

Masked Weaver

Swartkeelgeelvink

Ploceus velatus

The Masked Weaver is the most widely distributed southern African weaver, which occurs to the north of our region in southern Angola, southern Zaire, Zambia, Malawi, and southwestern Tanzania (Hall & Moreau 1970). It is most characteristic and abundant on the dry central plateau of South Africa, and it is apparently least common in the Transkei (cf. Quicquelberge 1989). It is uncommon in the Mozambique lowlands (Clancey 1971c), and relatively less common in the tropical lowlands of KwaZulu-Natal, Swaziland and the Transvaal lowveld. It is virtually absent from the treeless Namib. It may be found up to 2600 m in river valleys in the Lesotho highlands (Bonde 1993).

Five subspecies have been described for the region, all with continuous ranges (Clancey 1980b).

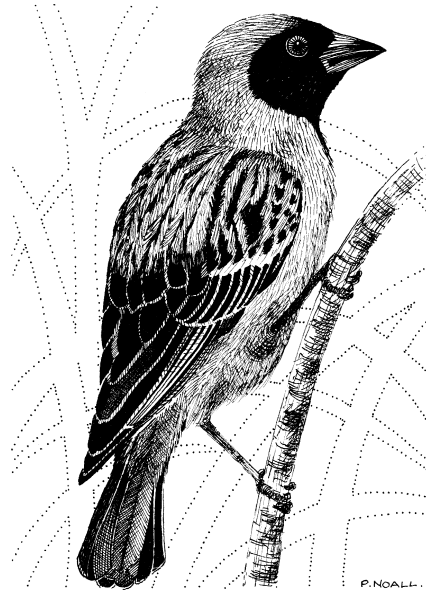
Since there are three black-faced weavers in southern Africa, errors in the identification of birds in breeding or nonbreeding plumage are to be expected. However, this is unlikely to distort the picture for the present species.

Habitat: Reporting rates do reflect accurately that it is most commonly found in open country, and is not primarily associated with woodland. It nests in trees, bushes, or reeds along watercourses, but also in trees near homesteads and in other vegetation away from water. Thus it is common throughout arid regions, at least where water is available for drinking.

Movements: Seasonal changes in reporting rate follow the breeding and nonbreeding seasons, but long-distance movements do occur. A ringed bird was recovered 1273 km from the ringing site, nine others had moved more than 100 km, and a further nine more than 50 km, although 292 of 370 birds were recovered within 10 km of the original ringing locality (Craig 1982a). In southeastern Botswana, ringing showed that adult males are quite sedentary, whereas most juveniles move out of the area during winter, as do many adult females in a drought year (Herremans 1994f); in this region on the hardveld it appears to be a partial migrant. Such records are of course biased by the increased chance of recapture or recovery near breeding sites to which male birds return in successive years (Rowan 1964). Further west in the Kalahari sandveld, it has been described as predominantly a wet-season migrant (Dawson 1975), while there is evidence for a large-scale dry-season influx into the Okavango basin (Brewster 1991; Herremans 1994f).

Breeding: In the eastern Zones 5–8, breeding activity was recorded almost throughout the year, but primarily August–March, with breeding being more concentrated in the eastern Cape Province (Zone 8) and spanning the widest period in Zimbabwe (Zone 5). In the winter-rainfall region in the southwestern Cape Province, breeding peaks earlier (October) than in other areas, and declines more rapidly in January–February. Breeding is considerably later, with a peak in the second part of the wet summer season (December–March) further north in Zones 1 and 2 where the arid (and possibly more migratory) subspecies *P. v. caurinus* occurs. The atlas records conform to published information (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Skinner 1995a).

Particularly in arid areas, the initiation of breeding is dependent on the start of rainfall and on veld conditions, and the unavailability of fresh grass-leaves may be limiting for nest building, particularly during droughts (Herremans & Herremans-Tonnoeyr



1995). Birds in artificially watered peri-urban gardens start nesting earlier than birds in the surrounding countryside (Wilson 1991).

Interspecific relationships: It may flock and roost with a wide range of other granivorous species, mostly ploceids. Flocks on passage were dominated at an artificial food source by resident pairs of Golden Weavers *Ploceus xanthops* (Herremans & Herremans-Tonnoeyr 1995).

The range overlaps extensively with all nine other *Ploceus* species in the atlas region, but it is the only small, predominantly granivorous member of the genus with such catholic habitat tolerance. There is no evidence from the distributions for complementarity or competitive exclusion with any of the *Ploceus* species.

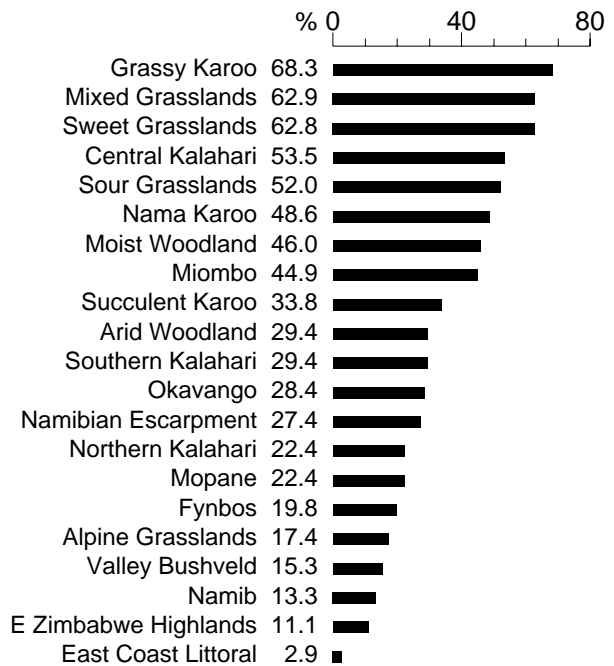
It is a common host of the Diederik Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx caprius* (Maclean 1993b).

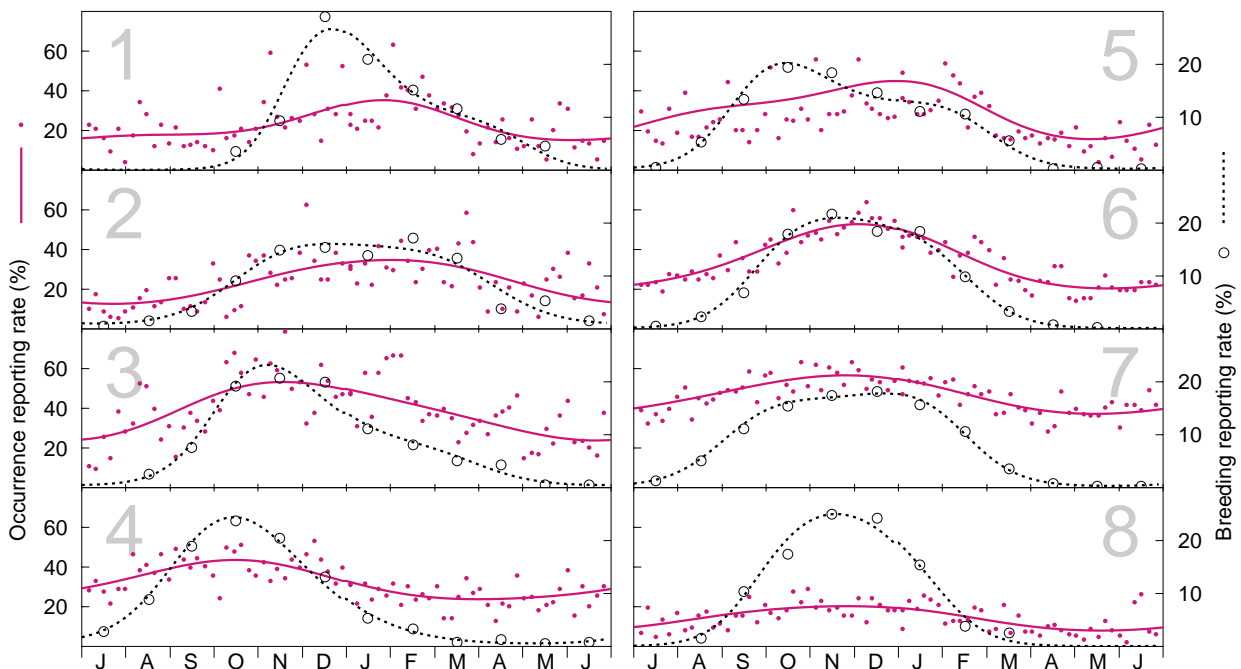
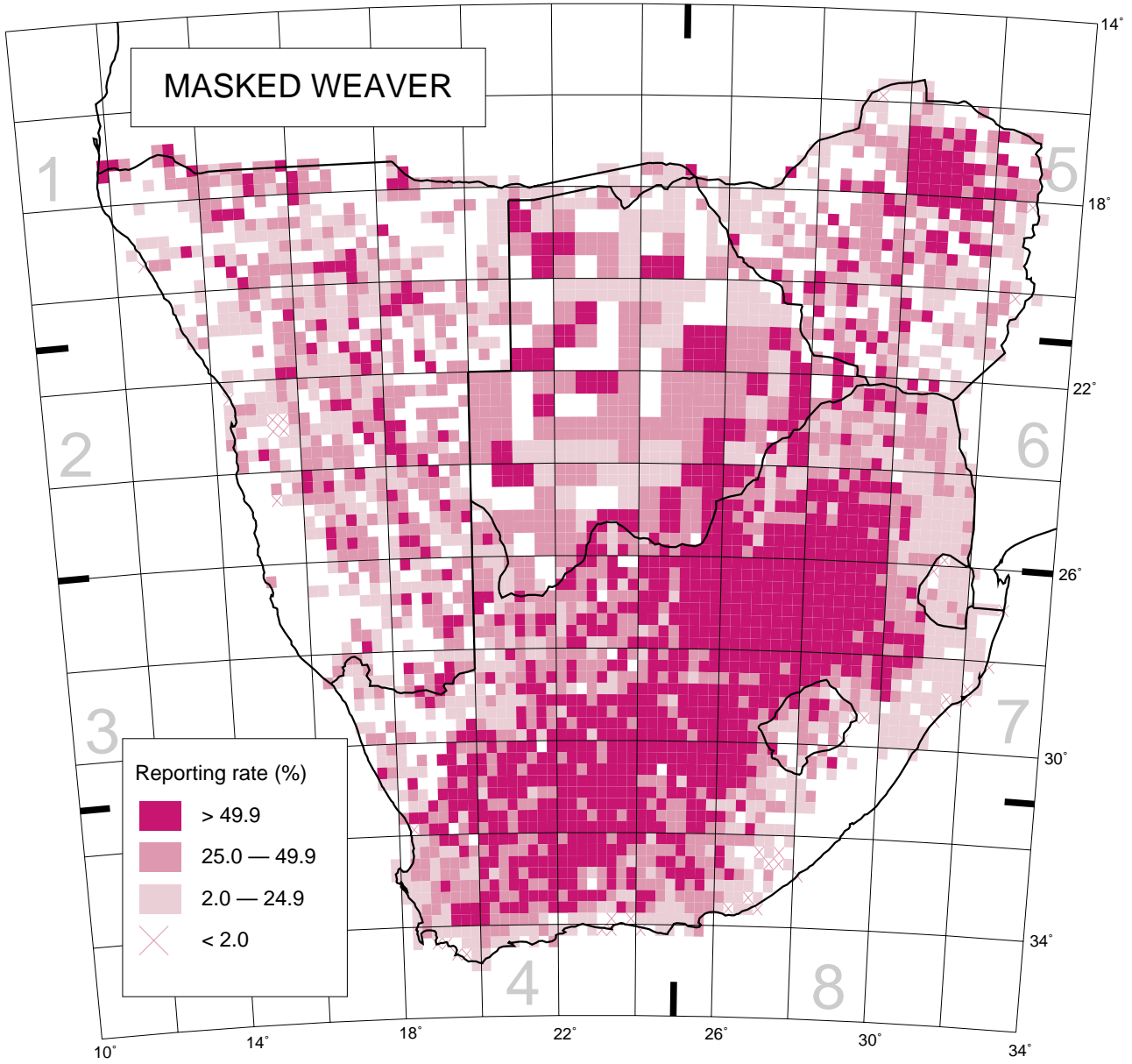
Historical distribution and conservation: First recorded at Worcester (3319CB) in 1940, it seems to have expanded into the southwestern Cape Province in recent decades (Brooke 1985). Macdonald (1990) suggested that it had earlier colonized the Karoo by making use of alien Mesquite *Prosopis* spp. trees as nesting sites. It has also expanded its breeding range into grassland areas where nests are suspended from barbed wire fences (H.D. Oschadleus *in litt.*). Like other granivorous weavers which often nest near water, it has taken advantage of modifications to the environment: it is common in suburban gardens in many areas (e.g. Howman & Begg 1983) and frequently breeds near farm dams. An enormously successful species, it is an unprotected pest in the Cape Province and Transvaal, where it damages grain crops in many areas.

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Recorded in 3463 grid cells, 76.3%
Total number of records: 54 365
Mean reporting rate for range: 39.9%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 705, 841, 2042, 2806, 2645, 3918, 9143, 790; Breeding: 86, 187, 481, 644, 506, 1133, 2873, 269.