



## Blackheaded Canary

### Swartkopkanarie

#### *Serinus alario*

The Blackheaded Canary is a southern African endemic species, largely confined to the Karoo biome. The distribution recorded here is substantially the same as that of Skead (1960), with the core distribution in the western and central Cape Province. There are scattered records from the northern Cape Province, Lesotho and Namibia (mainly in the south). There is a cluster of records on the edge of the Namib Desert, from just north of Solitaire to the Maltahöhe (2416DD) area. The Blackheaded Canary is seen in pairs, or more often observed in groups of 10–150 birds.

It is a distinctive species, unlikely to be confused with any other canary in southern Africa. There are two subspecies, *S. a. alario* and *leucolaema*, considered by Sibley & Monroe (1990) to be separate species, which differ in the amount of black and white on the head. They sometimes occur together in the same groups in western and northern parts of the Karoo. The atlas data can be considered reliable and comprehensive for this species. Although the Blackheaded Canary is nomadic and likely to occur as a vagrant outside its core distribution, it is also a popular cage-bird and some anomalous distribution records may be of aviary escapes (e.g. Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

**Habitat:** The Blackheaded Canary inhabits arid and semi-arid dwarf shrublands on plains and on hills, arid perennial grassland, shrubland in dune troughs, strandveld on the west coast, subalpine rocky slopes with bushes, fallow fields and weedy gardens (Skead 1960; Maclean 1993b). Reporting rates were highest from various Karoo vegetation types.

**Movements:** The models show that there are seasonal movements in this species. Essentially the 'centre of gravity' of the species shifts to the west in winter and to the east in summer. The models for Zones 7 and 8 show a marked summer–autumn peak in reporting rate in the eastern parts of the range. This corresponds to the timing of seed production in these summer-rainfall areas.

There is an increase in distribution and reporting rate in the western and southern Cape Province in winter, and perhaps some southward movement out of Namibia, corresponding with the winter-rainfall season in the southwest. Hockey *et al.* (1989) noted that the species is nomadic and irruptive in the extreme southwest. This is probably determined by the high variance in rainfall in the semi-arid Karoo areas where the core of its distribution lies. Similarly, Skead (1960) gave some data on scattered records outside the usual distribution, and stated that records in the coastal grasslands of the eastern Cape Province do not seem to occur seasonally or annually, although they generally occur during the winter.

**Breeding:** The breeding season in the western and southern Cape Province (Zones 3 and 4) is mainly August–November. Winterbottom (1968a) recorded most egg-laying August–October in the southwest. Maclean (1993b) gave the breeding season as July–April, variable with rainfall.

**Interspecific relationships:** The Blackheaded Canary associates with Yellow Canaries *S. flaviventris* and Whitethroated Canaries *S. albogularis*, and feeds in association with House *Passer domesticus* and Cape *P. melanurus* Sparrows (W.R.J.D. pers. obs) and with other canaries and waxbills (Skead 1960).

**Historical distribution and conservation:** There is no evidence of recent changes in the distribution of this species in South Africa where it is not considered to be threatened (Brooke 1984b). It has disappeared from southeastern Botswana at the northern fringe of its range during the last 50 years (Cole 1992). The Blackheaded Canary is probably inadequately protected because of the lack of conserved areas in its core distribution (Hilton-Taylor & Le Roux 1989).

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Recorded in 667 grid cells, 14.7%  
Total number of records: 2987  
Mean reporting rate for range: 13.2%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types



