

REDBILLED FIREFINCHES BREEDING IN WINDHOEK

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In a recent article entitled "The Pavlovian Phenomenon" (1997: *Lanioturdus* 30(4): 32-37) I reported on the presence of free-ranging Redbilled Firefinches *Lagonosticta senegala* in my garden in Windhoek West. The distribution of this species in Namibia is confined to the extreme north of the country, from the Kunene River across the northern Cuvelai system at about 18° S to the Okavango River and into Eastern Caprivi (Harrison *et al.* (eds) 1997, *The atlas of southern African birds*. Vol. 2). The birds in Windhoek are most probably escaped cage birds.

When first seen, some three years ago, there were three birds, one male and two females. For the first two years we regularly saw either two or three birds together. They were secretive and shy, and effective at avoiding predation. An attack by a Gabar Goshawk *Micronisus gabar* on a mixed group of feeding birds saw the firefinches making off first, and disappearing deep into thick foliage while the Gabar chased after a House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*.

In late February 1998 four firefinches were seen. Two were young birds begging from an adult male and a female bird. The two young were similar to the female but had no red on the face and no white spots on the chest. These young birds have survived until the present time (November 1998) and four firefinches are now regularly seen, one male and three females. All are now in adult plumage.

This record is of interest because (a) it shows that Redbilled Firefinches can survive some 700 km south of their normal range in an urban environment where gardens are watered and planted with trees and shrubs, and where seed is provided to birds on a regular basis; (b) the firefinches can breed and raise young successfully, thereby being able to establish and potentially maintain a wild population in Windhoek (and possibly other towns), and extend their natural range; and (c) it provides us with a breeding record for

the species, with egg-laying having taken place in late January, about one month after the first good rains of the season, and in the main nesting period recorded for this species in southern Africa (Maclean 1993: *Roberts' birds of southern Africa*).

It remains to be seen whether the Redbilled Firefinch will survive and increase to become a common garden bird in Windhoek.

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO THE LARKS OF NAMIBIA PART ONE – INTRODUCTION/OVERVIEW

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The 20 plus species of larks recorded from Namibia are examined with the goal of helping beginner birders identify this fascinating group. The first part is an overview with keys and tables to help identify the species; part two will give more information on each species, including tips on finding the larks in Namibia.

Introduction

While not as rich as some equatorial countries, Namibia's avifauna displays a high level of endemism. Spectacular near endemics such as the White-tailed Shrike, Damara Rockrunner, and Herero Chat draw birders from around the globe to Namibia's savannas and deserts. The uniqueness of Namibia's birdlife is not appreciated by many, however, due to a tendency for some birders to overlook the larks as "little brown jobs".

I must admit that I have never completely understood why, so many people are reluctant to sort out larks. It may be because of their drab colouration which reminds one of a pipit or cisticola. (Now if you really want a try to sort out a mess, tackle those two general!) Though superficially similar, larks are fundamentally different than the other confusing birds. For one, they have evolved into several genera. To a taxonomist, that raises interesting questions about the extent of genetic divergence between