



Wailing Cisticola

Huiltinkinkie

Cisticola lais

The centre of abundance of the Wailing Cisticola is in the grasslands of eastern southern Africa, with populations beyond the atlas region in the highlands of western Mozambique, Angola, Malawi and southern Tanzania. It is widely distributed from about 24°E northeastwards, mainly in higher-altitude grasslands.

There are five subspecies in the region (Clancey 1980b): *C. l. oreobates* in eastern Zimbabwe; *mashona* from Pietersburg to the Soutpansberg (23–22°S); *monticola* in the northern Free State and Transvaal highveld; *lais* from Swaziland through KwaZulu-Natal, the eastern Free State and Lesotho to the eastern Cape Province; and *maculata* from Algoa Bay (3325D) westwards.

There is controversy about the western limits of the species' distribution. Subspecies *maculata* allegedly occurs in the fynbos biome of the southwestern and southern Cape Province, eastwards to Algoa Bay (Clancey 1980b). The type specimen of this form is purportedly from Piketberg (3218DD), but the species has not reliably been recorded west of Algoa Bay subsequently (e.g. Winterbottom 1968a; Cape Bird Club 1981; Hockey *et al.* 1989). It is likely that the locality on the label of the type specimen is incorrect (Hockey *et al.* 1989). As a species characteristic of grassland habitats, it is unlikely to occur in mountain fynbos, but from the Kouga Mountains (3323C) eastwards, the fynbos biome is characterized by 'grassy fynbos' on the mountain tops (Rebelo 1996), which could constitute the range of *maculata*. Confusion with the similar Greybacked Cisticola *C. subruficapilla*, which is abundant in the fynbos biome, further complicates this problem.

It is fairly conspicuous, occurring singly, in pairs or family groups, and is usually detected by its call. Where they overlap, this species is easily confused with the Greybacked Cisticola which has a similar call, but is distinguished from that species primarily by habitat, larger size and buffy rather than grey underparts.

Habitat: It favours long grass, mainly on hillsides, often in patches of rank growth, frequently with some scrub,

shrubs or bracken, and often associated with rocky outcrops. Occurring mainly in montane grasslands, it ranges from sea-level in the eastern Cape Province up to 2700 m in the Drakensberg range (Tarboton *et al.* 1993), and between 750 m (but usually above 1500 m) and 2600 m in eastern Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981).

It was most frequently reported in Eastern Zimbabwe Highlands and Alpine Grasslands.

Movements: It is resident. There was a small summer increase in reporting rates in all regions, presumably reflecting an increase in conspicuousness of males owing to vocalizations in the breeding season. It is reported to migrate away from only the highest parts of the Drakensberg range (>2400 m) in winter (Brown & Barnes 1984; Johnson & Maclean 1994). Work in the central highlands of Lesotho (2928A,B), however, suggests that it is resident, or at best only marginally migratory, even at altitudes in excess of 2500 m (Tarboton *et al.* 1993; Allan *et al.* 1996). It is not known to undertake altitudinal migration in the eastern Transvaal (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b) or Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981).

Breeding: Atlas records were October–April. Egg-laying has been reported September–March (mainly December–January) (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Interspecific relationships: It is very similar to the Greybacked Cisticola, but is larger with a heavier bill, and it occurs in long grass rather than scrub-dominated habitats. It occupies similar habitat to that of the Lazy Cisticola *C. aberrans*, Spotted *Prinia maculosa* and Drakensberg *P. hypoxantha* Prinias, although all these species seem to require more scrub than the Wailing Cisticola.

Historical distribution and conservation: There is no evidence for any major change in distribution. The Wailing Cisticola is widely distributed and should not be threatened in the medium to long term, although afforestation and overgrazing destroy its habitat. The status of the southwestern race *maculata* needs investigation.

A. Berruti

Recorded in 425 grid cells, 9.4%
Total number of records: 3345
Mean reporting rate for range: 7.5%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



