



## Great Reed Warbler

### Grootrietsanger

*Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

In the nonbreeding season this Palearctic migrant is found over large areas of sub-Saharan Africa (Curry-Lindahl 1981; Pearson & Lack 1992). In southern Africa the Great Reed Warbler is a widespread, but rather uncommon summer visitor to dense vegetation, particularly near water. It occurs in the Caprivi and northern Botswana, Zimbabwe, most of the Transvaal, Swaziland, KwaZulu-Natal and the Free State. It is virtually absent from the Karoo, the central and southern Kalahari, but it is regularly present at scattered places throughout central Namibia, the most southerly records being in the Fish and Orange River drainages. It is recorded fairly regularly in the eastern Cape Province; the first records were in 1968 (Tree 1971, pers. comm.). It is remarkable that it remains virtually unrecorded in the Orange River valley in the northern Cape Province, where large stretches of suitable habitat are available; it might, however, have been overlooked in this area.

Great Reed Warblers generally skulk solitarily in dense vegetation and behave territorially during the nonbreeding season. Territories are proclaimed with a strikingly loud song, which has probably resulted in the species being relatively well recorded. When only recorded visually, it may occasionally have been confused with the Cape Reed Warbler *A. gracilirostris* and the Greater Swamp Warbler *A. rufescens*.

**Habitat:** In drier areas it is restricted to tall swamp vegetation, e.g. reeds and bulrushes, occasionally also papyrus, and thickets over or close to water. In the eastern Cape Province, Tree (1971) found that it was confined to *Phragmites* reedbeds. In the more mesic northern and eastern part of the subcontinent, it also occurs in lush thickets and tall grassy vegetation away from water, including gardens. The biome associations are not meaningful because it primarily occupies wetland habitats which occur in most biomes; it is therefore not surprising that the overall distribution is fairly similar to

that of the European Sedge Warbler *A. schoenobaenus*, another Palearctic migrant occurring in lush herbaceous vegetation in or near wetlands.

**Movements:** It arrives both late and slowly in southern Africa: the main influx is in late November and throughout December (Taylor 1979; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Herremans 1994d), but even in January new arrivals can still be noted, particularly in the drier areas where in many places the right habitat becomes available only after good rains. There are several records in the region from September and October but these should be viewed with caution. Departure is more rapid in March–April. In the drier areas numbers may vary greatly from year to year according to rainfall (Herremans *et al.* 1992) and site fidelity is low (Raijmakers & Raijmakers 1994), but in more mesic regions, site fidelity has repeatedly been noted (Tree 1965; Taylor 1979; Irwin 1981; Hanmer 1989a). Some birds were retrapped at the same site after 7–9 years (Hanmer 1989b). There are no proven cases of birds spending the austral winter in southern Africa. There are no ring recoveries of birds migrating either to or from southern Africa (Dowsett *et al.* 1988; SAFRING).

**Interspecific relationships:** It occurs in the same habitat as the Cape Reed Warbler and the Greater Swamp Warbler and is found together particularly with the former in many places. The level of interaction or interterritoriality is unknown, but the Great Reed Warbler tends to be closer to the edge of swamp vegetation and also extends considerably into adjacent thickets over dry ground. The Olivetree Warbler *Hippolais olivetorum* is similar in size, appearance and even song, but is a specialist of *Acacia* thickets on dry ground.

**Historical distribution and conservation:** The present map contains records from the eastern Cape Province, and several from the Karoo biome, including some along the Orange and Fish rivers in southern Namibia, which is an extension to the map shown by Maclean (1993b). The difference is probably due to better coverage and not to a recent change in status of the species. Its presence in the eastern Cape Province was, for example, already shown over 25 years ago (Tree 1971). The Great Reed Warbler does not appear to be under any threat in southern Africa.

M. Herremans

Recorded in 438 grid cells, 9.7%  
Total number of records: 1553  
Mean reporting rate for range: 3.0%

Reporting rates for vegetation types

