

Redbilled Francolin

Rooibekfisant

Fracolinus adspersus

The distribution of the Redbilled Francolin extends only slightly beyond southern Africa into southern Angola and southwestern Zambia. It is common and generally abundant throughout central and northern Namibia, and through much of northern Botswana, extending marginally into northwestern Zimbabwe and the northern Cape Province. It is more sparse in the Kalahari and generally avoids the open lacustrine areas of the Makgadikgadi and the eastern hardveld in Botswana. In the latter area it is parapatrically replaced along a sharp, soil-dependent boundary by the Natal Francolin *F. natalensis*. The atlas map refutes the disjunct ranges given in Urban *et al.* (1986) and indicates one continuous distribution.

It is a member of the 'vermiculated' francolins (Urban *et al.* 1986) and its closest relatives are the Natal *F. natalensis* and Cape *F. capensis* Francolins, but it is not as closely related to these as they are to one another, and it is more xeric in its habitat choice (Clancey 1986a; Crowe *et al.* 1992).

It is usually found in pairs during the breeding season and in coveys of 5–10 birds, up to 20, during the nonbreeding season (Urban *et al.* 1986). Common and usually tame, it is a conspicuous bird, especially when calling.

Habitat: It generally inhabits dry floodplains and adjacent riparian woodland where it is most abundant, e.g. Okavango Delta. It also occurs in *Acacia* and mixed woodlands, low scrub or thickets interspersed with open ground, frequently along watercourses (Urban *et al.* 1986). While it appears to be a sandveld specialist in Botswana, it often occurs on rocky substrata in Namibia. In northern Botswana, average densities varied from 1 bird/1.7 ha in riparian *Acacia* woodland near Lake Ngami (2022B), 1 bird/2.2 ha in mixed Okavango riparian woodland, 1 bird/25 ha in various types of Mopane woodland, to 1 bird/150 ha in Kalahari woodlands, while none were recorded in transects covering 250 ha of *Baikiaea* woodland (M.H. unpubl. data). In 3860 km of roadside observations in northern Botswana, an average of 1 bird/2.7 km was recorded (M.H. unpubl. data), but under optimal local conditions, much higher densities were found, e.g. 1 bird/

0.3 km along the Chobe riverfront (Herremans 1994b). The vegetation analysis shows a remarkably high reporting rate for the Okavango region.

Movements: There is no evidence for seasonal movements and the models show little variation in reporting rates.

Breeding: The atlas data indicate a winter/spring breeding season. Liversidge (1987) reported that it breeds during the peak rains, which is contrary to the atlas data. Brooke (1971f) reported that four of five breeding records in Zimbabwe were for February–March, while Irwin (1981) reported egg-laying in most months January–August. In Botswana, 70% of breeding records were in autumn/winter (March–June) after the main rains, with a much smaller peak in spring (August–October) (Skinner 1996b). J. Komen (pers. comm.) recorded breeding, usually after local rainfall events, for every month in Namibia.

Interspecific relationships: Wolff & Milstein (1977) suggested that there is competition between Redbilled and Natal Francolins, which have essentially parapatric distributions. Statements that the former have been replaced by the latter along the Vaal River in the southwestern Transvaal (Wolff & Milstein 1977) are probably based on misidentifications. It is likely that it was always the Natal Francolin that was present in this area (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Redbilled and Swainson's *F. swainsonii* Francolins often occur together.

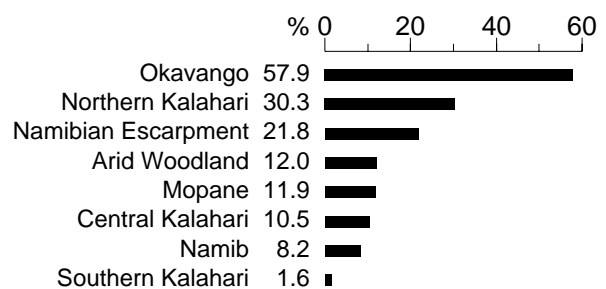
Historical distribution and conservation: Its occurrence in the northern Cape Province was not appreciated prior to the atlas period and previously published distribution maps fail to show its occurrence there, e.g. Urban *et al.* (1986) and Maclean (1993b), the latter also excluding southern Botswana from the range. This probably reflects a previous lack of information from this region, rather than any range expansion in recent times. Brooke (1984b) excluded it from the South African Red Data book on the assumption that it did not breed in South Africa but, as could be expected in this sedentary species, breeding has recently been recorded in the northern Cape Province (P.C. Anderson pers. comm.). The isolated records close to Kimberley (2824C) reflect an introduced and breeding population. The atlas data confirm its absence from the Transvaal (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

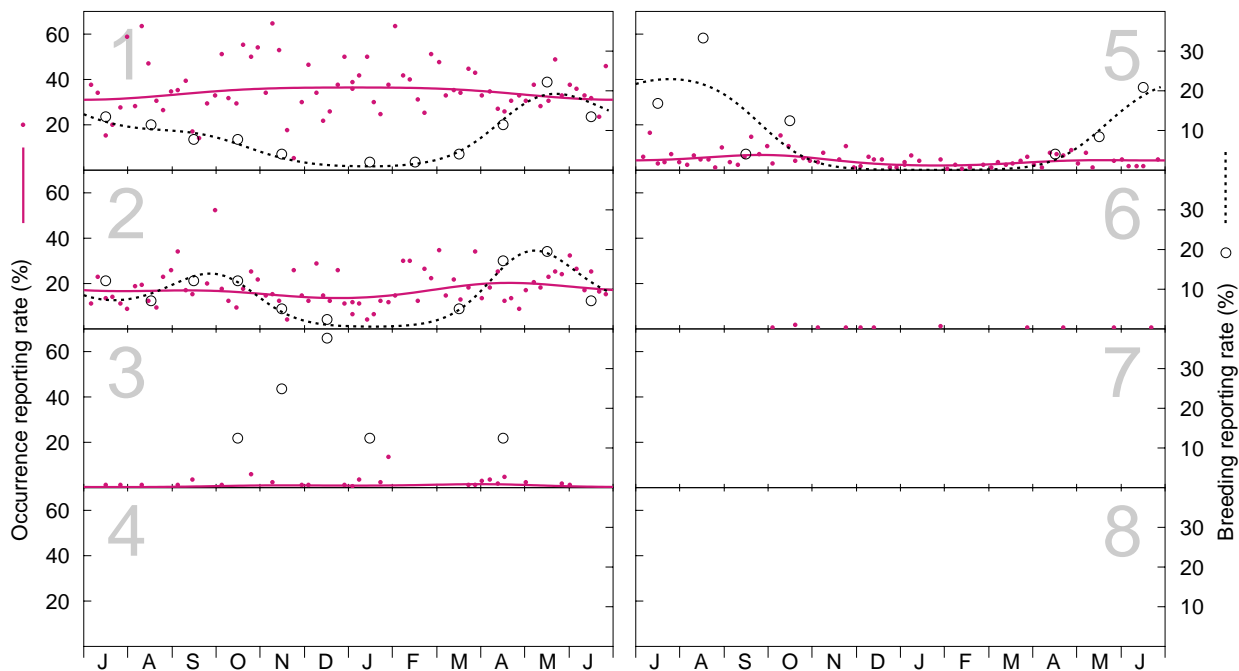
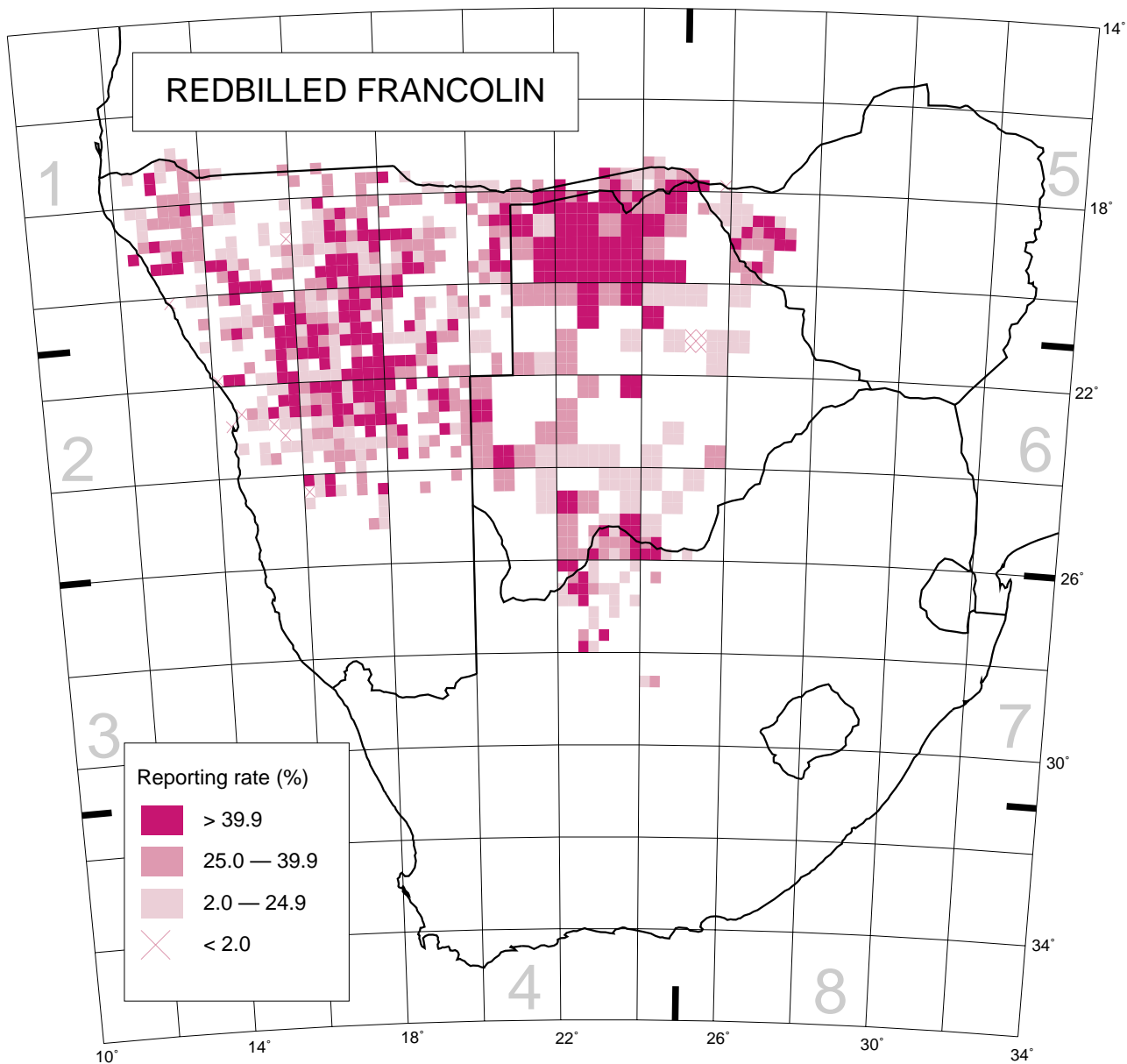
Apparent tolerance of human activity and preference for modified biotopes, coupled with its general abundance, place the Redbilled Francolin in a secure position. However, in Botswana it is hunted heavily and habitat degradation by overgrazing affects numbers (M.H. unpubl. data).

R.M. Little and M. Herremans

Recorded in 912 grid cells, 20.1%
Total number of records: 5792
Mean reporting rate for range: 36.0%

Reporting rates for vegetation types





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
 Occurrence: 1128, 623, 46, 0, 376, 13, 0, 0; Breeding: 103, 41, 8, 0, 24, 0, 0, 0.