



Longtailed Widow

Langstertflap

Euplectes progne

The display flight of a male Longtailed Widow, also known as the 'Sakabula', with its arched tail, rowing wingbeats and red epaulettes, is a memorable spectacle. There are three isolated populations of this species: in the Kenyan highlands; in Angola, southern Zaire and Zambia; and in southern Africa (Hall & Moreau 1970). It is not known when these populations were last in contact but, surprisingly, it is the birds of the central group which are the most distinct morphologically from the Kenyan and southern African populations (Craig 1993b).

The southern African birds extend from the eastern Cape Province through the Free State, Lesotho, Transkei, KwaZulu-Natal, and western Swaziland to the Transvaal plateau. The species just enters southeastern Botswana, but it is most common on the central highveld of South Africa. It occurs up to 2750 m in the Drakensberg Mountains (Bonde 1993). The isolated population near Humansdorp (3424BB) in the eastern Cape Province has been present for at least several decades (Skead 1967b). There are no records from Mozambique, Zimbabwe or Namibia.

The Longtailed Widow is distinctive in breeding plumage and noticeably larger than any other *Euplectes* species. It is therefore less likely to have been overlooked or misidentified in mixed flocks of *Euplectes*.

Habitat: The vegetation analysis emphasizes its reliance on open grassland habitat. Reporting rates were highest in Mixed Grassland, followed by Sweet and Sour Grasslands. The reporting rate in Alpine Grassland was lower than in the other grassland types.

Movements: It is much easier to recognize in nonbreeding plumage than other *Euplectes*, which explains the less marked seasonality in reporting rates compared with its congeners. There is no evidence for large-scale seasonal movements in the atlas data, nor from previous field observations (Craig 1977). Existing evidence from the edge of the range in southeastern Botswana indicates that it almost disappears during drought, but rapidly expands its range again during wet cycles (M. Herremans pers. obs).

Breeding: The atlas data mainly span October–April which accords with egg-laying information from the Transvaal and

eastern Cape Province (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Maclean 1993b). Egg-laying has been recorded as late as June in KwaZulu-Natal (Dean 1971).

Interspecific relationships: Although it will join other ploceids in mixed-species flocks, it seems to associate with other species less often than most *Euplectes*. Its breeding areas may overlap with the Redshouldered Widow *E. axillaris*, although the Longtailed Widow is generally the more common species at higher altitudes.

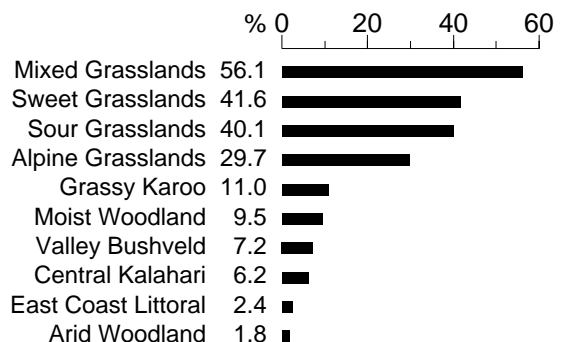
Historical distribution and conservation: It was not recorded in Botswana by Smithers (1964) and the atlas records may represent a local range expansion into this region, or the records could represent different stages of a dynamic edge of distribution, dependent on rainfall.

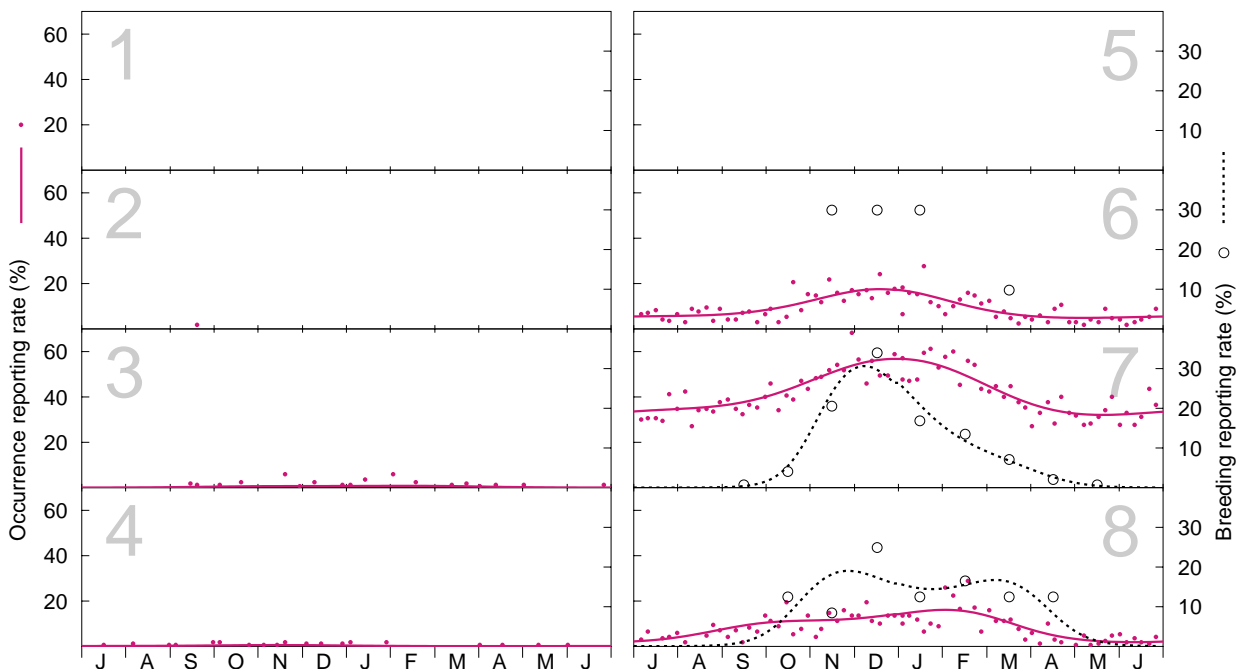
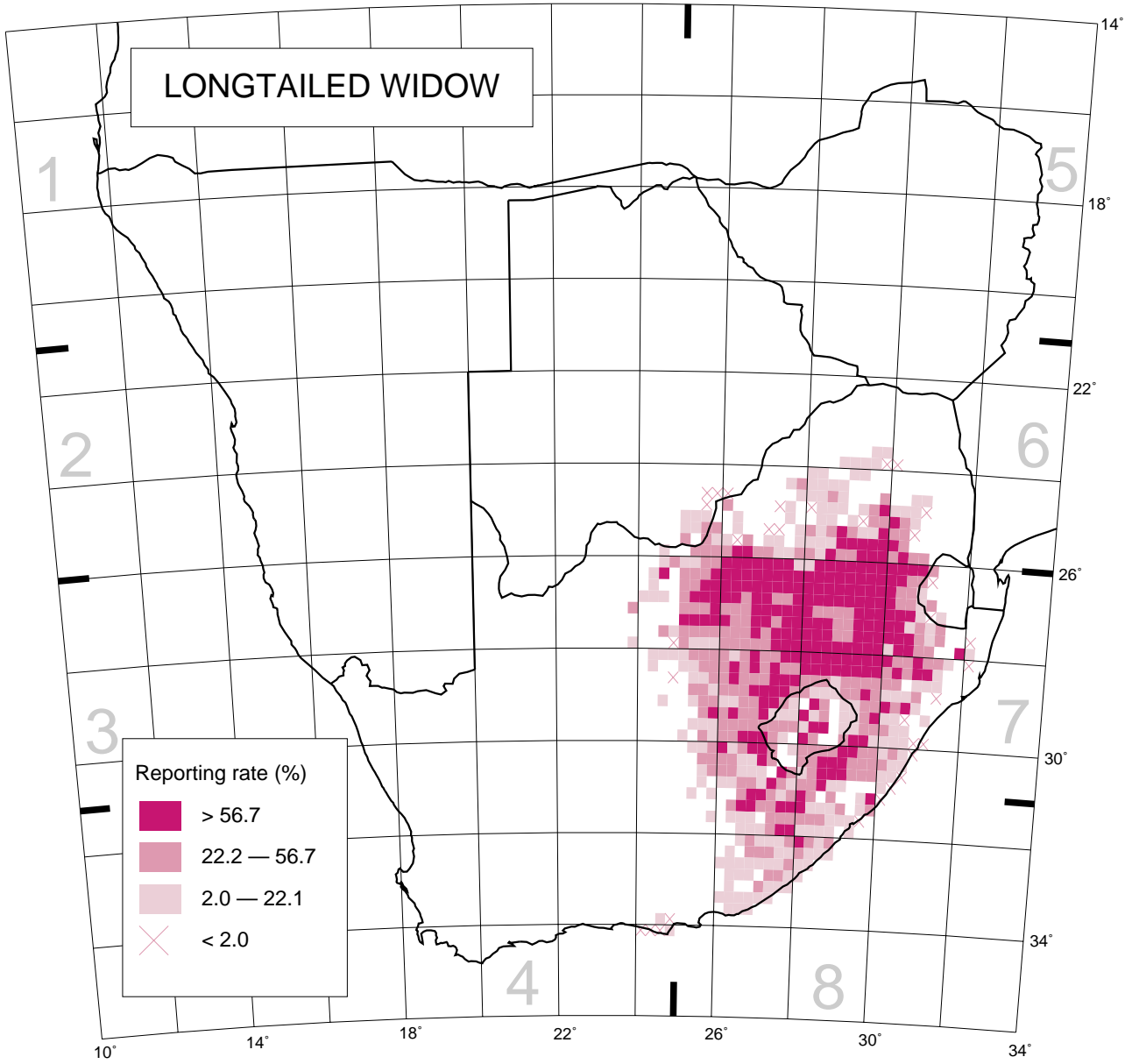
Its open grassland habitat can be degraded by too-frequent fires and overgrazing by livestock. In addition, large areas of its range have been transformed by dense human settlement and commercial afforestation. On the positive side, it is attracted to cultivated *Eragrostis* grass pastures when nesting (e.g. Maclean 1993b). The Longtailed Widow is currently not considered threatened but it could be a useful indicator of habitat quality in grasslands.

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Recorded in 717 grid cells, 15.8%
Total number of records: 21 326
Mean reporting rate for range: 35.3%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 0, 1, 22, 24, 0, 1033, 8221, 480; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 10, 141, 24.