

African Rail

Grootriethaan

Rallus caerulescens

This resident of marshes and swamps is endemic to sub-Saharan Africa. It is rare in West Africa, uncommon in the Ethiopian highlands and occurs widely from eastern Zaire to central Kenya, and south through eastern and central Africa to the Cape Province in South Africa (Urban *et al.* 1986). While recorded up to 3000 m (Urban *et al.* 1986), its occurrence in low-altitude and coastal areas is mainly confined to regions south of 20°S. In southern Africa, the African Rail is largely absent from the driest regions and is locally distributed elsewhere. Most records come from the higher-lying parts of Zimbabwe, the Okavango and associated swamps in Botswana and the Caprivi, the central plateau of the Transvaal and northern Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, and the southwestern Cape Province (Clancey 1964b; Earlé & Grobler 1987; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Hockey *et al.* 1989; Maclean 1993b).

The atlas data provide scattered records from the arid western regions of South Africa and show isolated records from Etosha Pan and the Bushmanland Pans in northern Namibia, Hardap Dam (2417BD) in southern Namibia, and the seasonally flooded pans in Hwange National Park in western Zimbabwe.

Although secretive and under-recorded, it has a loud, distinctive call which often reveals its presence in dense vegetation.

Habitat: It inhabits reedbeds and dense, rank growth in permanent or seasonal swamps and marshes, and beside rivers, streams, pools and lakes. It also occurs in paddy fields and in seasonally wet sugar-cane adjacent to marshes (Urban *et al.* 1986; Taylor 1994). It prefers shallowly flooded areas, and frequently forages on mud, in shallow water and on floating vegetation. It sometimes extends its breeding territories into seasonally flooded sedge meadow or hygrophilous grassland adjacent to permanent cover (Urban *et al.* 1986; Taylor 1994). The vegetation analysis shows the highest reporting rates from biomes which may be expected to contain much suitable wetland habitat.

Movements: There is no evidence for regular migrations. Most seasonal variations in numbers (e.g. Schmitt 1976; Hopkinson & Masterson 1984) may be explained by the

dispersal of immatures or by local movements to and from habitat rendered temporarily unsuitable by burning, drying out or the reduction of cover. The low incidence of calling during the nonbreeding season, when it is not territorial (Urban *et al.* 1986; Taylor 1994), adequately explains seasonal variations in reporting rates. The May peak in Zone 7 probably reflects the increased calling by immatures at the end of the breeding season (Taylor 1994).

Breeding: In southern Africa most breeding occurs during the summer months, being recorded January–May in Zimbabwe, September–February in the Transvaal, September–March in KwaZulu-Natal and in November in the southwestern Cape Province, with single records also for July (Transvaal) and August (KwaZulu-Natal) (Clancey 1964b; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Hockey *et al.* 1989; Taylor 1994). The atlas data are few, except for Zone 7, where most records come from the late summer (March–May). Where habitat remains suitable, winter breeding could occur more frequently than is known, but it is not known to be multiple-brooded (Schmitt 1976; Urban *et al.* 1986).

Interspecific relationships: It is allopatric with the closely related Water Rail *R. aquaticus* which breeds in North Africa and throughout Eurasia (Urban *et al.* 1986). It is widely sympatric with the Black Crake *Amaurornis flavirostris*, a smaller species which tolerates a wider range of habitats, has different foraging methods and, in KwaZulu-Natal, occurs infrequently at high altitudes (Urban *et al.* 1986; Taylor 1994).

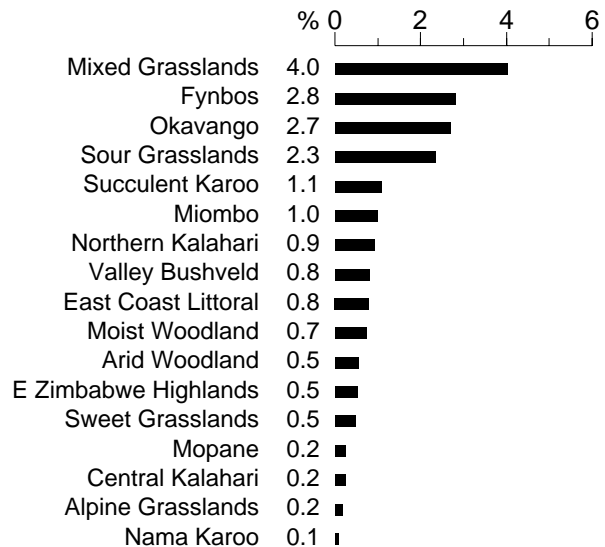
Historical distribution and conservation: Its distribution is probably largely unchanged. It is more widespread in the southwestern Cape Province than was previously thought (Hockey *et al.* 1989).

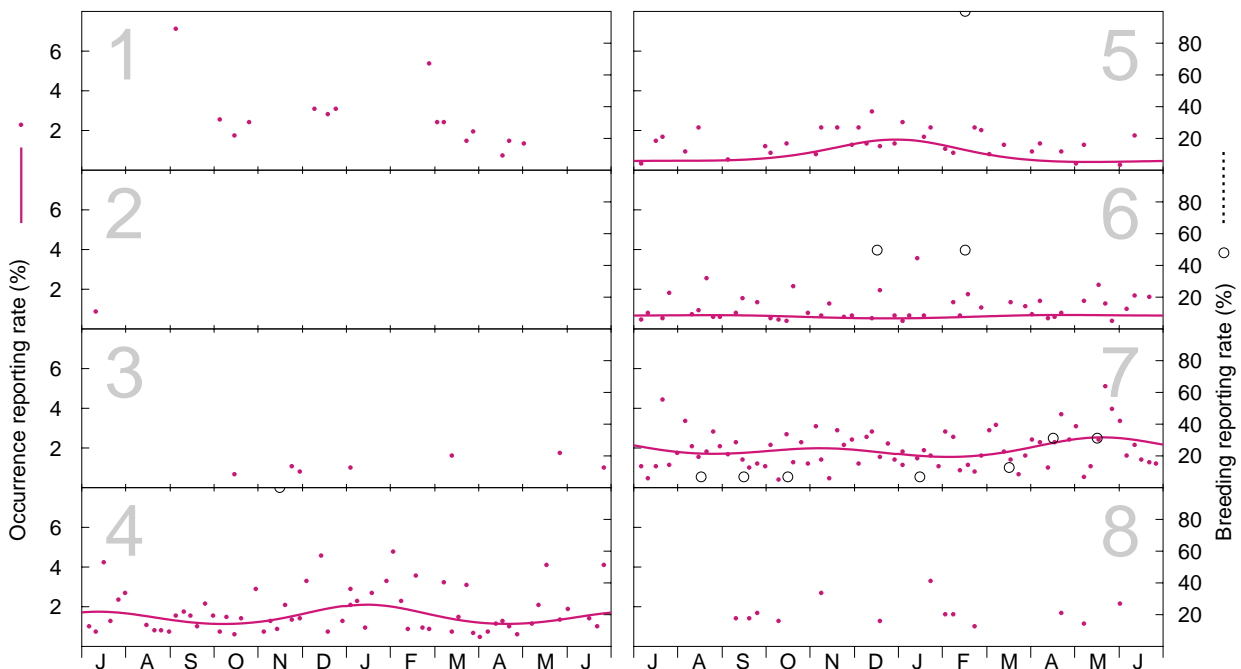
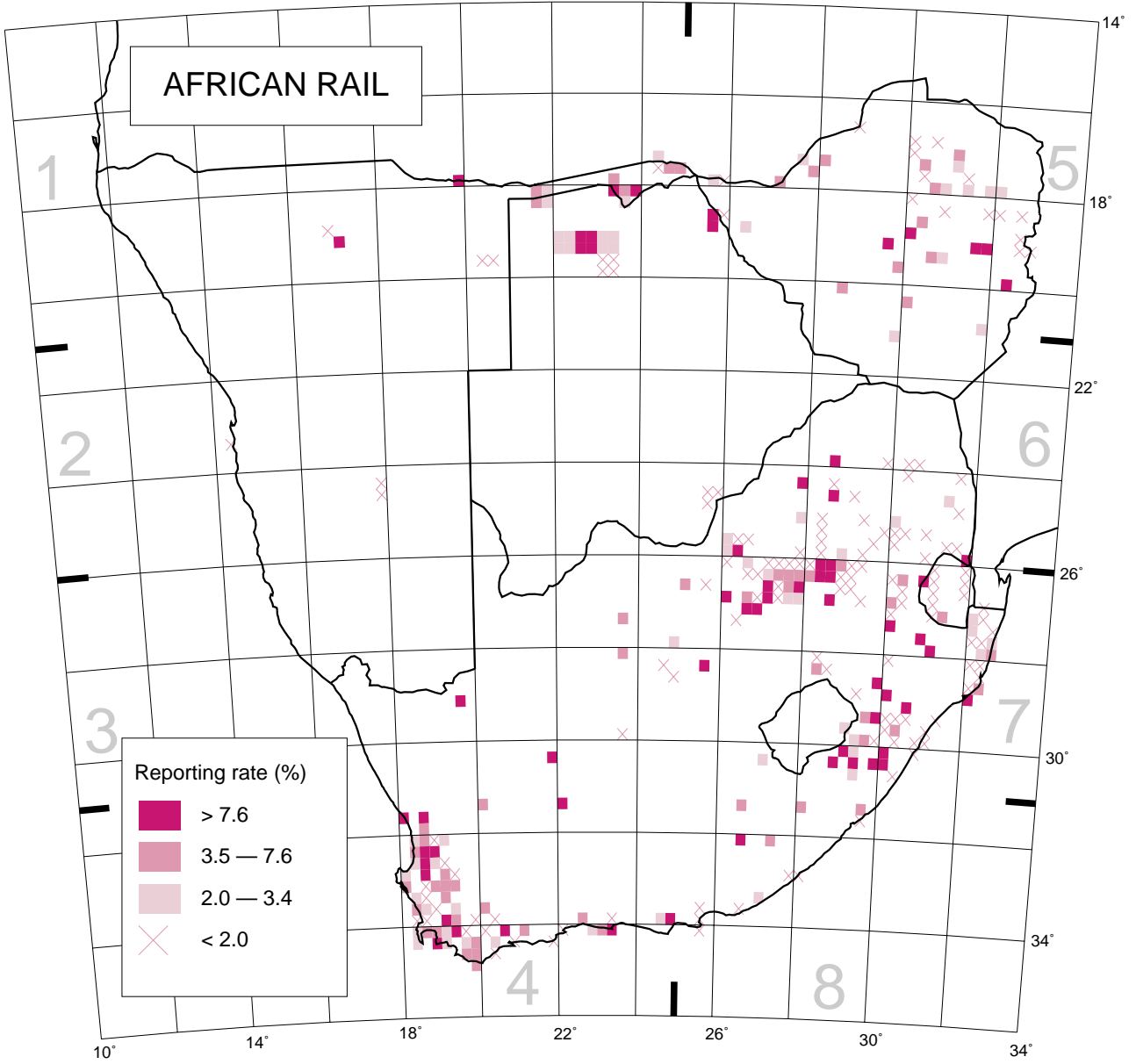
Although the African Rail's natural wetland habitats are continually being reduced (Skead 1967b; Taylor 1994), it is under no immediate threat and is able to colonize relatively small, artificially created, wetland patches (Hockey *et al.* 1989; pers. obs).

P.B. Taylor

Recorded in 322 grid cells, 7.1%
Total number of records: 2164
Mean reporting rate for range: 4.1%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 17, 1, 7, 129, 65, 73, 379, 16; Breeding: 0, 0, 0, 1, 1, 2, 16, 0.