Whitewinged Flufftail

Witvlerkvleikuiken

Sarothrura ayresi

The Whitewinged Flufftail is the rarest African rallid, known only from wetlands in Ethiopia and South Africa, with acceptable sight records also from Harare (1731CC) and Chingola, Zambia (Urban *et al*. 1986; Taylor 1994). Lack of subspeciation suggests that migration may occur between Ethiopia and South Africa. The paucity of records from intervening regions and an overlap of occurrence dates, however, make this unlikely and the species may be purely nomadic, undergoing periodic long-distance dispersal when populations are high (Hopkinson & Masterson 1977; Collar *et al*. 1994). In South Africa it is recorded from August–March and in May (Taylor 1994).

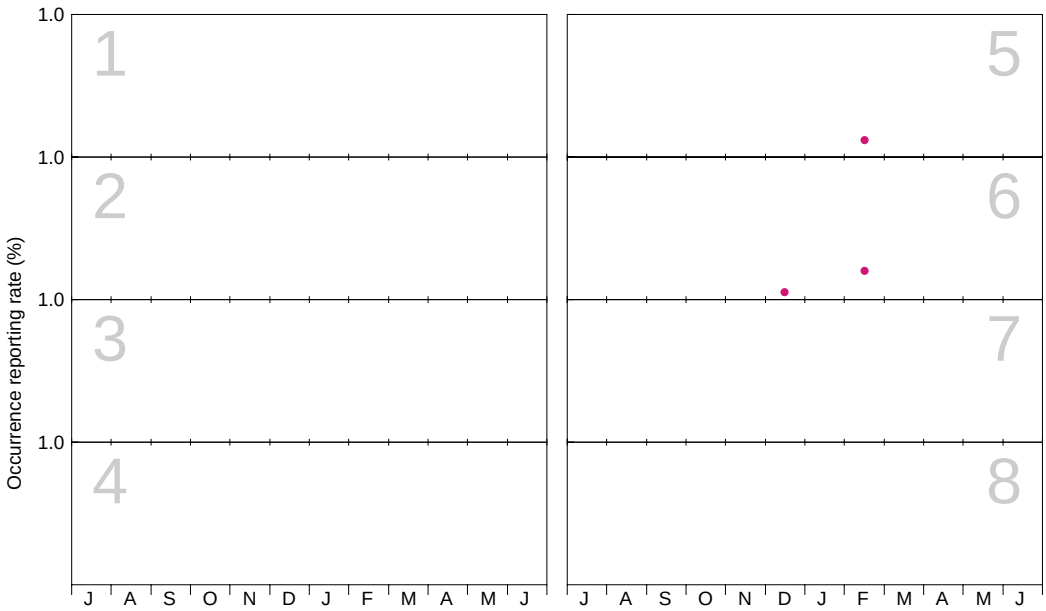
Its status is given as 'rare' in South Africa (Brooke 1984b) and 'endangered' globally (Collar *et al*. 1994). In Ethiopia it was seen only once between 1957 and 1995, but in August 1996 10–15 pairs were found breeding in a wetland near Addis Ababa (pers. obs.). In South Africa it has been recorded sporadically in very small numbers, most frequently since 1990 when it has been found regularly from November–March at four localities in KwaZulu-Natal and the Transvaal (Taylor 1994; pers. obs.). In early 1997 five more localities were discovered (pers. obs.), four in the eastern Free State and one in KwaZulu-Natal. The total population at these nine sites, together with four other sites at which the birds may occur irregularly, is estimated to be up to 230 birds.

In South Africa it occurs for short periods alongside breeding Redchested Flufftails *S. rufa* in moist to shallowly flooded dense marsh vegetation 0.5–1.5 m tall, and for longer periods in taller, more deeply flooded dense vegetation not commonly inhabited by its congener (Taylor 1994). A description of the nest and eggs from Ethiopia agrees closely with that of two possible nests of this species from Zimbabwe in the 1950s, one egg from which has been preserved. The species may breed in South Africa but existing records of possible breeding (Mendelsohn *et al*. 1983; Brooke 1984b) are unconvincing (Taylor 1994). Ethiopian breeding habitat is seasonal: shallowly flooded short, dense grassland and marsh (Guichard 1948; Taylor 1994; pers. obs.).

This species differs from other flufftails in being less vocal (its common calls closely resemble vocalizations of the Crowned Crane *Balearica regulorum*) and, when not breeding, in being easy to flush and having a strong, prolonged flight (Taylor 1994). Its total population must be very small and its future is extremely precarious: its habitats are continually being reduced by damming, draining, grazing and afforestation with plantations of alien trees, while disturbance by birdwatchers is also a potential problem. The lack of recent records from South African coastal localities suggests that it is now confined to higher-altitude wetlands in this country (Urban *et al*. 1986; Taylor 1994).

P.B. Taylor

Recorded in 2 grid cells, 0.04%
Total number of records: 6
Mean reporting rate for range: 1.78%



Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 0, 0, 0, 0, 1, 5, 0, 0.