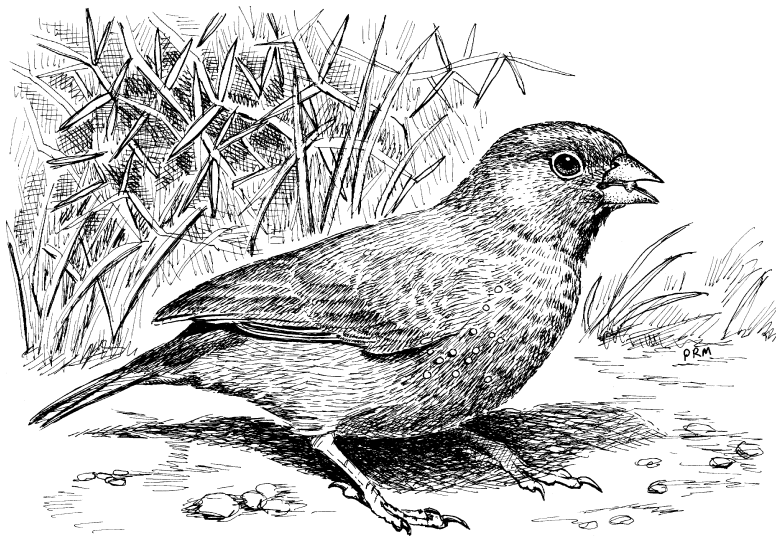




Redbilled Firefinch

Rooibekvuurvinkie

Lagonosticta senegal

The Redbilled Firefinch is distributed widely throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Clement *et al.* 1993), often near human settlements, where it becomes quite tame (Payne 1980a; Irwin 1981). In southern Africa it is present in the moister woodland areas in the north and east of the region. It is most common in the northern and western Transvaal, along the Limpopo River, and in the Okavango and Caprivi. It is widespread in Zimbabwe. In the southwest, the distribution extends along the Vaal and Orange rivers into otherwise more arid areas. Atlas data reveal an apparently isolated population in the eastern and southern Cape Province. Morphological variation is clinal (Irwin 1981) but three races have been described in southern Africa (Clancey 1980b). These do not show clear discontinuities in ranges.

Its small size and short tail make the Redbilled Firefinch distinct, except perhaps when compared to the Brown Firefinch *L. nitidula*, but confusion with other firefinches may have occurred.

Habitat: Woodland, savanna, riverine and thicket vegetation, particularly near water, are the preferred habitats (Payne 1980a). In the Caprivi, the Okavango and along the Limpopo River, it is the commonest firefinch (Day 1987; Koen 1988; Brewster 1991). Grassland and higher-altitude areas represent marginal habitat, as do tree-lined rivers in otherwise open areas. It rarely occurs above 2000 m (Clement *et al.* 1993), and is largely absent from high altitudes in the eastern highlands of Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981).

Movements: Although mainly sedentary, there is evidence for localized seasonal movement in some areas (Jones & Ward 1977; Payne 1980a). Birds are nomadic in more marginal areas (Macdonald & Birkenstock 1980) and may take up residence following local movements, as described for areas in southeastern Botswana and central Zimbabwe (Vernon 1977; Wilson 1984). The models show wide scatter of reporting rates, which makes the trends not very reliable. There is a suggestion of an increase in reporting rates in most areas between autumn and spring. The larger increase in Zone 6 could be the result mainly of recruitment of young birds in areas of prime habitat after breeding (Payne 1980a). Heightened activity and greater

conspicuousness in deciduous woodland at this time might also be important. A slightly later increase in the Okavango, Caprivi and in Zimbabwe probably results from an extended breeding season in these more northerly areas (see Payne 1980a). Neither atlas nor ringing data (SAFRING) suggest large-scale movement.

Breeding: Double peaks of activity (June and October), particularly noticeable in Zimbabwe, contrast with Irwin (1981) where a clear January–February peak is apparent. Northwestern populations show a breeding season similar to that further north in Zambia, i.e. February–August (Payne 1980a). There were few records for Zone 1; however, Caprivi birds reportedly breed September–March (Koen 1988). Breeding in Zambia and Senegal (Morel 1973; Payne 1980a) appears independent of rainfall; the same seasonality of breeding was found in years of different rainfall. Peak breeding activity during the drier months in Zimbabwe suggests the same may occur there, and to a lesser extent further south.

Interspecific relationships: It is sympatric with Brown, Jameson's *L. rhodopareia* and Bluebilled *L. rubricata* Firefinches in certain parts of its range, although usually to some extent separated ecologically or micro-geographically (Irwin 1981; Collett 1982; Hall 1983; Brewster 1989a, 1991). The Redbilled Firefinch is the foster species of the Steelblue Widowfinch *Vidua chalybeata* (Maclean 1993b; Payne *et al.* 1993).

Historical distribution and conservation: The current distribution does not differ markedly from the historical distribution (Clancey 1980b). A potential threat to the widespread and common Redbilled Firefinch is illegal trapping for the cage-bird trade. The apparently isolated population in the eastern and southern Cape Province merits taxonomic investigation.

R.J. Nuttall

Recorded in 1093 grid cells, 24.1%

Total number of records: 8550

Mean reporting rate for range: 14.0%

Reporting rates for vegetation types

