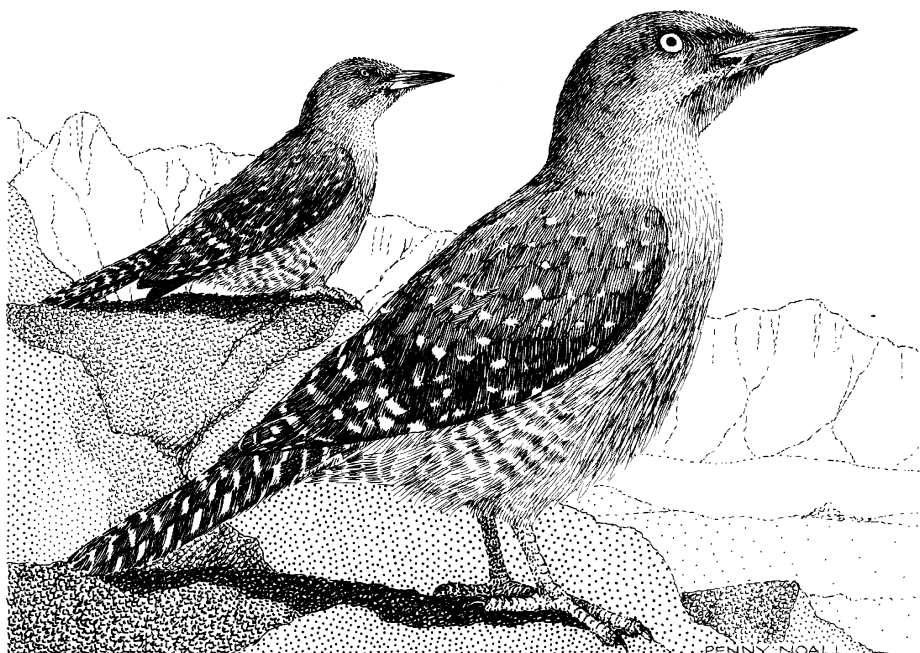




Ground Woodpecker

Grondspieg

Geocolaptes olivaceus

The Ground Woodpecker is a notable endemic which has not yet been found ranging north of the Limpopo or in Namibia, and it is unlikely to do so because it is susceptible to heat stress and seldom occurs far from surface water suitable for drinking and bathing. This is well illustrated in the distribution map which shows its avoidance of the hot, dry Karoo basin. It is one of only three terrestrial woodpeckers in the world (Short 1971); the other two (genus *Colaptes*) both occur in South America.

Its comparatively large size, loud calls, and habit of perching in family groups on prominent rocks, render this species fairly conspicuous. The atlas data present an accurate picture of its distribution. It can occasionally be confused with rock thrushes *Monticola* spp. if a poor view is obtained.

Habitat: Landform is more important than vegetation type in the ecology of this species. Steep boulder-strewn slopes of buttes, or of the cave sandstone regions of the Drakensberg, provide characteristic habitat and many such areas lie in Alpine Grasslands, as shown in the vegetation analysis. Because the species is primarily a terrestrial forager, it avoids areas covered with dense vegetation. It is less common in the fold mountains of the southwestern Cape Province than might be expected, probably because mature fynbos is too tall and dense to suit it.

Movements: Ground Woodpeckers have been observed in the alpine summit area of the Drakensberg escarpment only during the summer months (Brown & Barnes 1984), although the species is evidently resident in the Maluti Mountains of Lesotho throughout the winter (Tarboton *et al.* 1993). The models suggest little evidence of movements in most of the range, but there appears to be an increase in reporting rates in Zones 3 and 6 during the winter and early spring. This may be due to altitudinal movements, but may equally result from increased conspicuousness in these months when adult pairs become highly territorial and chase out the progeny of earlier years, which have associated with them during the nonbreeding season.

Breeding: It breeds throughout its range. Egg-laying peaks August–November (Oatley 1995b). Nesting may start as early as July and late broods may only emerge in February. The atlas breeding data span July–April, mainly September–December, with an indication of slightly earlier breeding in the south of the range. Tunnel excavation can occur at any time of year and is not always indicative of reproductive activity since some tunnels serve only as dormitories (Oatley 1995b).

Interspecific relationships: The open and often treeless nature of its habitat generally precludes sympatry between this species and other woodpeckers.

Historical distribution and conservation: Historical distribution details are few and provide no evidence for major alteration of its range or change in its numbers, although Tarboton *et al.* (1987b) noted that it no longer occurs at Woodbush (2330CC) where an early specimen was collected. It was not listed as a Red Data species in South Africa (Brooke 1984b) and there seems little likelihood of the Ground Woodpecker's status deteriorating in the foreseeable future, since its relatively wide range and inaccessible haunts are a strong safeguard. It is, however, listed as globally 'near-threatened' by Collar *et al.* (1994).

T.B. Oatley

Recorded in 494 grid cells, 10.9%
Total number of records: 4809
Mean reporting rate for range: 11.9%

Reporting rates for vegetation types

