



Cape Robin

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Cossypha caffra

This is a familiar and easily identified species in many areas in South Africa. The Cape Robin is one of a number of Afromontane species that are localized north of the Zambezi River but much more catholic in their choice of habitat in southern Africa (Liversidge 1959). It avoids the really dry areas of the Karoo and Kalahari, although it has managed to penetrate the arid Richtersveld and colonize the desert town of Oranjemund (2816CB) via the green riparian fringe of the Orange River from where it extends into Namibia along the Fish River, reaching the Hardap Dam (2417BD). It is absent as a breeding bird from much of coastal KwaZulu-Natal and the lowveld areas of Swaziland and the eastern Transvaal. The overall range in southern Africa is remarkably similar to that of the Olive Thrush *Turdus olivaceus*.

The five subspecies recognized in the region by Clancey (1980b, 1981) all have continuous ranges, while the isolated population in the eastern highlands of Zimbabwe is considered to be the same race as birds in the eastern Transvaal escarpment.

Habitat: From the Limpopo Valley northwards to East Africa, it is an Afromontane forest-fringe bird, seldom found much below 1700 m except as a dry-season altitudinal migrant. The distribution map and vegetation analysis show the striking change from Afromontane specialization in Zimbabwe to the broad utilization of a range of habitats south of the Limpopo River. The vegetation analysis gives an indication of the wide range of habitats utilized. Essentially it is, like all robins, a cover-loving bird which thrives in habitats ranging from coastal fynbos through farmstead woodlots to *Leucosidea* scrub at 3000 m in alpine grassland. The bracken-briar fringe of Afromontane forest is a favoured habitat and is the best place to look for this species further north in its Afrotropical range.

Movements: It is a noted altitudinal migrant in the eastern parts of southern Africa and northwards (Oatley 1966). Such movements have been noted in KwaZulu-Natal (Cyrus 1989; Johnson & Maclean 1994) and Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981). It occurs only as a nonbreeding winter visitor to the Lebombo Mountains in Swaziland (Parker 1994) and the same is true for the coastal region of Mozambique (Clancey 1971c). The models show patterns of seasonal fluctuation in reporting rates which probably result from a combination of altitudinal migration and post-breeding moult, both of which would tend to result in fewer reports in midsummer. However, the long-

distance movements identified by Clancey (1981), based on perceived plumage characters of collected specimens, have not been corroborated by alternative evidence. Brown & Barnes (1984) recorded the Cape Robin at high altitudes in the Drakensberg in all months of the year. Six thousand have been ringed in southern Africa but none have yet provided evidence of migration or even of extensive dispersal (SAFRING).

Breeding: Breeding activity was recorded in every month of the year. Egg-laying commences earliest (June) in the winter-rainfall area of the southwestern Cape Province and is usually finished there by November (Rowan 1969). The shortest breeding periods, September/October–December, are recorded at cool, high-altitude localities. River valley and bushveld birds in summer-rainfall areas commence laying as early as August. Out-of-season breeding is rare and has been recorded April–May. Peak egg-laying months in the summer-rainfall region are October–November (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Nest predation is high (Earlé 1981) and replacement nests are common.

Interspecific relationships: It is the commonest host of the Red-chested Cuckoo *Cuculus solitarius* in southern Africa with 90 records in contrast to a total of 59 records for all other authenticated hosts (Rowan 1983). Levels of parasitism vary regionally, being lowest in the southwestern Cape Province where only 28% of nests are still active when the cuckoo arrives to breed (Rowan 1969).

It breeds alongside the Natal Robin *C. natalensis* in the middle portion of the major river valleys in KwaZulu-Natal, evidently without any significant competition for resources. Breeding overlap with the more closely related Whitethroated Robin *C. humeralis* is rare, however, and confined to a few areas in the southern Tugela River basin. Altitudinal migrants share winter habitat with up to four other species of robin at any one site.

Historical distribution and conservation: It has almost certainly benefited in historic times through the development of human settlements with their gardens and woodlots in otherwise unsuitable regions. It was recorded for the first time in Botswana during the 1992 drought (Brewster 1992a; Wall 1992). The Cape Robin is widespread, common and not threatened.

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Recorded in 1373 grid cells, 30.3%
Total number of records: 47 865
Mean reporting rate for range: 47.0%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



