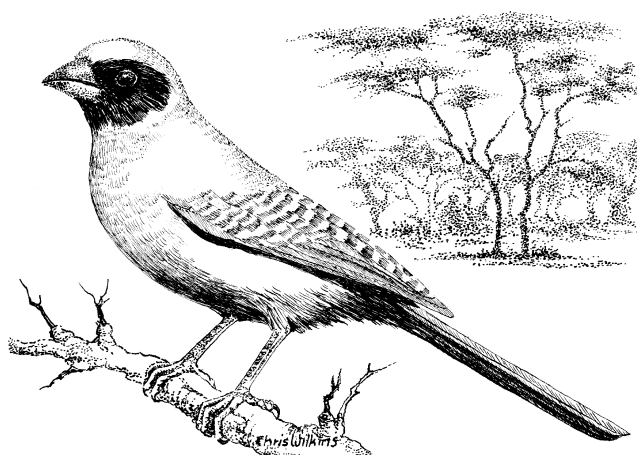




Blackcheeked Waxbill

Swartwangsysie

Estrilda erythroneura

The Blackcheeked Waxbill is a bird of arid thorn savanna, with two oddly disjunct populations separated by 1300 km: one nearly endemic to southern Africa which extends marginally into southwestern Angola and Zambia, and another, usually treated as the subspecies *E. e. delamerei*, in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda (Hall & Moreau 1970; Goodwin 1982). In the atlas region, its distribution falls roughly between the 200 and 500-mm-rainfall isohyets. There are strongholds in central Namibia, near the Okavango and in the hardveld of eastern Botswana and the western Transvaal.

No formal density estimates are available, but Skead (1975b) trapped 118 birds over 40 months, with an 18% recapture rate, at a 250-ha study site (2528AB).

Two subspecies have been described for southern Africa (Clancey 1980b), and the present distribution map reveals two disjunct populations, one in the northwest and one in the southeast, with a wide gap in between. However, according to Clancey (1980b), the racial separation is south-west–northeast, whereby birds in the Okavango are linked with southeastern Botswana and the Transvaal in subspecies *erythroneura*, while birds from the northern Cape Province to Namibia are considered to be *soligena*.

Its distinctive call notes make misidentification unlikely, except possibly in dim light when its flight shape could be confused with the Violet-eared Waxbill *Uraeginthus granatinus*. The atlas data can be considered reliable.

Habitat: The distribution follows the pattern of a thorn-belt species, while virtual absence from the drier parts of the thornbelt (particularly the central and southern Kalahari) indicates that it is dependent on surface water. It prefers dry *Acacia* thornveld, especially *A. tortilis* (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), mixed *Acacia*–*Dichrostachys* (Skead 1975b), *A. erioloba* and *A. mellifera*. Although absent from much of the arid Kalahari itself, it is locally associated with Kalahari sands elsewhere, and is not as dependent on riverbeds as some other estrildids. Many authors have commented that it is more arboreal than its relatives (Hall & Moreau 1970; Skead 1975b; Goodwin 1982), and it is probably absent from the Karoo and parts of the Kalahari

for this reason. Although in northern South Africa it favours open thorn savanna (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), it is found in dense thickets and ‘bush-encroached’ *A. mellifera* savanna in central Namibia and Botswana.

Movements: In northern South Africa (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b) and central Namibia it appears to make short seasonal movements, although this is only weakly suggested by the models. The mild increase in reporting rates in Namibia during winter appears to be due to an increase in population densities. However, there may be an additive effect of increased conspicuousness, as Blackcheeked Waxbills flock and give frequent contact calls during winter. The possibility exists that some birds move into the dry Kalahari in the wet season, particularly in years of good rains.

Breeding: Egg-laying has been recorded December–May from the Transvaal, Botswana and Namibia (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Skinner 1995a; Brown & Clinning in press), but the data suggest greater opportunism, especially in the arid west. Irwin (1981) also reported egg-laying outside this period for Zimbabwe.

Interspecific relationships: Ginn *et al.* (1989) noted that while it is sometimes more common locally than many of its relatives, the Blackcheeked Waxbill is oddly free from parasitism by whydahs. In central Namibia, where Shaft-tailed Whydahs *Vidua regia* are noticeably more common than their Violet-eared Waxbill hosts, it has been observed twice that snatches of Blackcheeked Waxbill song were mimicked by Shaft-tailed Whydah males (pers. obs.). It seems possible that Blackcheeked Waxbills are an occasional host, even though the whydah is widely regarded as a host-specific parasite with closely co-adapted mimetic traits.

Historical distribution and conservation: No historical data exist for comparison. There are no significant threats at present, although savanna clearing for urbanization and agriculture encroach locally on its range. The Blackcheeked Waxbill is not abundant in most places and utilization for the cage-bird trade should be monitored.

P. Barnard

Recorded in 1048 grid cells, 23.1%
Total number of records: 5793
Mean reporting rate for range: 15.8%

