



Orangebreasted Waxbill

Rooiassie

Sporaeginthus subflavus

In southern Africa, the Orangebreasted Waxbill is largely restricted to the upland grasslands of the eastern half of the subcontinent, although it does reach the coast at its southern limits. There are two population centres on the map: the Mashonaland plateau of Zimbabwe, and the central highveld region of South Africa. These two seemingly disjunct populations are linked because the species occurs quite widely in southern Mozambique (Clancey 1971c). A population of 7000 birds was estimated for Swaziland where it is an 'uncommon breeding resident' (Parker 1994), while in Lesotho it has been classified as 'rare' (10–100 birds) (Osborne & Tigar 1992a). It is surprisingly uncommon in the wetlands of the Okavango, Caprivi and western Zimbabwe, where the tropical subspecies *S. s. niethammeri* reaches its southernmost limit (Clancey 1980b). All the eastern birds belong to the race *clarkei*.

Under ideal conditions it can be common – nonbreeding birds may form flocks of up to 50 or more. Although the male is colourful, the species is inconspicuous, being primarily a ground-feeder. It is easily overlooked, particularly in areas where less common, and it is probably more widely distributed in Zimbabwe than indicated. It is unlikely to be confused with any other estrildid, so that the scattered records to the southwest of its main range, mainly along rivers, are probably reliable.

Habitat: It is widespread in the moist grasslands, grassy savannas, and marshes of the Afrotropical region (Goodwin 1982); it is also often encountered in adjacent cultivated or fallow lands. Although Miombo is the vegetation type with the highest reporting rate, the species actually inhabits interspersed grasslands and marshes in valleys and basins, here and in other woodlands. In the Eastern Zimbabwe Highlands it is found in the montane grasslands up to 2000 m (Irwin 1981). Mixed, Sour and, to a lesser extent, Sweet Grasslands are the favoured vegetation types further south.

Movements: There is wide scatter in the reporting rates; the increase in late summer/early winter in Zone 7 may be related to post-breeding flocking and dispersal. In the northeastern Cape Province (Zone 8) there were no records in winter, but the overall number of records is small. It is probably sedentary throughout its range.

Breeding: There were few breeding records, probably because of its preference for old bishop and widow nests. The data in Zones 5–7 confirm the midsummer to midwinter season already established for Zimbabwe, Transvaal and KwaZulu-Natal (Dean 1971; Colahan 1982; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). There is some indication that the breeding peak is later with decreasing latitude, but this trend is not confirmed by other data-sets (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Interspecific relationships: In southern Africa the Quail Finch *Ortygospiza atricollis* is most similar ecologically to the Orangebreasted Waxbill, but has a wider distribution. Most of the range of the Orangebreasted Waxbill falls within that of the Quail Finch, but it is not known whether, or to what extent, they might compete.

The Orangebreasted Waxbill is not as widespread as the Red Bishop *Euplectes orix*, its main source of vacated nests in Zimbabwe (Colahan 1982).

Historical distribution and conservation: It is apparently less common in the Transkei than earlier in the 20th century (Quickelberge 1989), probably because of overgrazing of grasslands and vleis, while a suspected decline in numbers in Lesotho (Osborne & Tigar 1992a) could be attributed to similar practices there. The Orangebreasted Waxbill is not considered threatened in South Africa, while in Zimbabwe it has been described as being 'generally adaptable' (Irwin 1981). It is marginal in Botswana and it would not be wise to allow substantial capture quotas for the cage-bird trade there.

B.D. Colahan

Recorded in 582 grid cells, 12.8%
Total number of records: 6168
Mean reporting rate for range: 9.9%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



