

CAPE EAGLE-OWL | *Bubo capensis*

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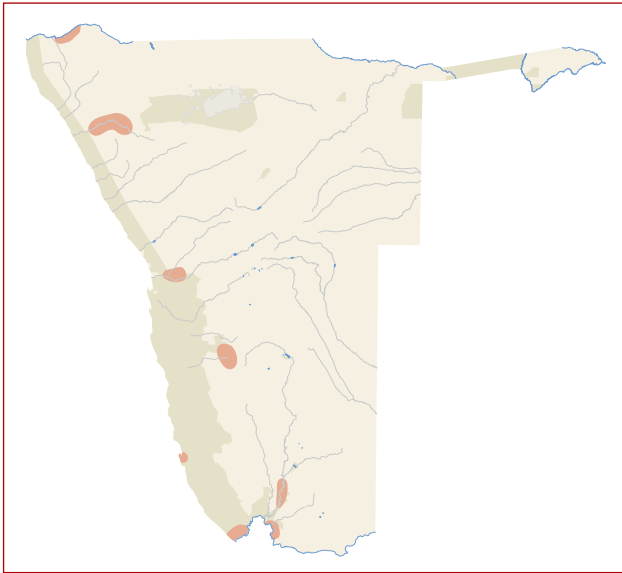
Conservation Status:	Near Threatened
Southern African Range:	Namibia, South Africa, Lesotho
Area of Occupancy:	14,000 km ²
Population Estimate:	Probably fewer than 1,000 birds
Population Trend:	Unknown
Habitat:	Rocky or mountainous terrain, usually associated with river valleys
Threats:	Habitat degradation through overgrazing



DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

This large and apparently scarce nocturnal owl has three subspecies in Africa. One subspecies, *Bubo capensis*

capensis, is confined to South Africa, Lesotho and the western parts of Namibia (Kemp 2005). Its dependence on rocky uplands may explain its absence from essentially flat parts of the central subcontinent. By 1997 there were just three



records of sightings in Namibia (Mendelsohn & Allan 1997); one of a bird at Lorelei, on the Orange River in 1956 (Clinning 1980b), one of a breeding pair near the coast at Lüderitz in 1983 (Walter *et al.* 1986), and one injured bird found on the farm Namibgrens in 1987, on the escarpment 140 km south west of Windhoek (Brown 1987, Boyer & Bridgeford 1988). Since then numerous records have extended its range, from the Swakop River Valley and Brandberg Mountain (Mallet-Veale 1996) to the Ugab River in the Namib Desert (Swanepoel 2003), and it has been recorded at various other localities as far north as 4.5 km from the Kunene River in the Kaokoveld (Swanepoel 2009, 2013).

It is also suspected to occur as far north as southern Angola (Kemp & Calburn 1987). Thanks to an intimate knowledge of habitat preferences, owls were successfully located at the Zebra River in the Tsaris Mountains, on the Brandberg massif, at the Khowarib Schlucht (Swanepoel 2003) and in the Okakora Mountains near the Kunene River at 17° 13' S (Swanepoel 2005). It is probably safe to assume, therefore, that Cape Eagle-Owls are likely to occur in Namibia where montane areas are incised by river valleys in arid areas and where hyrax or rock rabbits are available, and its area of occupancy is estimated to cover 14,000 km².



ECOLOGY

Elsewhere in southern Africa, the Cape Eagle-Owl prefers relatively mesic rocky habitat, so it is unusual that it is found in very arid areas of the Namib Desert. However, most of these are associated with river valleys and the owl shows a preference for rocky or mountainous terrain with cliffs, gorges, canyons and boulder-strewn hillsides, especially those consisting of igneous (e.g. granite) or sedimentary rock (e.g. dolomite, limestone: Swanepoel 2003). It appears to have habitat preferences very similar to the Verreaux's Eagle (Black Eagle) *Aquila verreauxii*

and the Speckled Pigeon (Rock Pigeon) *Columba guinea*, and wherever these and Rock Hyrax *Procavia capensis* or rabbits are found, the bird is likely to occur (W Swanepoel pers. obs.).

In other parts of southern Africa, the bird hunts mainly large and small mammals (Allan 1995, Kemp 2005), but its diet in Namibia is poorly known other than records from Lüderitz of Red Rock Rabbits *Pronolagus* spp., Four-striped Mouse *Rhabdomys pumilio*, an unidentified rat, and a Hartlaub's Gull *Chroicocephalus hartlaubii* (Walter *et al.* 1986). There are five breeding records for Namibia with eggs laid in June and July (Brown *et al.* 2015). In South Africa, eggs are laid mainly in May and June, and somewhat later in the Western Cape (Kemp 2005, Tarboton 2011).



THREATS

Few are known for this species because its life history in Namibia is so poorly known. However, its habitat preferences and range suggest that overgrazing by goats in rocky hillsides may pose a threat to its ecology. Low density of people in these areas and the creation of conservancies in many regions suggest that this will be a minor threat.



CONSERVATION STATUS

Prior to the systematic searches by Swanepoel (2003, 2005, 2009, 2013), the Cape Eagle-Owl would have been categorised as *Rare and Peripheral*. However, it is clear that substantial numbers occur in Namibia (probably fewer than 1,000 individuals), and as a subspecies that is endemic to the region it requires protection and research. It is therefore given *Near Threatened* status; future Namibian Parks and Wildlife legislation needs to grant *Specially Protected* status to this species. The species is not considered threatened in South Africa (Kemp 2005) or globally (IUCN 2012a).



ACTIONS

There are numerous other localities in Namibia with suitable habitat for the Cape Eagle-Owl where its preferred prey species probably occur (Swanepoel 2003). Further research will determine if these predictions are correct and together with density estimates of owls, will allow a first estimate of the population size in Namibia. Since 2003, the Cape Eagle-Owl has indeed been found at some of these localities, e.g. in the Otjihipa Mountains, Baynes Mountains and the Hoarusib River and its environs (Swanepoel 2013). Research on prey specificity and population fluctuations will greatly help in understanding its population ecology and conservation needs in Namibia.