



## Blackeared Finchlark

### Swartoorlewerik

#### *Eremopterix australis*

This nomadic species is distributed mainly in the central and northwestern Cape Province, with scattered records from southern Namibia and the western Free State. It is endemic to the arid western half of southern Africa, and is virtually endemic to South Africa where the vast majority of the population is concentrated.

There are two interesting gaps in the atlas distribution pattern in South Africa. There were no records from the area immediately north and west of Kakamas (2820), and from the general area south and east of Loxton–Victoria West (3122, 3123). These areas contain at least some suitable habitat for the Blackeared Finchlark, and the species has been recorded from both general areas outside the atlas period. It was fairly common and breeding in both 2820BA and 2820BC in March 1994 (pers. obs), and specimens have been collected at Victoria West (3123CA) and Murraysburg (3123DD) in the past. The absence of atlas records from these areas may reflect a lack of observations at the right time, rather than a total absence of the bird. In addition, however, both regions are fairly hilly to mountainous and the amount of suitable habitat is limited.

The species is gregarious even when it is breeding, and is usually seen in groups of 5–10; otherwise flocks may number 50–100 birds (Keith *et al.* 1992; Maclean 1993b). This is a distinctive and unmistakable finchlark, with its head and underparts entirely black in the male, and heavily streaked underparts and lack of black belly in the female. Good field characters are the rounded black wings and bouncing and erratic flight. The atlas data appear to be reliable.

**Habitat:** This species occurs in sparse dwarf shrublands and grasslands, mainly on red sands derived from dolerites and granites in the central, northern and northwestern Karoo and southern Kalahari. It also occurs in dwarf shrublands on poorly drained clays and stony soils derived from sedimentary shales in the southern Karoo. Reporting rates were substantially higher in the Nama Karoo, compared with the Grassy and Succulent Karoos, and the Southern Kalahari.

**Movements:** The models for Zones 3 and 4 show that there may be some seasonal movement from the northern and northwestern Karoo to the southern Karoo in the summer. In addition, the correspondence between peaks in occurrence and breeding models suggests that the species is more conspicuous when breeding, i.e. singing and displaying. The species is nomadic over most of its range, tracking patches where there has been recent rain (Keith *et al.* 1992).

**Breeding:** The data suggest spring and autumn peaks in breeding for both the northern and southern Karoo (Zones 3 and 4).

**Interspecific relationships:** The Blackeared Finchlark can occur and nest in close proximity to Stark's Lark *Eremalauda starki*, Greybacked Finchlark *E. verticalis* and Larklike Bunting *Emberiza impetuani*, but tends to keep in small groups of its own species (pers. obs). There may be mutual benefits in nesting in the same area as other small larks and buntings.

**Historical distribution and conservation:** The lack of recent breeding records in the Transvaal (last recorded breeding in 1870) may indicate a contraction in the distribution of this species, but it may have been only a rare vagrant to this province (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The Blackeared Finchlark is not considered to be threatened in South Africa (Brooke 1984b), but its distribution lies mainly in an area that is inadequately protected (Hilton-Taylor & Le Roux 1989) and it is therefore a species whose status should be monitored.

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Recorded in 321 grid cells, 7.1%  
Total number of records: 758  
Mean reporting rate for range: 14.9%



