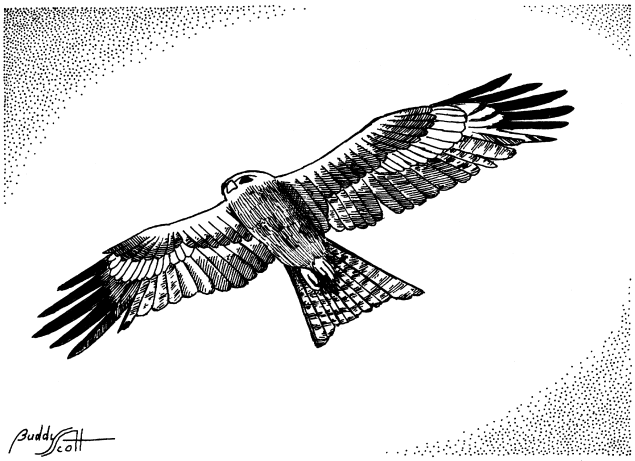


# Yellowbilled Kite

## Geelbekwou

*Milvus migrans parasitus*

Although currently treated as a subspecies of the Black Kite *M. migrans*, adult Yellowbilled Kites are readily identified in the field; reliable atlas data are thus available for this form. This race is widespread in, and restricted to, Africa south of the Sahara, and their breeding in southern Africa also justifies separate treatment of this population.

The Yellowbilled Kite is a common intra-African migrant to southern Africa. Fair numbers breed in the region, especially in eastern southern Africa. However, many others, perhaps the vast majority, visit the region as nonbreeding migrants, often being found in nomadic flocks, sometimes in the company of Black Kites (e.g. Tarboton & Allan 1984; Herremans & Herremans-Tonnoeyr 1994c). It is not known whether these nonbreeders are southern African-bred birds that have yet to reach reproductive maturity, or whether they are migrants from populations breeding elsewhere in Africa.

While the atlas data show that it occurs throughout the region, several distinct areas of concentrated abundance are evident: in the southwestern Cape Province, the Transkei and KwaZulu-Natal, southeastern Botswana, the Okavango and Caprivi, and in Owambo in northern Namibia. Other areas, of lesser abundance, are in Zimbabwe, central Botswana, central Namibia and the Transvaal. Breeding birds are secretive and their nests are usually inconspicuous, so assessments of breeding densities are hard to obtain. Several nests were placed 75–100 m apart in a clump of trees in the southwestern Cape Province (Steyn 1982b), while adjacent nests were found 300–500 m apart in forested valleys in coastal KwaZulu-Natal (pers. obs), but typical breeding densities in the region are much lower than this.

**Habitat:** It was recorded in a great variety of habitats, with about half of the vegetation types having reporting rates higher than 10%. However, reporting rates were much higher in woodlands, especially those with dense rural human habitation, than in grasslands and desert areas. It was also more abundant in the higher-rainfall regions.

**Movements:** The models clearly show the times of arrival and departure. It arrives in synchronized fashion August–September throughout the region, except in the arid west (Zones 2 and 3) where it appears about a month later. This may be because a higher proportion of eastern birds are breeders. Reporting rates increased until late September, followed by a further significant increase December–January in most Zones, except in Zimbabwe (Zone 5). These changes are probably due to a wave of nomadic birds invading southern Africa during midsummer (e.g. Herremans & Herremans-Tonnoeyr 1994c), when numbers decrease further north in higher-rainfall areas (Aspinwall 1982). In autumn, most have left the southern Zones by mid-March, while it is only by late April that most have left the northern Zones.

The only foreign recovery of a bird ringed in southern Africa was of a juvenile ringed on the Skeleton Coast and later recovered in an aircraft engine in Burundi. A nestling ringed in Zambia was recovered two months later in Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981), documenting the southward post-breeding dispersal of birds born in the tropics. Recoveries of three rehabilitated birds ringed near Durban (2931CC) were at distances of several hundred kilometres in directions north and southwest of Durban (SAFRING).

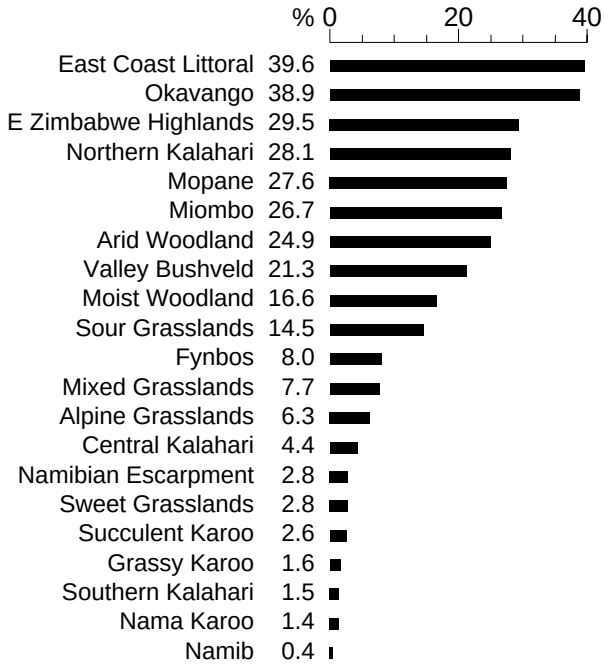
**Breeding:** Many more breeding records are available from eastern southern Africa than from the western regions. Most atlas records come from September–December, with some as late as March, the latter referring to fledged young. Egglaying data show that the peak laying months, September and October, are remarkably consistent between Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, the Transvaal and KwaZulu-Natal, but slightly later in the southwestern Cape Province (October–November) (Winterbottom 1968a; Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Brown & Clinning in press; N.J. Skinner *in litt.*).

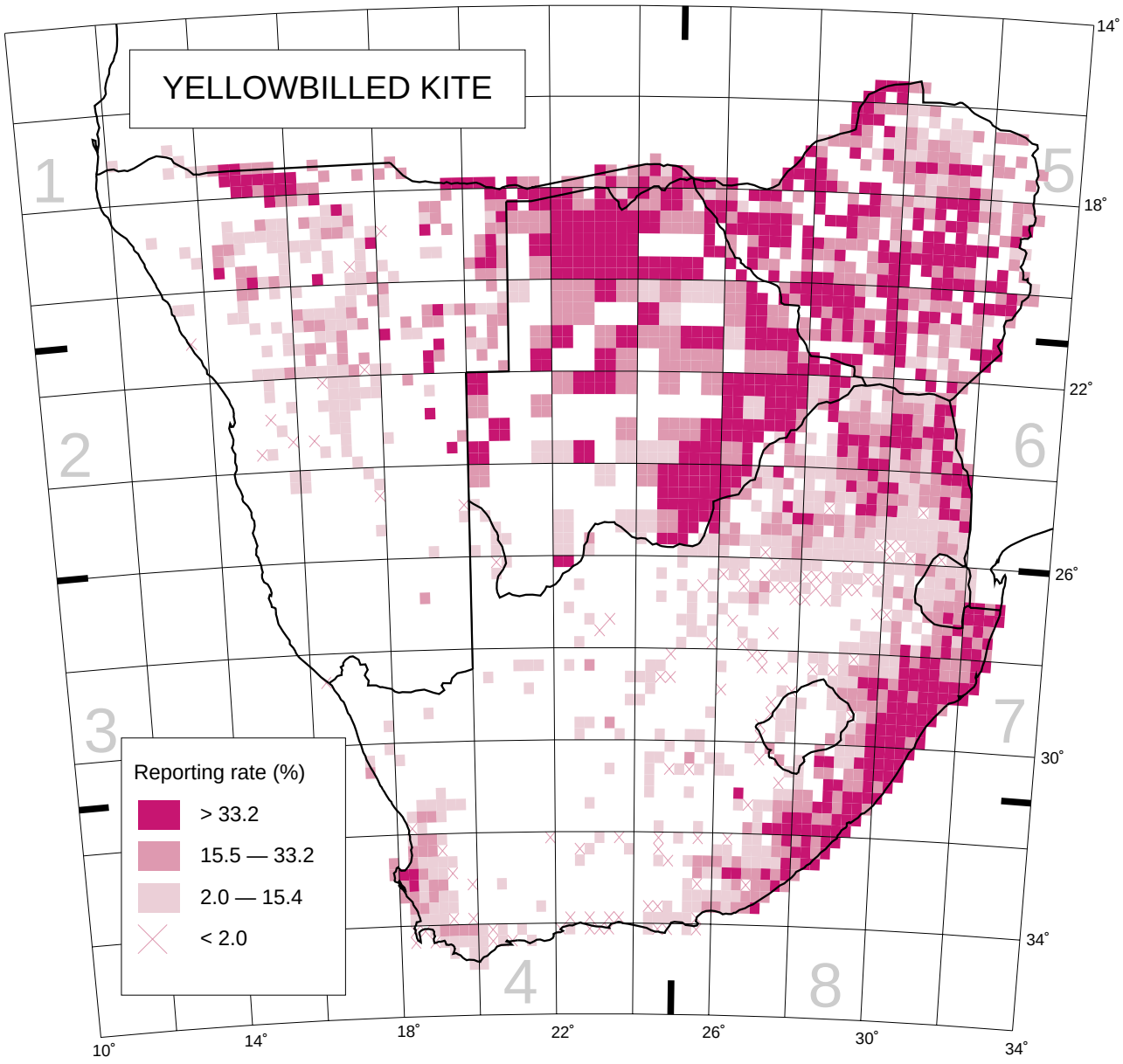
**Historical distribution and conservation:** A recent decline in numbers is suggested for the Transvaal, probably due to poisoning, and Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981; Tarboton & Allan 1984). However, the food supply of kites has probably increased as a result of a growing availability of human refuse, especially in densely populated rural areas where kites are probably now more abundant than before. Boshoff *et al.* (1983) found no difference in the status of this species in the Cape Province when comparing data from the periods 1700–1969 and 1970–79. The Yellowbilled Kite is common and adaptable.

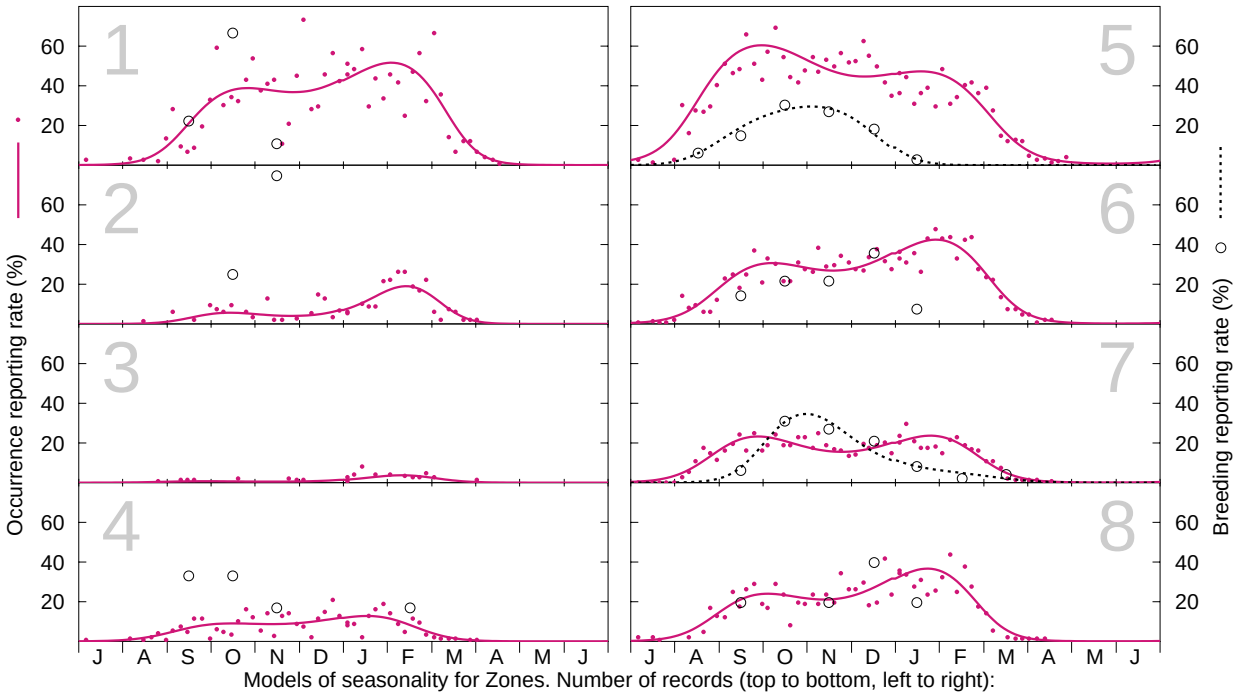
*J.M. Mendelsohn*

Recorded in 2101 grid cells, 46.3%
Total number of records: 22 303
Mean reporting rate for range: 18.7%

Reporting rates for vegetation types






Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 560, 137, 38, 410, 2648, 2065, 2177, 784; Breeding: 9, 4, 0, 6, 33, 14, 48, 5.