



## Sombre Bulbul

### Gewone Willie

#### *Andropadus importunus*

This is a bird of the southern and eastern coastal regions of Africa, extending from the Cape to southern Somalia, and ranging inland to varying extents, especially along river valleys. No breaks are apparent between any of the distributions of the five races recognized by Clancey (1980b).

The Sombre Bulbul is well named, with nondescript olive and grey plumage which is cryptic in foliage; its most distinctive visual feature is its whitish-ivory eye. Vocally it is difficult to miss; its distinctive pleasing song-call (from which it takes its Afrikaans name) is uttered throughout the year and, during the breeding season, virtually throughout the day, usually from a prominent perch on top of a bush. In many parts of South Africa it is known by an alternative English name of 'Bushwillie'.

Normally occurring as singletons or in pairs, it is best observed when loudly advertising its territory from the top of some bush, but it dives into cover at the slightest disturbance.

**Habitat:** It favours coastal scrub, thickets in wooded valleys and bushveld, and coastal and Afromontane forest, especially the edges. In the fynbos region of the southern Cape Province it is generally found in the vicinity of forest patches, fringing woody vegetation around vleis and along streams and rivers, including stands of alien vegetation such as Rooikrans *Acacia cyclops*. In his study of the birds of the eastern Cape Province, Skead (1967b) noted that in addition to being extremely common in forest and Valley Bushveld, it also occurred in Thornveld and Karroid Brokenveld. It has adapted to life in gardens in well-wooded suburbs.

**Movements:** It is sedentary. Scores of ringed birds have been recaptured annually at ringing sites for up to 10 years after ringing. The models complement ringing results. The longest movement recorded for a ringed bird was 34 km, from Grahamstown (3326BC) to Riebeek East (3326AA); this was probably an example of dispersal rather than regular seasonal movement (SAFRING).

**Breeding:** It has a long breeding season in southern Africa, with egg-laying occurring in any month October–April (Keith *et al.* 1992). However, most clutches (over 70%) are initiated October–December. This is well demonstrated in the models which indicate that evidence of breeding activity may be found in any month of the year. Peak breeding is similarly timed in the winter-rainfall region (Zone 1).

**Interspecific relationships:** It is a host of the Jacobin Cuckoo *Clamator jacobinus* which preferentially parasitizes bulbuls, mainly Blackeyed *Pycnonotus barbatus* and Cape *P. capensis* Bulbuls, in southern Africa (Rowan 1983). Liversidge (1970a) found that near Port Elizabeth (3325DC), Sombre Bulbuls were selected as hosts only in those areas where they were the commonest breeding bulbul. He observed one instance in which a female Jacobin Cuckoo was attacked so severely by Sombre Bulbuls that afterwards she could be caught and picked up by hand.

Despite pugnacity towards conspecifics, it occurs commonly and amicably alongside Cape or Blackeyed Bulbuls throughout much of its range in southern Africa, the *Pycnonotus* bulbuls favouring more open habitats. It also overlaps with the Yellowbellied Bulbul *Chlorocichla flaviventris* from KwaZulu-Natal northwards; the latter species favours the denser forest, though both may be seen feeding in the same fruiting trees outside of the forest boundaries (pers. obs).

**Historical distribution and conservation:** Its range is not known to have undergone change since its discovery in the early 19th century. Although a fruiteater and regular visitor to guava, loquat and other cultivated fruit trees, its cryptic colouring and behaviour have probably enabled it to escape detection more frequently than its more flamboyant relatives, and it has not earned a reputation as a fruit stealer. The Sombre Bulbul is a common species in many parts of its widespread Afrotropical range and its populations are not under threat.

T.B. Oatley

Recorded in 604 grid cells, 13.3%  
Total number of records: 24 322  
Mean reporting rate for range: 41.5%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types



