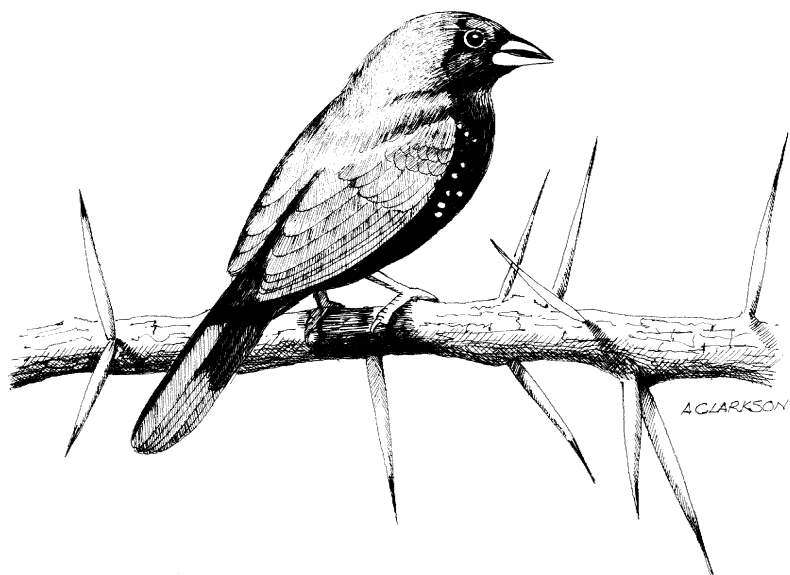




Bluebilled Firefinch

Kaapse Vuurvinkie

Lagonosticta rubricata

Distributed in the moister regions of West, Central and East Africa (Hall & Moreau 1970), the Bluebilled Firefinch ranges from the eastern Cape Province coastal belt (c. 24°E) northwards through Transkei, KwaZulu-Natal and Swaziland into the Transvaal and eastern Zimbabwe. It is a scarce resident along the dry middle Limpopo Valley (Ayres 1886; Day 1987) and shows clear avoidance of most of the South African highveld (far southeastern Transvaal and western Swaziland being exceptions) as well as the relatively arid western parts of the subcontinent.

Confusion with Jameson's Firefinch *L. rhodopareia* (Hunter 1986b; Koen 1988) necessitates caution when interpreting its distribution (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), for example in eastern Botswana (Borello 1984; Hunter, N.D. 1985; Skinner 1986a), from where there are as yet no confirmed records (Borello 1992b; Penry 1994). Hybrids with Jameson's Firefinch in zones of sympatry further confound the issue (Hanmer 1990). In eastern Zimbabwe, the Bluebilled Firefinch occurs over a wide range of altitudes up to 1800 m, e.g. Haroni-Rusitu (2033AA), Nyanga (1832BD) and Mutare (1832DC). The population in eastern Zimbabwe is subspecifically distinct (Clancey 1980b).

Habitat: Moist, wooded habitats are preferred, from the escarpment to the littoral plain. In Afromontane areas it favours forest margins and bracken-briar (Manson & Manson 1984; pers. obs). It is a localized resident of riverine bush in the eastern Cape Province (Skead 1967b; Collett 1982). In low-lying areas it inhabits riverine forest, bush and thickets. In drier habitats, it is restricted to relict forest patches and riparian vegetation (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). In Zimbabwe's eastern highlands, the moist, east-facing slopes below 1600 m are preferred (Irwin 1981).

Movements: Although it is considered resident throughout the year (Hall 1983; Davidson 1986; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), seasonal trends are evident in the atlas data. Higher reporting rates in winter are obvious in Zones 6–7, with a shift to autumn in Zone 8. This could result from recruitment of young birds, with family groups more conspicuous than individuals or pairs. Temporal differences in

breeding between Zones 6, 7 and 8 are not evident, however. Birds may also be more conspicuous in deciduous vegetation in winter, and differences between the three Zones may indicate the earlier effects of autumn/winter conditions on vegetation further south. The marked peaks may also represent seasonal movement of part of the population: northeast in winter, southwest in summer, also with the possibility of altitudinal movements. West African populations wander widely when not breeding (Clement *et al.* 1993). Scant ringing data do not indicate this in southern Africa (SAFRING), although local altitudinal movements may occur in KwaZulu-Natal (pers. obs). Seasonal differences in activity or in vocalizations may also contribute to differences in reporting rate.

Breeding: Evidence of breeding was recorded November–July. Many estrildid finches require green nesting material, including seeding grass inflorescences (Goodwin 1982); this species,

however, uses dry grass in nest construction (Maclean 1993b). Availability of suitable insect prey to feed young may also be an important factor determining timing of breeding. Egg-laying has been recorded in southern Africa November–June (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Interspecific relationships: Although sympatric with Jameson's Firefinch in parts of its range, the Bluebilled is usually separated ecologically, occurring in eastern Zimbabwe, for example, in montane thicket and rank grassland, while Jameson's is found in drier miombo woodland (Irwin 1981).

It is the exclusive host of the Black Widowfinch *Vidua funerea* (Maclean 1993b).

Historical distribution and conservation: Old records from Knysna (3423AA), Keurbooms River (3423AB) and Grootvadersbos (3320D) (Taylor 1909) are considered to be misidentifications of the Redbilled Firefinch *L. senegalensis* (Winterbottom 1964d). The Bluebilled Firefinch is a common species in most places, but populations may be sensitive locally to exploitation for the cage-bird trade.

R.J. Nuttall

Recorded in 517 grid cells, 11.4%

Total number of records: 9221

Mean reporting rate for range: 15.1%

Reporting rates for vegetation types

