



Blackheaded Oriole

Swartkopwielewaal

Oriolus larvatus

The Blackheaded Oriole occurs widely in woodlands from East Africa southwards (Maclean 1993b). In southern Africa it is found mainly in the mesic east; the core of the distribution lies in Zimbabwe and the Transvaal north of about 26°S, eastern Botswana, Swaziland, KwaZulu-Natal and along the coastal belt to about 22°E at Mossel Bay (3422AA). The distribution extends westwards, mainly with lower reporting rates, at the northern extremity of the atlas region in northern Botswana, the Caprivi Strip and into extreme northeastern Namibia. Clancey (1980b) recognized two subspecies in the region; these are poorly differentiated according to Irwin (1981), and appear to have continuous ranges.

The distinctive plumage and call make it unlikely that any mistaken identity occurred, and because it is the most conspicuous of the orioles, it should not have been overlooked, except possibly when breeding.

Habitat: It appears to use any moist woodland, preferably evergreen or only lightly deciduous, but was found most frequently in Afromontane Forest. Reporting rates from the Okavango basin were relatively low. The many isolated peripheral records illustrate that it may also occur in patches of suitable habitat in otherwise unsuitable areas of grassveld, indicating that it may overfly extensive unsuitable habitat at times.

Movements: It is essentially resident but subject to seasonal wandering in some areas (e.g. Irwin 1981). In the southernmost Zones (4, 7, 8), reporting rates were almost uniform; populations show no indication of seasonal movement but local wandering in search of suitable food resources such as *Ficus* spp. may be considerable. In northerly Zones (1, 5–6), a higher degree of seasonality is evident, with a peak of observations towards the end of the dry season; the degree of seasonality is most marked in the Transvaal (Zone 6) with reporting rates reaching a minimum February–March and then rising steadily to peak August–September. In Zimbabwe (Zone 5), the model shows a marked increase in reporting rates from April–May, reaching a peak July–August. The causes of these seasonal fluctuations are not known, but as with other canopy birds of broadleaved woodland, leaf-fall in the dry season may enhance conspicuousness. Alternatively, more wandering in the dry season may also have boosted

reporting rates. Recoveries of ringed birds are mostly made near the site of ringing; there is one record of a first-year bird recovered 99 km from the ringing site in Zimbabwe (Tree & De la Harpe 1995).

Breeding: Breeding activity was recorded virtually throughout the year. In Zimbabwe (Zone 5), breeding peaks October–November, but further south (Zones 6–8) the peak is later, November–January. Zones 6–8 also show less synchronized breeding compared to the more distinctly peaked model for Zone 5. Similar differences in the timing of breeding in Zimbabwe, the Transvaal and KwaZulu-Natal are also apparent in published egg-laying data (compare Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Interspecific relationships: See the texts for European *O. oriolus* and African *O. auratus* Golden Orioles.

Historical distribution and conservation: There appears to be little evidence of change in overall distribution. There may have been some peripheral expansion, as well as a filling in of range, with the development of plantations of alien trees such as *Eucalyptus* spp., and it has also adapted to suburban parks and gardens. The Blackheaded Oriole is widespread and common and of no immediate conservation concern in southern Africa.

A.J. Tree

Recorded in 1387 grid cells, 30.6%
Total number of records: 32 210
Mean reporting rate for range: 37.8%



