



Familiar Chat

Gewone Spekvreter

Cercomela familiaris

The Familiar Chat occurs discontinuously in West, Central and East Africa, but is most widespread south of the Limpopo River (Campbell 1988) with the highest population densities in the semi-arid Karoo of South Africa, as shown by the consistently high reporting rates in that region. It is markedly absent from most of Botswana and thinly distributed in the Transkei and the lowveld areas of Zimbabwe, Transvaal, Swaziland and KwaZulu-Natal, as well as from highveld areas lacking rocky ground.

Six subspecies are recognized (Clancey 1980b); there are no obvious gaps in distribution that clearly separate them.

Although a plain bird, this common chat is familiar to most observers and is conspicuous in its behaviour. Inexperienced observers are, however, likely to have confused it with the Sicklewinged Chat *C. sinuata*, although this would probably have affected the database more for the latter species.

Habitat: It has a preference for broken ground and rocky habitats within a broad range of open vegetation types, but is seldom seen far from sources of water. It usually uses holes and crevices as nest sites. This might account for its scarcity in the Transkei where intense foraging by free-range pigs and high densities of other stock probably make successful breeding for this and other ground-nesting birds well-nigh impossible. The sandveld of the Kalahari does not offer suitable nesting sites which probably accounts for its absence from that region. In other areas it is frequently associated with human habitation, but mainly in rural contexts.

The vegetation analysis shows the strong association with the Karoo but is somewhat misleading in its relatively high ranking of the Central Kalahari which is significantly populated only in its southernmost reaches. In Lesotho it occurs mainly below 2400 m (Tarboton *et al.* 1993).

Movements: It is resident. A slight reduction in reporting rates in midsummer, during the later part of the breeding season, probably results from being less conspicuous during moult and during the heat of the day.

Breeding: The season is spring–summer. September–October were given as peak egg-laying months in the Karoo and Zimbabwe, October in KwaZulu-Natal, November in the Transvaal and November–February in Namibia (Winterbottom 1968a; Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Brown & Clinning in press).

Interspecific relationships: Its range overlaps widely with those of several other chats, but different habitat preferences appear to keep them largely segregated. In alpine areas (>2800 m) it is replaced by the Sicklewinged Chat (Brown & Barnes 1984). Association with Klipspringers *Oreotragus oreotragus* has been reported (Steyn & Hosking 1988). It is a probable host of the Diederik Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx caprius* (Rowan 1983).

Historical distribution and conservation: If, as stated by McLachlan & Liversidge (1970), its principal food is flies, it is probable that its association with water is determined by the prevalence of flies around water and the abundance of flies associated with stock farming and human habitations. It may be that the range of the Familiar Chat has expanded considerably as farmers have created watering points for small stock throughout the semi-arid parts of South Africa and in large areas of Namibia.

J.A. Harrison

Recorded in 2470 grid cells, 54.4%
Total number of records: 25 421
Mean reporting rate for range: 20.8%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



