

## Sociable Weaver

### Versamelvoël

#### *Philetairus socius*

Sociable Weavers are endemic to southern Africa. Their range is centred on the northern Cape Province and southern Namibia where they are much more abundant than elsewhere. Reporting rates may, however, be inflated by some observers recording the conspicuous communal nests rather than the birds themselves. Atlas records indicate that there are some notable disjunctions in the range: it is absent from the Ghaap Plateau (2724A,C) in the northern Cape Province, and another gap occurs south of Etosha in northern Namibia.

Four subspecies have been recognized (Clancey 1980b; Clancey *et al.* 1991): *P. s. eremnus* is centred in the Orange River valley, while *socius* occurs further to the northwest in the northern Cape Province and Namibia; *xericus* occupies the Namibian escarpment, and *geminus* in Etosha and southern Owambo is separated from subspecies further north.

In the southern Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, Maclean (1973) estimated about 80 birds/km<sup>2</sup> in a narrow strip of optimal habitat. It builds unique, huge colonial nests under a single communal roof; colony sizes vary from 2–500 birds (Maclean 1973).

**Habitat:** Atlas data reveal a strong association with Southern Kalahari vegetation where reporting rates were more than three times greater than in any other vegetation type. On a local scale, it needs areas of open savanna grassland containing large trees in which to build nests. Most nests are built in *Acacia erioloba*, *Boscia albitrunca* and *Aloe dichotoma* trees; it rarely uses alien trees (Anderson, M. D. 1994a). Nests are also frequently built on utility poles, and locally nests are constructed on cliff faces, e.g. at the Asbestos Mountains southwest of Griekwastad (2923CD). The subspecies *geminus* in Etosha also uses Mopane *Colophospermum mopane* trees. Scrubby and dense woodland is avoided, as are areas devoid of suitable nest sites. The availability of stiff grasses, e.g. *Aristida ciliata*, appears to be important for use as nesting mate-

rial (Maclean 1973). Areas which develop dense and tall grass-cover in wet years become sensitive to bushfires which may also destroy nests; this may be a reason for its absence from the more fire-prone Central and Northern Kalahari.

**Movements:** Locally there is limited (Maclean 1973) to extensive inter-colony movement (M.D.A. pers. obs), but birds are found near their nests throughout the year. The slight seasonal changes in reporting rates probably reflect changes in population sizes and recruitment, because peak reporting rates in northern Namibia follow a late-summer breeding season that differs from that in southern populations.

**Breeding:** In the northern Cape Province and southern half of Namibia, breeding appears to occur at any time of the year, being triggered by rainfall and lasting as long as food supply allows. Up to four consecutive broods may be raised, so eggs and chicks may be present long after the rainfalls that stimulated breeding (Maclean 1973). A quite different pattern appears to hold in northern Namibia where atlas records and egg-laying data (Brown & Clinning in press) indicate a more discrete breeding season, December–August.

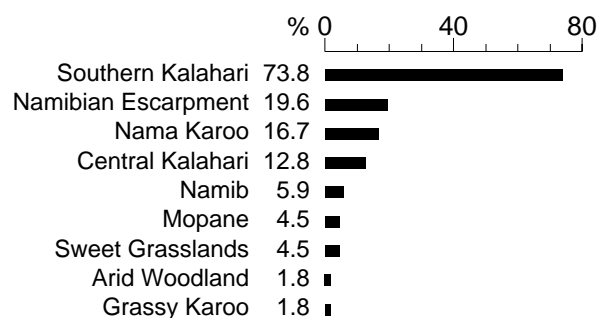
**Interspecific relationships:** Its close relationship with the Pygmy Falcon *Polihierax semitorquatus* has been discussed in the account for the latter species. Rosy-faced Lovebirds *Agapornis roseicollis* and Redheaded Finches *Amadina erythrocephala* may also use its nest masses for breeding (Maclean 1993b; M.D.A. pers. obs), while other species, such as Ashy Tit *Parus cinerascens* (Macdonald 1983) and Pied Barbet *Tricholaema leucomelas*, use them for roosting. Some large birds use the nests as platforms to build their nests on; some examples are Giant Eagle Owl *Bubo lacteus*, White-backed Vulture *Gyps africanus* and Bateleur *Terathopius ecaudatus* (M.D.A. pers. obs; A. Maritz pers. comm.).

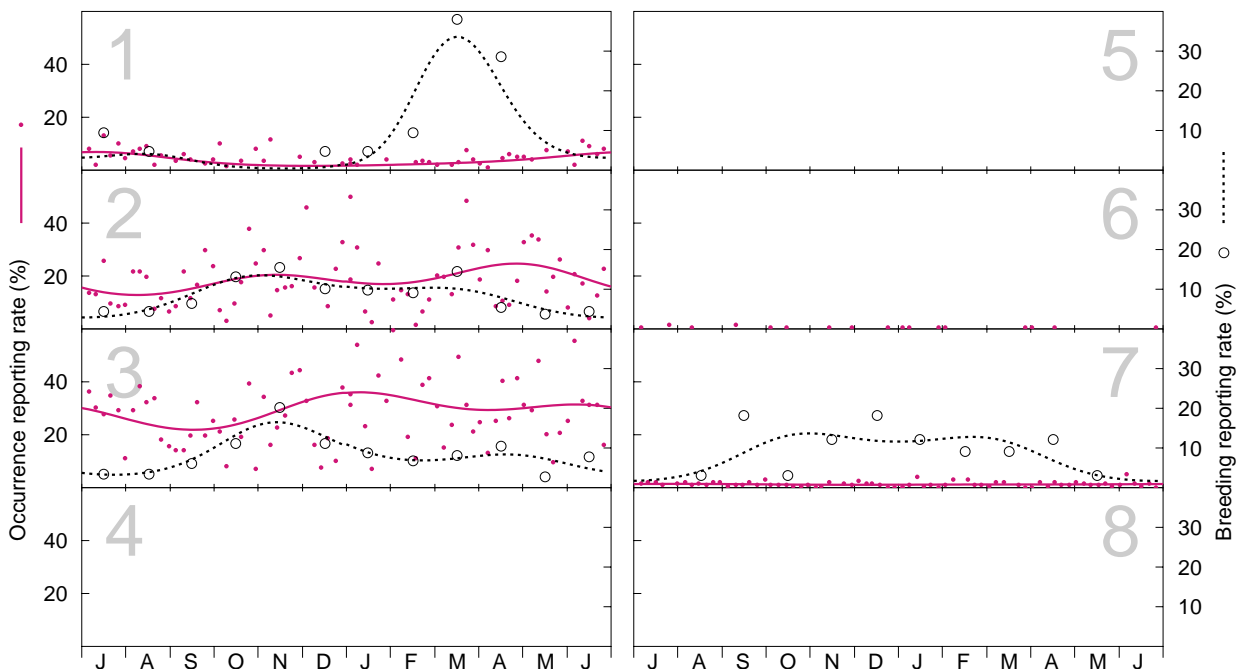
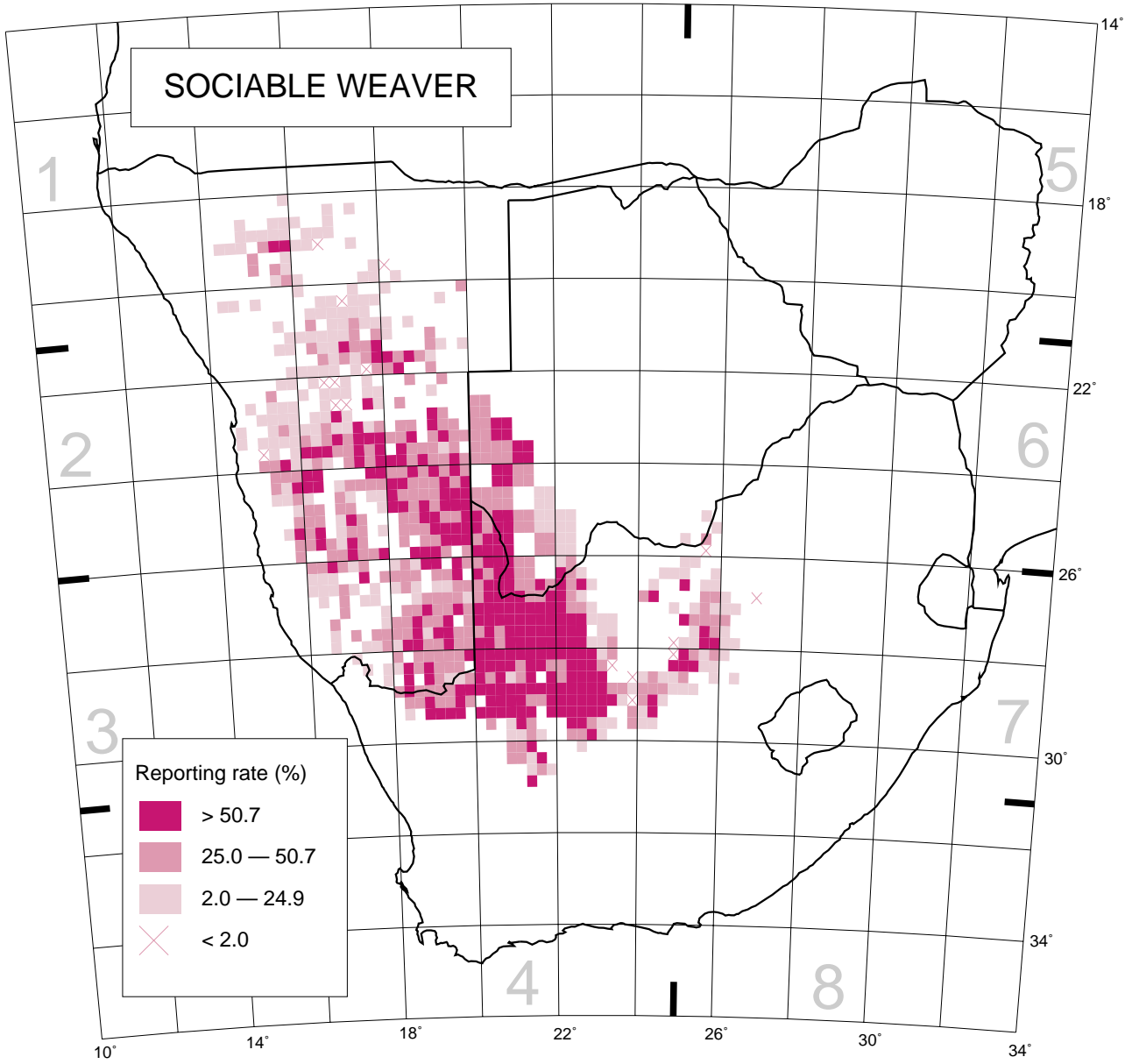
**Historical distribution and conservation:** Populations have expanded in distribution during the 20th century, using telephone poles, electricity pylons and other artificial structures as nest sites. The species could expand further if it would accept alien trees for nesting. Most parts of its preferred biomes are unlikely to be changed to any substantial degree in the near future and the Sociable Weaver's conservation status would seem secure. The gap in the northern Cape Province, north of the Ghaap plateau, however, may coincide with extensive clearance of *Acacia* veld for dryland crop farming, while the species may be reduced locally in other areas following bush encroachment in response to overgrazing.

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Recorded in 833 grid cells, 18.4%  
Total number of records: 5290  
Mean reporting rate for range: 30.7%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):  
 Occurrence: 128, 676, 1610, 0, 0, 20, 241, 0; Breeding: 21, 188, 259, 0, 0, 0, 33, 0.