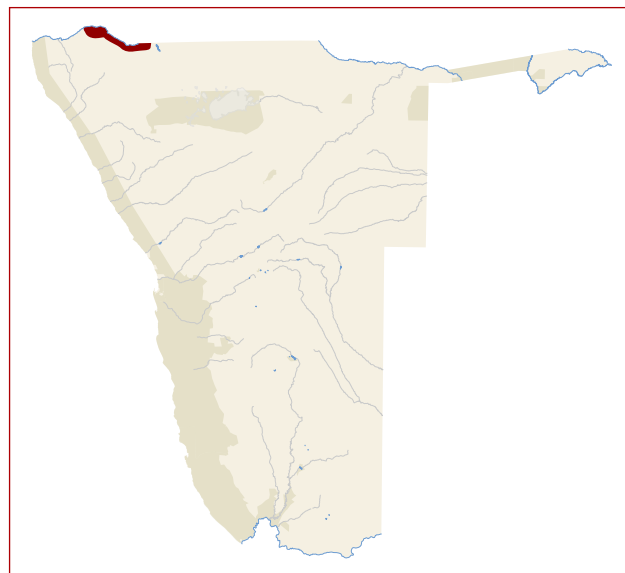


CINDERELLA WAXBILL | *Estrilda thomensis*

RE Simmons | Reviewed by: C Boix-Hinzen; P Morgan



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DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

This species is endemic to Angola and Namibia. In Namibia, it was only recorded in six quarter-degree squares in SABAP1, all of which are associated with the Kunene River between the Epupa Falls and Ruacana (Barnard 1997a). Here, it is associated directly with the river, but is more easily found in many of the seeps and springs in tributaries some distance from the Kunene River and the rocky hills adjoining the river (M Boorman, P Morgan pers. obs.). It also occurs along drainage lines in the Baynes Mountains and Omavanda Mountain to the south and south-west of Epupa (W Swanepoel pers. obs.). In Angola, it occurs from the Iona National Park in south-west Namibe Province, northwards into the escarpment areas of Huila Province and as far north as Fazenda do Cuito in Huambo (Dean 2000). There it is described as locally common.

In Namibia, it is rare and usually occurs in small groups of up to 11 birds, with some observations of more than 20 birds and one record of 44 birds (P Morgan pers. obs.). It has a reporting rate of 8% (Barnard 1997a) and in a 10-day survey along the 180 km-long Kunene River only three groups of one to four birds each were observed in November 1997, at a density of 1.6 birds per 10 km of river. In suitable palm and Mopane riverine areas, the density rises to 2.1 birds per 10 km. Other sightings are known from springs and dry river beds, including the Ondoto River near Epembe, the Omuhongo River near Okongwati and Ehomba, all well within 50 km of the Kunene River (Nuttall 2005, M Boorman, P Morgan, N Thompson pers. obs.).

Conservation Status:	Endangered
Southern African Range:	Northern Namibia
Area of Occupancy:	1,200 km ²
Population Estimate:	About 2,000 birds
Population Trend:	Currently stable
Habitat:	Riverine banks, surrounding Mopane and <i>Acacia</i> woodland
Threats:	Proposed Epupa Dam flooding large parts of range, livestock grazing

Along the Kunene River, it occupies an area of 1,200 km². This falls within the Epupa-Ruacana Important Bird Area, but not within a formally protected conservation area (Jarvis *et al.* 2001, Simmons *et al.* 2001b). These figures suggest that about 2,000 birds probably occur in the region. However, this could be an underestimate, considering the general inaccessibility of the area and that this species (particularly the female) is easily overlooked.



ECOLOGY

The Cinderella Waxbill prefers riverine habitat and rocky hills adjacent to the Kunene River, Mopane or *Acacia* woodland and scrub farther inland. Although it is thought to move away from the Kunene River into the nearby escarpment to breed (Nuttal 2005), this is not necessarily the case because birds have been observed in the area throughout the year, but may be more difficult to see during the rainy season when the vegetation is denser (P Morgan pers. comm.). There is only one breeding record for this species from Namibia; an almost complete nest, loosely resembling that of a White-browed Sparrow-Weaver *Plocepasser mahali* and lined with soft grass inflorescences was found on 11 May 2008 and was monitored until the emergence of five fledglings on 21 June 2008 (P Morgan unpubl. data). Another nest-building attempt was monitored about two years later, but the nest was abandoned before completion, possibly because of disturbance caused by monitoring activities (P Morgan unpubl. data). During this period, the male delivered all nesting material to the female, which incorporated it into the nest (P Morgan unpubl. data).

The Cinderella Waxbill feeds on the ground, as well as in trees and bushes, mainly on grasses or by foraging through bushes or trees through which grasses are growing (C Hines, RE Simmons unpubl. data). It has also been seen foraging on flowers and on honeydew-producing insects in the canopies of Mopane and Leadwood *Combretum imberbe* trees (C Hines in Nuttal 2005, P Morgan pers. obs.). It has a preference for the blossoms of the winter-flowering Kaoko Ceraria *Ceraria longipedunculata*, a shrub that is relatively common along rocky slopes in this area; the timing of breeding could be linked to the flowering of these shrubs (P Morgan pers. obs.). It also hawks termites when they emerge after rains (Nuttal 2005). It visits waterholes, wells, and depressions in dry riverbeds on a daily basis (Nuttal 2005) and prefers to drink where the vegetation encroaches right up to or overhangs the water's edge (P Morgan pers. obs.). Peak activity occurs between 09h00 and 11h00 and most drinking occurs in the morning hours.



THREATS

Locally, it suffers from habitat degradation caused by cattle and goats grazing the grasses and trampling vegetation along the immediate banks of the Kunene River. The more important future threat is the possible construction of a hydro-electric

dam below the Epupa Falls (Simmons 1997o). If built, the dam waters will extend 75 km east of Epupa, and cover an area of up to 382 km². It will then eliminate 218 km² of riverine vegetation in the likely draw-down area of the dam; this area will cover about 50% of the length of river where the waxbill occurs (Hines 1996a). It will also turn the flowing river water to stationary dam water. Depending on how this changes insect biodiversity, it could affect the bird, because adults feed their young on insects. A large dam is likely to attract the local Himba populations and increase the practice of subsistence agriculture in the area. This will increase competition for grasses with livestock such as goats and cattle, posing a potential threat to this species. It is probable that any surviving groups of waxbills will be forced into the more marginal areas in the dry river beds away from the main perennial river. However, it is possible that these birds are more resilient than perceived, because of their diverse feeding habits and their known ability to coexist with humans and domestic animals at the Ehomba settlement; the potential appearance of small islands within the flooded area could, in fact, be advantageous to the species (P Morgan pers. comm.).



CONSERVATION STATUS

This species is classified as *Endangered* in Namibia because of its small single population estimated at about 2,000 birds occupying an area of less than 5,000 km² (IUCN criterion B1a). The threats of the Epupa Dam hydro-electric scheme may reduce this area drastically and eliminate the present riverine vegetation in which it is most common. Any revised or future Nambian Parks and Wildlife legislation needs to list this species for *Specially Protected* status. It is not considered globally threatened (IUCN 2014).



ACTIONS

Because of the perceived dangers of the loss of a large portion of the population, present research and ringing studies should be encouraged to determine a better estimate of population size. The erection of the Epupa Dam is a controversial scheme that is currently on hold for various reasons. The dam has been opposed by local Himba people, chiefly because it covers their traditional grave sites and because valuable grazing areas will be lost. More suitable sites occur at Baynes Mountains farther west, where less riparian vegetation and no graves will be lost in an inundation area that would be smaller and would influence a smaller proportion of the waxbill's range than the Epupa Falls site. Surveys of the area in 1997 and 2004 indicate a greater avian species richness at the Epupa site than at the Baynes Mountains site (Simmons *et al.* 2005c). A dam at the Baynes Mountains site is considered the best compromise between development and conservation for the long-term well-being of the Cinderella Waxbill. Studies to determine accurate population figures are required, particularly away from the river. Its nesting areas and breeding ecology are poorly known and information is urgently needed, particularly in light of the looming threats.