



## Cape Batis

### Kaapse Bosbontrokkie

#### *Batis capensis*

The Cape Batis is one of the most widespread forest birds in southern Africa and it is found in the south and east of the region. It ranges from the western Cape Province in the vicinity of Vanrhynsdorp (3118DA) in a broad coastal belt to KwaZulu-Natal. Here the range extends inland up the Drakensberg escarpment, through western Swaziland and along the southern Lebombo range into eastern Swaziland, and into eastern and northern Transvaal. This inland range encompasses altitudes in excess of 2000 m, and in the Transvaal it extends westwards from the escarpment along the Magaliesberg, Waterberg and Soutpansberg mountains. In Zimbabwe the bird has an interesting and discontinuous distribution, reaching the Matobo National Park (2028) in the southwest, but also with a concentration of records in the eastern highlands. In the eastern half of Africa, the range extends northwards as far as 2°S (Hall & Moreau 1970).

Four subspecies are recognized in the region (Clancey 1980b) and all have discrete ranges: birds in the eastern highlands of Zimbabwe belong to *B. c. erythroptalma*; the scattered records on the plateau further west constitute the entire range of *kennedyi*; *hollidayi* occupies the range from the Soutpansberg (c. 23°S) southwards to the gap through KwaZulu-Natal; and further south it is replaced by the nominate race.

It usually occurs in pairs and is not unlike the other *Batis* flycatchers, but is the most brightly coloured. It draws attention to itself with its range of strange calls and antics. The atlas records are thought to be comprehensive.

**Habitat:** Spatially, atlas records correspond best with the distribution of the Afromontane Forest and Eastern Zimbabwe Highlands biomes; the species is also regular in Valley Bushveld, Fynbos and East Coast Littoral. Previous work concurs: Skead (1964a) recorded it in tall macchia adjacent to forest, and stated that it is also typical of valley bushveld and dense thornveld in the eastern Cape Province (Skead 1967b). So, although generally considered to be a bird of evergreen forest, it is not restricted to it and can be more catholic. It can survive in tiny, isolated forest fragments, suggesting a readiness to recolonize via open spaces (Irwin 1955). Within forest it prefers undergrowth tangles but will use the canopy. Alien vegetation is acceptable provided that it is dense and contains weeds which sustain insect populations. On the Karoo fringes, it may be found in dense succulent scrub, sometimes alongside the Pirit Batis *B. pririt* (Winterbottom 1961b; Pocock 1963).

**Movements:** It is largely resident over most of its range. In the south (Zones 4 and 8) there may be an east–west movement. Part of the southwestern population may vacate its range there and move east in winter, presumably to warmer regions. There is possibly some movement from the eastern Cape Province to KwaZulu-Natal at the same time. Long-distance migration has not been suggested previously, but Clancey (1964b) noted the species to be ‘rare as a breeder on the coast’ in KwaZulu-Natal, implying that birds wintering there move inland to breed. Altitudinal migration is not evident in the Natal atlas (Cyrus & Robson 1980). Irwin (1981) suggested that there is some altitudinal movement to lower-lying areas in Zimbabwe during winter.

**Breeding:** It is a summer breeder, with the same clearly defined season throughout its range: September–April, peaking November–December. It is interesting that this pattern is similar in both summer- and winter-rainfall areas.

**Interspecific relationships:** It is part of a superspecies with the Chinspot *B. molitor*, Mozambique *B. soror*, Woodward’s *B. fratrum* and Pirit Batises (Hall & Moreau 1970). A feature typical of a superspecies is the clear ecological separation of its members, and *Batis* is no exception. The Cape and Woodward’s Batises are forest birds, separating them from the woodland-dwelling Chinspot, Mozambique and Pirit Batises. The ecological difference between the Cape and Woodward’s Batises is more subtle: the latter replaces the former along the coastal plain northwards from extreme northern KwaZulu-Natal. Woodward’s Batis therefore inhabits tropical coastal forests, while the Cape Batis is essentially a bird of temperate Afromontane forests.

**Historical distribution and conservation:** The distribution has changed little in documented times, but there have been a few interesting events at the edge of the range. On the Karoo margins, the Cape Batis is now regular at, and a little beyond, Prince Albert (3322AA), but was not recorded there before 1976 (Winterbottom & Winterbottom 1984). At Cradock (3225BA), currently on the edge of the range, the species first appeared in 1932, was present until 1943, and then vanished again (Collett 1982). For the Free State, Earlé & Grobler (1987) stated that it occurs only at Golden Gate (2828DA), but it is now known to occur more widely in the eastern Free State and was probably overlooked previously (Colahan 1989a). The only historical record for Lesotho was from Maphotong Gorge near Roma (2927BC) (Aspinwall 1973), whereas during the atlas period there were scattered but regular records from several localities in that country. The Cape Batis is not threatened.

D.N. Johnson

Recorded in 508 grid cells, 11.2%  
Total number of records: 10 339  
Mean reporting rate for range: 19.4%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types



