



## Southern Grey Tit

### Piet-tjou-tjou-grysmees

*Parus afer*

The Southern Grey Tit's range both resembles and differs from those of several other Karoo endemic species. It has a wide distribution which covers much of the Karoo, but which does not extend as far north as in species such as the Karoo Chat *Cercomela schlegelii* and Karoo Robin *Erythropygia coryphaeus*; there is only a small extension of the range into southwestern Namibia and for the most part it does not reach the Orange River. As in several other Karoo species, there is an extension of the range into the highlands of Lesotho, but the large extent of its distribution there, and its apparent isolation from the bulk of the range to the west, are unusual. Its distribution along the south coast is complex: the mountains of the Groot Swartberg and Baviaanskloof appear to act as barriers to its southward expansion into the Little Karoo, and it is markedly absent from the relatively humid southern littoral between Mossel Bay (3422AA) and Port Elizabeth (3325DA). However, further west it occurs – albeit relatively thinly – in a broad swath southward to the coast in the wheat-farming area of the Overberg, between 20°E and 22°E. It also appears to avoid the wetter part of the mountain ranges east of Cape Town (3318CD), but thrives in the mountains of Lesotho and in rocky habitats generally. The map contains several other features relating to presence/absence and reporting rates which pose questions as to the species' ecological requirements and subspecific taxonomy.

Clancey (1980b) described the race *P. a. arens* as occurring in the Lesotho highlands, southwestern Free State and the Karoo of the eastern Cape Province, while the map suggests that the Lesotho population probably extends into

the highlands of the northeastern Cape Province but is isolated from populations to the west (see also Osborne & Tigar 1990).

It occurs in pairs or small groups of 3–6 birds (Hockey *et al.* 1989). The Southern Grey and Ashy *Parus cinerascens* Tits are quite distinct in plumage, call and habitat choice, but are nevertheless similar to the uninitiated. The data were carefully vetted and it is believed that the limits of their respective ranges are accurately depicted here.

**Habitat:** In the Karoo it is associated with karroid scrub and usually with rocky areas, including koppies. Along the west coast littoral it occurs in strandveld and renosterveld without rocks. In Lesotho it prefers rocky areas, including slopes, with moderate to thick shrub cover (Osborne & Tigar 1990), but also occurs in grassy areas with rocks (D.G. Allan pers. comm.). On the west and south coasts it penetrates wheat-farming areas where hills and valleys with fragments of renosterveld remain (Hockey *et al.* 1989). It nests in a variety of holes, including those in man-made structures.

**Movements:** No regular long-distance movements have been described or are likely. The midsummer decreases in reporting rates are probably linked to post-breeding moult during which birds tend to behave in a secretive manner.

**Breeding:** The season is August–March (Maclean 1993b). Egg-laying has been recorded August–October with one record from May (Winterbottom 1968a). Suspected breeding in Lesotho was recorded December–January (Osborne & Tigar 1990), and November–December breeding was recorded in the Natal Alpine Belt (Brown & Barnes 1984). Atlas data accord with published records and provide some support for a relatively early breeding season in the winter-rainfall region.

**Interspecific relationships:** The ranges of the Southern Grey and Ashy Tits are mutually exclusive (e.g. Earlé & Grobler 1987) except for a small area of parapatry in the east. Even in this area, the occurrence of the two species together is probably rare because of different habitat preferences. For the most part, their ranges appear to be separated by a narrow belt (c. 50–100 km wide) in which neither species is common.

**Historical distribution and conservation:** The Southern Grey Tit is unlikely to have undergone major changes in distribution, is common and occupies habitats which are not under threat at present.

J.A. Harrison

Recorded in 479 grid cells, 10.6%  
Total number of records: 3292  
Mean reporting rate for range: 15.4%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types



