



Croaking Cisticola

Groottinktinkie

Cisticola natalensis

The Croaking Cisticola is a widespread African species occurring in moist grasslands in the eastern part of southern Africa. In South Africa it is locally common from the eastern Cape Province, through KwaZulu-Natal and more locally in eastern and northern Transvaal. It is common in Swaziland and widespread in Zimbabwe and Mozambique (Clancey 1971a), but occurs very locally in far northeastern Botswana (Herremans & Herremans 1992c) with a single record from the eastern Caprivi (Branfield 1990). In KwaZulu-Natal it is more common at higher altitudes than on the coast, but it usually occurs below 1500 m (Clancey 1964b; Cyrus & Robson 1980). It seldom occurs above 1600 m in Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981).

There is a wide gap in distribution along the Limpopo Valley, and birds to the north and south belong to the nominate subspecies (Clancey 1980b; Irwin 1981). The isolated population in extreme western Zimbabwe and far northeastern Botswana belongs to the restricted-range subspecies *C. n. holubi*, while birds in the eastern highlands of Zimbabwe are of the race *matengorum* (Clancey 1980b; Irwin 1981).

Distinctly the largest of the southern African cisticolas, it is relatively conspicuous and usually detected by its characteristic call. It usually occurs in pairs, although the male is far more conspicuous in the breeding season, calling from an exposed perch on a tree or shrub and making display flights. In keeping with its larger size, it has larger territories than other cisticolas. Its large size and diagnostic call reduce the possibility of misidentification with other cisticolas, and the atlas data are accurate.

Habitat: It typically occurs in moist, rank, open grasslands, interspersed with occasional bushes and trees, on open plains, rolling hills, or the edges of vleis. It is also reported from clearings in forest and edges of secondary growth below 1000 m in Zimbabwe, where it also moves into reedbeds and more swampy places (Irwin 1981). In KwaZulu-Natal it also enters old agricultural lands and cut plantations in the dry winter months (Clancey 1964b).

It was reported most frequently from the Eastern Zimbabwe Highlands and Miombo, but was also common in the East Coast Littoral. It is present in suitable patches of habitat within a wide range of other vegetation types.

Movements: It is resident. In all regions the modelled reporting rates show a summer peak, probably reflecting an increased conspicuousness of the male in the breeding season. In Zimbabwe it may shift to moister areas in winter (Irwin 1981) and *holubi* disappears from considerable parts of its range in Botswana after veld fires in the dry season (Herremans & Herremans 1992c). It is not known to undertake altitudinal movements in KwaZulu-Natal, Swaziland or Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981; Johnson & Maclean 1994; Parker 1994).

Breeding: Atlas records were all from the latter part of summer. Egg-laying has been reported October–February, mainly November–December in KwaZulu-Natal, and December–February in Zimbabwe (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Interspecific relationships: In southern Africa it has no close ecological equivalent, either in the genus *Cisticola* or among the other warblers. The other large warblers are all species of dense cover, so that this species has an ecological role closer to that of flycatchers and small shrikes in open habitats. Further north in Africa there are three other large *Cisticola* species which are ecologically similar; all are restricted to highland areas.

It is a host of the brood-parasitic Cuckoo Finch *Anomalospiza imberbis* (Maclean 1993b).

Historical distribution and conservation: The historical range is not known to have differed from the present, although farming practices may have caused local declines in abundance. The Croaking Cisticola is widely distributed and common in Africa, and cannot be regarded as threatened, but intensive agriculture and afforestation may reduce its abundance in southern Africa. Its larger territories make it more vulnerable to habitat fragmentation than other cisticolas. The well-marked race *holubi* has an isolated, restricted range in the headwaters of the Deka, Matetsi and Ngwezumba rivers (1824B, 1825, 1926A) and may become threatened if plans to convert more of the Northern Plains in Botswana to arable land are implemented (Herremans & Herremans 1992c).

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Recorded in 360 grid cells, 7.9%
Total number of records: 3228
Mean reporting rate for range: 9.8%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



