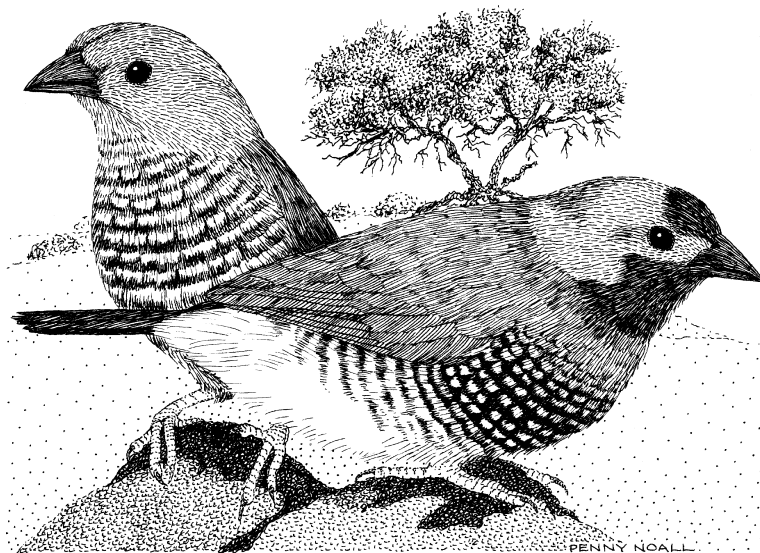




Melba Finch

Gewone Melba

Pytilia melba

The Melba Finch occurs across the southern African thornbelt, wherever reliable drinking water is available, hence the clear 'Kalahari hole' in the distribution in Botswana. It is widespread in Zimbabwe, northern South Africa, eastern Swaziland, and all but the most arid parts of Namibia and Botswana. It extends northwards into the Sahel, avoiding only the Zaire Basin and moist coastal West Africa (Hall & Moreau 1970). Clancey (1980b) recognized two subspecies in the region, which have continuous ranges on the present map.

Mixed *Acacia*-*Dichrostachys* thorn savanna on the Nyl floodplain (2428DB) had densities of 0.25–1.25 active breeding pairs/ha in nest census plots (Barnard & Markus 1991; P.B. unpubl. data), and ringing data in Skead (1975b) suggest an estimated 0.39–0.79 pairs/ha in very similar habitat at Vaalbosch Farm (2528AB). The rocky hills near Windhoek (2217CA) in Arid Woodland support lower densities, roughly 0.2 pairs/ha (P.B. unpubl. data). Like many estrildids, it appears to be highly monogamous and territorial; pairs or family groups are most often encountered (Skead 1975b).

The similar appearance of the Goldenbacked Pytilia *P. afra* could lead to misidentification in areas of sympatry, although the habitat preferences differ. Goodwin (1982) regarded the two species as relatively distantly related within the genus, although they appear superficially similar.

Habitat: It is typically found in *Acacia* savanna, especially *A. tortilis* and *A. erioloba*, open grassland close to cover, and mixed thorn and broadleaved savanna with thickets. It can occur in broadleaved woodland if there are both open grassy patches and thickets or thorny shrubs. The high reporting rates in Mopane, Moist Woodland and Okavango biomes result from a significant *Acacia* mosaic in these otherwise predominantly broadleaved vegetation types. It needs to drink regularly, at least in the dry winter (Maclean 1993b), and availability of surface water has a clear impact on the distribution.

Movements: The atlas models do not show large-scale, regular migrations. However, variations in reporting rates in Zones 2 and 6 are probably reliable and significant; a dry-season contraction into the Limpopo drainage could account for the pattern. In a study in the Transvaal, territoriality appeared to break down outside the breeding season, but birds did not appear to move far from the breeding site (Skead

1975b). During the 1992–93 drought, however, the species declined dramatically in southeastern Botswana, to the extent that bird-export companies failed to make up their usually sustainable quota; the event was attributed to emigration (M.H. pers. obs).

Breeding: Most records are from mid- to late rainy season, peaking March–April. Breeding is opportunistic, even occurring in winter if good late rains have fallen. Particularly in the moister north-east, spring breeding can also occur if suitable grass is available (Irwin 1981). Breeding success is variable depending on rainfall and veld conditions; the number and persistency of displaying Paradise Whydahs *Vidua paradisaea* during autumn is a good indicator of breeding activity in its Melba Finch host (M.H. pers. obs).

Interspecific relationships: The Melba Finch is the exclusive host of the Paradise Whydah (Maclean 1993b), and the ranges of the two species in the region are almost completely coincident, with the host slightly more widely distributed but less conspicuous than its parasite. The range of the Melba Finch encompasses almost completely the more restricted range of the congeneric Goldenbacked Pytilia, which prefers broadleaved woodland but can also be found in lush *Acacia* savanna and riverine scrub.

Historical distribution and conservation: The present map clearly demonstrates its absence from the arid Kalahari where there is no surface water, a fact generally overlooked (e.g. Stark 1900; Roberts 1940; Maclean 1993b; Sinclair *et al.* 1993; Newman 1996).

The Melba Finch is not considered threatened, but it seems possible that local populations could be temporarily depressed by trapping for the cage-bird trade. It is known by aviculturists as a 'difficult and delicate' species (Goodwin 1982) in which mortality during shipment is high.

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Recorded in 1558 grid cells, 34.3%

Total number of records: 11 343

Mean reporting rate for range: 19.3%

Reporting rates for vegetation types

