



Sicklewinged Chat

Vlakespekvreter

Cercomela sinuata

The Sicklewinged Chat is endemic to southern Africa and its distribution includes most parts of the Karoo biome in South Africa and southern Namibia, also extending into the southwestern Cape Province, and into the grassland biome in the Free State, northeastern Cape Province and Lesotho. Population concentrations of this otherwise sparsely distributed species are centred on the eastcentral Karoo and the Lesotho highlands, where it is one of the most plentiful birds in the Alpine Belt at altitudes above 2900 m (Brown & Barnes 1984; Tarboton *et al.* 1993). Densities in the Karoo have not been reported but it is particularly common in the Hanover district (3124AB) (McLachlan & Liversidge 1970). Records become markedly more scattered west of 22°E.

Three subspecies have been described (Clancey 1980b), two of which appear to have continuous ranges in the Karoo. The map suggests a degree of isolation of the third subspecies *C. s. hypernephela* which is found in the Lesotho highlands and KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg. This would be especially true if the records from the northeastern Cape Province are of *hypernephela*. In that area Sicklewinged Chats have been recorded as common at 2500 m on Ben Macdhui (3027DB) (D. du Plessis pers. comm.), but it is not yet clear which race was observed. If these are indeed *hypernephela*, it would represent a large extension of the known range of this subspecies.

Densities of 28 birds/km² in summer and 10 birds/km² in winter have been measured in Lesotho highlands (Brown & Barnes 1984; Osborne & Tigar 1990).

The Sicklewinged Chat is more slightly built and longer legged than the Familiar Chat *C. familiaris*, and also differs subtly in plumage and behaviour, but the two can easily be confused. The Sicklewinged Chat and the similarly pale Tractrac Chat *C. tractrac* are also difficult to distinguish from a distance. This is likely to have caused significant under-

reporting of the Sicklewinged Chat and may have distorted the distributional picture to some unknown extent, particularly in the west (see text for Tractrac Chat).

Habitat: It is a bird of open scrub, scrubby and overgrazed grassland. It appears to avoid human habitation, although it does frequent pastures and cultivated lands. The vegetation analysis reveals a strong association with the grassier eastern parts of the Karoo biome. In Lesotho, *hypernephela* is found in Alpine Grasslands, generally above 2250 m (Osborne & Tigar 1990).

Movements: Clancey (1964b) reported that *hypernephela* is an altitudinal migrant into KwaZulu-Natal in winter. However, the distribution map shows that penetration is only marginal, although the difference in altitude may be considerable. Brown and Barnes (1984) suggested that it moves only relatively short distances to lower altitudes when forced to do so by severe winter conditions, and that it is recorded below the Alpine Belt only at these times. This conclusion would appear to be supported by the break in distribution mentioned above. Tarboton *et al.* (1993b), on the other hand, reported a general vacating of the Katse Basin (2000–3100 m) in Lesotho during winter.

In Zone 3, generally low summer reporting rates and a marked winter increase are suggestive of seasonal movement into and out of the winter-rainfall succulent Karoo along the west coast. Understanding of this species' movements would benefit greatly from ringing studies based in the Lesotho highlands, the grassy eastern Karoo and the succulent western Karoo.

Breeding: The few breeding records confirm a spring–summer breeding season (Keith *et al.* 1992) which apparently peaks earlier (October–November) in the southwest (Zone 4) than in the northeast (Zone 7; November–February).

Interspecific relationships: The 22°E meridian is an approximate division between areas of relatively high reporting rates for the Sicklewinged Chat to the east and Tractrac Chat to the west. It may be that average rainfall and the amount of grass cover are factors in separating the cores of their ranges. In the KwaZulu-Natal Alpine Belt, the Sicklewinged Chat replaces the Familiar Chat which occurs only at lower altitudes (Brown & Barnes 1984).

Historical distribution and conservation: There is no evidence of historical change but the Sicklewinged Chat may have benefited from agriculture – including overgrazing – to an unknown extent. It is not under any immediate threat.

J.A. Harrison

Recorded in 572 grid cells, 12.6%
Total number of records: 2494
Mean reporting rate for range: 10.9%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



