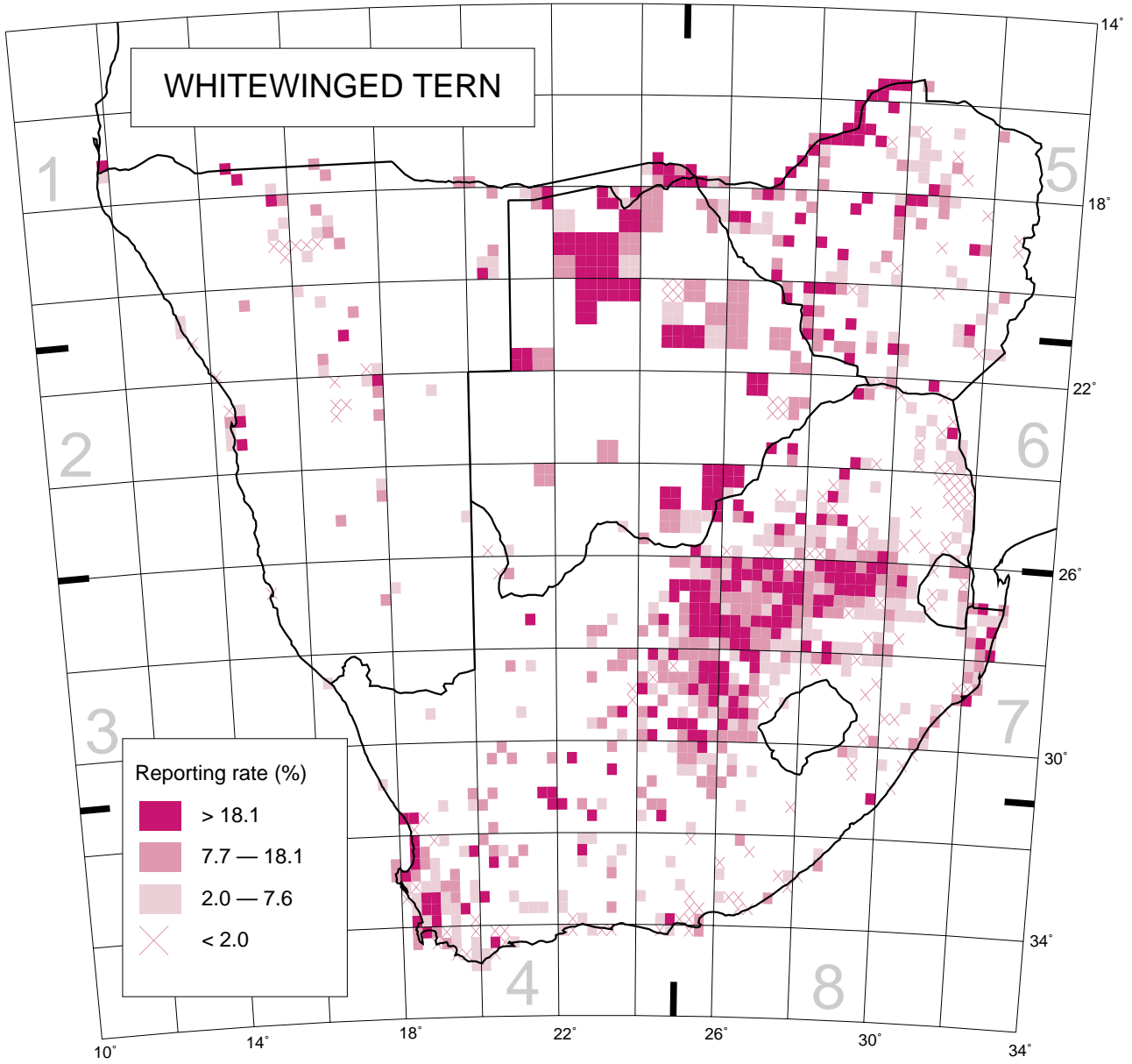
Historical distribution and conservation: It apparently expanded its range into the Cape Province during the 20th century, because Stark & Sclater (1906) knew of only one ‘occurrence in the Colony proper, but it appears to become more abundant further north’, and went on to list localities from which it was then known, in the Free State, Transvaal, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. At that time the largest flocks had been observed along the Zambezi River. The creation of artificial wetlands such as sewage works and shallow dams has certainly benefited the Whitewinged Tern within southern Africa.

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Recorded in 1029 grid cells, 22.7%
Total number of records: 9830
Mean reporting rate for range: 11.1%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 147, 60, 125, 509, 864, 662, 2399, 37.