

## Grassbird

## Grasvoël

Sphenoeacus afer

The Grassbird's distribution extends from the fynbos of the southwestern Cape Province in a narrow coastal arc which broadens in the grasslands to the east and north. There is an isolated population in the eastern highlands of Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981) where confusion with the Moustached Warbler *Melocichla mentalis* is possible. It is absent from the drier regions (less than 250 mm annual rainfall), such as the central Karoo and Namibia, and from Botswana. There is a break in distribution between the nominate race in the southwestern and southern Cape Province, and the race *S. a. intermedius* in the eastern Cape Province to KwaZulu-Natal, which appears to have a continuous range with *natalensis*, the northernmost race in South Africa. Birds in the eastern highlands of Zimbabwe are of the well-isolated, distinct race *exasus* (Clancey 1980b).

Although it has a tendency to skulk in dense vegetation, its habit of singing loudly and distinctively from an exposed perch in the morning and late afternoon makes it unlikely to be overlooked or misidentified.

**Habitat:** It is an insectivore, living in rank vegetation with long grasses, restios or ferns, in tangled scrub, low, sparse shrublands and in hilly grasslands with scattered bushes. In the fynbos biome it inhabits low- to medium-height mesic and wet fynbos, within which it prefers restiodominated vegetation (Fraser 1990) and in which it is one of the 'dominant species' (Winterbottom, J.M. 1966b). In low-lying Mountain Fynbos in the Cape Peninsula it was

most numerous (1.0 bird/ha) in H.C. Taylor's (1984) Restionaceous Tussock Marsh five years after a fire (Fraser 1990). In 28-year-old Mountain Fynbos in the southwestern Cape Province at an altitude of c. 500 m, it occurred at a density of 1 bird/ha in Tall Sparse Shrubland (Fraser 1989). It occurred at half this density in Tall Open Shrubland, but was absent from four other structural formations with taller and denser vegetation. It can thus be considered to select habitat on structural criteria and it avoids areas in which the woody component of the vegetation becomes too high or dense.

**Movements:** It is not thought to undertake seasonal or altitudinal migrations, and the atlas data do not provide evidence to refute this assumption. Seasonal differences in recording rates – most pronounced in the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4) and in Zone 7 – are probably attributable to the bird's increased detectability when it sings during the breeding season.

**Breeding:** Breeding was not recorded in Zimbabwe; elsewhere the Grassbird nests in summer, except for the nominate race in the winter-rainfall area of the Cape Province (Zone 4), where most breeding is in early spring.

**Interspecific relationships:** It shares its habitat with other small insectivores, notably *Cisticola* spp., but the level of competition, if any, between them has not been investigated.

**Historical distribution and conservation:** Its distribution is not known to have altered historically, although its abundance in certain regions is likely to have declined.

In fynbos it does not adapt to alien woody plant invasion and abandons areas which become heavily infested with Australian wattles such as *Acacia cyclops*, *A. saligna* and *A. longifolia* (Hockey *et al.* 1989; Fraser & Crowe 1990). Urban development, agriculture and forestry have reduced the area of suitable habitat. The Grassbird is likely to benefit in the medium term from frequent burning of fynbos (more often than the natural cycle of 15–20 years), as fire encourages the establishment of restioid vegetation (Van Wilgen 1981), which it favours, at the expense of slow-maturing proteaceous and other shrubs. It is a characteristic species of firebreaks burnt at six-year intervals in Mountain Fynbos near Stellenbosch (3318DD), and from which 'woodland' birds have been lost (Richardson & Fraser 1995).

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Recorded in 537 grid cells, 11.8% Total number of records: 9475 Mean reporting rate for range: 14.4%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



