



## Natal Robin

### Nataljanfrederik

*Cossypha natalensis*

This widespread Afrotropical species extends north to Sudan, west to Nigeria and Angola and south via the eastern littoral to the eastern Cape Province of South Africa (Keith *et al.* 1992). In southern Africa, the Natal Robin is a characteristic species of the southeastern coastal forests, but it is also a summer-breeding visitor to bushveld habitats.

It is a fine songster and superb mimic, and its bright orange underparts, slate-blue wings and orange head with rufous crown make it a distinctive bird. Its song is very similar to that of the larger Chorister Robin *C. dichroa*, however, and there is also general similarity in overall appearance, except that the Natal Robin lacks the black facial mask of the Chorister Robin. It is easy to confuse the two species on the basis of brief glimpses in evergreen forest and some of the atlas records are likely to have resulted from such confusion.

**Habitat:** It occurs in undergrowth of coastal evergreen forest, especially dune forest (throughout the year); also riverine forest, sand forest and escarpment forests below mistbelt level. In summer months it also visits and breeds in thickets and wooded gullies in thornveld and bushveld areas. It is a characteristic bird of garden shrubberies in KwaZulu-Natal coastal towns.

In KwaZulu-Natal, it does not usually occur above 400 m, but north of the Limpopo Valley it ranges to 1500 m in Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981) and above 1800 m further north in Afromontane forest.

**Movements:** Throughout its Afrotropical range, it exhibits partial or total migration (Keith *et al.* 1992), but the direction and extent of its movements are improperly understood. Clancey (1991a) invoked migrational movements to explain the presence of specimens resembling some subspecies within the ranges of others. He believed that adults from the eastern Cape Province and KwaZulu-Natal coasts undertake post-breeding migrations to south-

ern Mozambique, but ringing records from KwaMashu (2930DB) and Mtunzini (2831DD) show that both areas have resident birds of this species (SAFRING). It visits and breeds in valley thornveld habitats of inland KwaZulu-Natal, but is absent from such areas in winter. Coincidentally, ringing records show that some birds are winter visitors to coastal areas but disappear in summer. The models are equivocal, as might be expected for a species which has full migrants, partial migrants and residents all in the same Zone (e.g. Zone 7).

**Breeding:** Atlas data indicate breeding activity August–April. Egg-laying peaks in November; December–January clutches are usually replacements (Keith *et al.* 1992). It is not usual for this species to initiate clutches after January, so February–April records are probably based on observations of spotted juveniles. The suggestion in the atlas that breeding starts earlier in Zone 5 and 7 than in Zone 6, seems to confirm published egg-laying data (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

**Interspecific relationships:** The closest relative of the Natal Robin is the Chorister Robin and the two species breed side by side in some forests, especially near the southern limits of the Natal Robin's range. Eight hybrids between the two species have been recorded from the eastern Cape Province (Clancey 1982a). Overlap of breeding range also occurs with the Cape *C. caffra*, Whitethroated *C. humeralis* and Heuglin's *C. heuglini* Robins, but significant interactions with these three congeners have not been recorded.

During summer the Chorister Robin normally replaces the Natal Robin in forests above 400 m at 30°S; this changeover level becomes lower southwards and higher northwards to the limits of the range of the Chorister Robin in the northern Transvaal.

**Historical distribution and conservation:** There are no historical records to suggest that there have been any changes in its distribution, but destruction of coastal forest must impact on local resident and visiting migrant populations. The Natal Robin is not considered to be under threat.

T.B. Oatley

Recorded in 242 grid cells, 5.3%  
Total number of records: 7008  
Mean reporting rate for range: 27.0%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types



