

Cape Reed Warbler

Kaapse Rietsanger

Acrocephalus gracilirostris

The Cape Reed Warbler is a common Afrotropical resident, widely distributed throughout Africa south of the Sahara (Hall & Moreau 1970). In southern Africa it ranges through Zimbabwe, Swaziland, northern Botswana and scattered localities in the eastern hardveld of Botswana, and through most of South Africa where it is notably absent in the drier regions north and south of the Orange River. It is also absent from the Namib and the Kalahari, but it occurs in scattered localities throughout Namibia where it is probably associated with perennial and ephemeral waterbodies and farm dams. Atlas data indicate that its three primary strongholds are the rivers and wetlands in the southwestern Cape Province, on the Transvaal highveld, and in the Okavango region of Botswana.

Its scattered distribution in Zimbabwe could be a result of uneven coverage because it probably occurs throughout the country. Gaps in the distribution in the Transkei and KwaZulu-Natal midlands are noteworthy, as is the coincidence of a gap with the relatively dry Tugela River basin. Quicquelberge (1989) considered the species to be rare in the Transkei; overgrazing and habitat destruction may be limiting factors. Absence in the Great Karoo is likely due to the lack of perennial waterbodies with suitable reedbed habitat. The discontinuities in the distribution do not seem to coincide with limits of ranges of the four subspecies recognized by Clancey (1980b).

It is fairly vocal, but seldom shows itself from thick cover and as a result it is frequently overlooked unless calling.

Habitat: It is a species of reedbeds and bulrushes in lagoons of standing water, estuaries, rivers, dams, pans, marshes, vleis and lakes (Maclean 1993b). It is likely to occur in most biomes, provided the required wetland habitat exists.

Movements: Atlas data reveal no evidence for seasonality, and it appears to be resident throughout its range. Ringed birds are frequently recaptured at the site of ringing (SAFRING). Reporting rates are somewhat higher during the summer breeding period when it is more vocal. Some birds are mobile, however, apparently also undertaking nocturnal flights (Herremans 1993b), and movements of 30–40 km have been documented in Zimbabwe (Irwin

1981). It is remarkably quick to colonize small patches of new habitat, even if they are available for only relatively short periods of time (K.N.B. & M.H. pers. obs).

Breeding: Breeding is concentrated in spring and early summer (August–February) in most of the range. Egg-laying data indicate that breeding is almost throughout the year in Zimbabwe, while there is a clear peak (September–December) in the winter-rainfall area of the southwestern Cape Province, but only slightly later (October–January) in the summer-rainfall region of the Transvaal (Winterbottom 1968a; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Interspecific relationships: It may compete with other *Acrocephalus* and *Bradypterus* warblers in different parts of its range. It occurs alongside the larger Great Reed *A. arundinaceus* and Greater Swamp *A. rufescens* Warblers and overlaps widely with the much smaller African Marsh Warbler *A. baeticatus* and also with the similar-sized African Sedge Warbler *Bradypterus baboecala*. There are subtle differences in habitat preference, with Great Reed and African Marsh occupying smaller patches of reeds closer to bushes and even over dry ground, Greater Swamp Warbler preferring papyrus stands and African Sedge Warbler occupying dense matted vegetation, not necessarily tall or over water.

Historical distribution and conservation: There is no evidence to suggest that the present-day distribution differs from the historical distribution, except that the construction of dams and sewage ponds in drier areas has most likely helped to extend its range. On the other hand, there has been widespread loss of natural wetland habitats. Although previously thought to be absent from southern and central Namibia (e.g. Maclean 1993b), it is now found to occur at scattered localities throughout that country. The Cape Reed Warbler is widespread in Africa and is not considered threatened (Brooke 1984b; Collar *et al.* 1994).

K.N. Barnes and M. Herremans

Recorded in 1210 grid cells, 26.7%

Total number of records: 15 021

Mean reporting rate for range: 14.5%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



