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MISCELLANEOUS TAXONOMIC NOTES ON AFRICAN BIRDS

XLV

by

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THE RACES OF THE WHITETHROAT *SYLVIA COMMUNIS* LATHAM REACHING THE SOUTH AFRICAN SUB-REGION

Following the findings of Stresemann and Stresemann, *Journ.f. Ornith.*, vol. cix, 3, 1968, pp. 303 - 314, nominate *Sylvia communis* Latham, 1787: Kent, England, is currently not considered to reach the South African Sub-Region during its non-breeding sojourn in Ethiopian Africa, the two races wintering in the Sub-Region being *S.c. volgensis* Domaniewski, 1915: Saratov, Volga R., U.S.S.R., and *S.c. icterops* Ménétries, 1832: Talych=Talyshskiye Gory, south-eastern Azerbaydzhan, U.S.S.R. I have recently researched the races of *S.communis* to be admitted to the South African list and conclude on the basis of material from Rhodesia and Botswana, in addition to specimens from Zambia and southern-western Tanzania, that while it is true enough that most specimens are clearly attributable to both *volgensis* and *icterops*, some elements of *S.c.communis* do reach the drier interior of southern Africa during their non-breeding stay in Africa, where they moult, and that the exclusion of this taxon from the list is indefensible.

While much of the material available is in a seriously abraded and insolated condition, a sufficiency of moulting or completely moulted

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Atlantic or, better highland Britain, population is sufficiently discrete as to be recognised as a fourth subspecies.

S.c.jordansi differs from *S.c.communis* in the male having the pileum much darker and greyer (Hair Brown (pl. xlvi), *versus* Drab (same pl.)); dorsum, dark Light Brownish Olive (pl. xxx) or redder, against Buffy Brown (pl. xl). Ventrally, generally with the breast deeper pale vinaceous-cinnamon, and flanks darker and browner. In the wings, the red-brown outer vanes and tips of the greater-coverts and remiges are more saturated and ochraceous, and there is little or no development of a pale wing-bar across the apices of the said coverts. Females are similarly darker and rather redder above, the head-top likewise darker and greyer. Ventrally they do not differ, but the wings are also more saturated reddish over the coverts and remiges, and the wing-bar is lacking. Juveniles also show the darker head-top character. Wings of 15 ♂♀ 68,5 - 72mm. In its cold grey head-top colouration *jordansi* shows closer affinity with *S.c.icterops* than with *S.c.communis*.

The range of *S.c.jordansi* is highland Britain in Ireland, Wales, north-western and northern England, and Scotland and the Inner Hebrides. It does not reach eastern or southern Africa on migration, and apparently winters in far West Africa. Some specimens in the paratypical series taken in May in Scotland are in fresh contour plumage, but with the wing-tips and tails relatively abraded, suggesting that in a proportion of this race the autumnal moult is arrested and only completed shortly before departure from the African wintering grounds.

South-eastern England breeders, toptotypical of *S.c.communis*, are slightly intermediate towards *jordansi* in that some males show a darkening of the pileum, but otherwise they agree well with Continental birds. This race is in a sense the link between *jordansi* and *volgensis*, having the short wing of the former and the colouration of the latter.

A major problem in appreciating the nature of the variation in the west of Europe is the industrial grime which seriously contaminates the birds on their arrival on the breeding grounds. For purposes of this study all British, Dutch and German breeders were first dry cleaned.

THE AUSTRAL AFRICAN RACES OF THE RUSH WARBLER *BRADYPTERUS BABOECALA* (VIEILLOT)

The (Little) Rush Warbler is a largely sedentary species of permanent marshes, papyrus swamps, and reedbeds alongside rivers and

lagoons, which extends in a series of minor races from Niger and Chad in the west and the Sudan and Ethiopia in the east, south, in the west, to southern Angola, and in the east to the southern and eastern Cape and Natal. The precise number of races it is meaningful to admit is still undecided, although many have been described, owing to the smallness of the series in most instances. The races occurring in southern Africa have at no time been studied in depth. Roberts, *Birds of South Africa*, 1940, p. 253, admitted some five subspecies for the Sub-Region, giving the characters believed to distinguish the taxa and an assessment of the ranges as he saw them on the very limited material available in South African museums in the days immediately prior to the Second World War. A study of material available to me in the mid-1960's indicated that at least four races of *B.baboecala* were acceptable in the South African Sub-Region, these being in due course recognised in my *Catalogue of Birds of the South African Sub-Region*, part iv, 1966, pp. 472, 473, and in the *S.A.O.S. Check List of the Birds of South Africa*, 1969, pp. 220, 221.

Recent study of a series of 138 specimens from south-central and southern Africa carried out in the Durban Museum suggests the treatment of the populations adopted in my *Catalogue* in 1966 is fundamentally correct, though the ranges of the four taxa admitted require to be adjusted somewhat, and the revised diagnostic characters are in need of publication. Variation of moment in grouping the populations into acceptable subspecies affects the level of saturation of the dorsum, the relative whiteness or buffness of the ground to the venter, and the degree of streaking over the lower fore-throat. There is a measure of variation in size and the length of the bill, the largest and longest billed birds occurring in the population resident in the Winter Rainfall District of the Cape. Roberts used bill-length to distinguish two large south-western races: *B.b.baboecala* and *B.b.brachypterus* (Vieillot), from those occurring further north in the east in South Africa: *B.b.transvaalensis* Roberts, *B.b.tongensis* Roberts, and *B.b.bedfordi* Ogilvie-Grant = *B.b.msiri* Neave, but, while the means of this variable are statistically significantly different, the wide range of individual variation and overlap in measurements are such that I do not believe that bill-length on its own can be used with assurance in the recognition of subspecific taxa.

Individual variation is relatively high in the present warbler, which, correlated with environmentally induced colour modification and the smallness of samples from single localities taken at one time, renders grouping of populations into satisfactory races difficult. Contamination from plant dust and carbon from grass fires also obscures differences unless material is dry-cleaned in advance of

critical examination. On the other hand, "foxing" scarcely affects the Rush Warbler. A specimen collected by Lucas at Potchefstroom in 1877 examined agrees remarkably well with recently-taken material of the same taxon.

The population of the Winter Rainfall District of the Cape is not divisible on the basis of colouration into western and southern races. Roberts, *loc. cit.*, recognised two subspecies from the south-western and southern Cape, respectively, the former as *B.b.baboecala* and the latter as *B.b.brachypterus*, but the arrangement is invalid, because, apart from the under tail-covert character used to differentiate them not holding up in series, both names have virtually the same type-locality: *B.b.baboecala*: Knysna, and *B.b.brachypterus* Knysna, or better, perhaps, Plettenberg Bay. They are, therefore, absolute synonyms. The eastern limits of this relatively large, long-billed population appear to be the East London district of the eastern Cape, a specimen from East London being of nominate *B.baboecala*, while one from further up the coast from Mtafufu R., coastal Transkei, is referable to a group of rather smaller populations, with lighter flanks, duller under tail-coverts, and lower fore-throat streaking which ranges from being lightly indicated to absent. Birds from the Transkei, East Griqualand and Natal also range shorter in the bill and wing than those of the Winter Rainfall District: bills 18 - 17, wings 54 - 60, *versus* 16 - 18,5 and 60 - 64,5 mm. In my *Catalogue*, p.473, I placed such elements as *B.b.transvaalensis* Roberts, 1919: Wakkerstroom, south-eastern Transvaal. On the basis of the variation as now interpreted I believe the low elevation birds occurring along the Transkei and Natal coast, as well as those present in the immediate hinterland in Natal, certainly below 1 200 m. a.s.l., should be associated with the subspecies *B.b.tongensis* Roberts, 1931: Kosi Bay, north-eastern Zululand, rather than *transvaalensis*, which will be discussed briefly hereunder.

B.b.tongensis is now seen as a wide-ranging lowland race, which differs from *B.b.baboecala* in its smaller size and shorter culmen, obsolete or absent fore-throat streaking, and paler, warmer buffy flanks and under tail-coverts. Populations from the Transkei coast, coastal Natal and Zululand, north along the coastlands of eastern Africa to north-eastern Tanzania and coastal Kenya to the Tana R. can be satisfactorily grouped in it. It also ranges onto the interior plateau of the continent in Tanzania, Malawi, parts of Zambia, and north-eastern Rhodesia. *B.b.moreaui* Sclater, 1931: Amani, Usambara Mts, north-eastern Tanzania, named in the same year as *tongensis*, is antedated by the latter name by a month or two.

The population present over the upper elevations of the Drakensberg versant in East Griqualand and Natal, north to the Orange Free State, the plateau of the Transvaal and of Rhodesia are almost invariably associated by workers with nominate *B.baboecala*, though admitted as distinct in both my *Catalogue* (1966) and in the S.A.O.S. *Check List* (1969) under the name *B.b.transvaalensis* Roberts. Roberts, *Ann.Transv.Mus.*, vol. vi, 3, 1919, pp. 116, 117, gave *transvaalensis* specific rank, differentiating it from *B.brachypterus*=*B.b.baboecala* on the basis of a generally lighter facies and shorter bill. Compared directly with south-western and southern Cape *B.b.baboecala*, material of *transvaalensis*, which included three para- and topotypes from Wakkerstroom, the type-locality, shows that this form is not paler above than nominate *baboecala*, but is markedly whiter below: over the fore-throat, mid-breast and the entire medio-ventral streak; and the sides, flanks and under tail-coverts are lighter, less olivaceous-brown. In contrast to the condition in *tongensis*, the lower fore-throat streaking is sharply defined, but like this latter taxon it is smaller than *baboecala* and averaging shorter billed. Populations agreeing with the Wakkerstroom sample range from East Griqualand and the high interior of Natal (Blood River), to the Orange Free State, and the plateau of the Transvaal, north to Rhodesia. One of the specimens from Kabulabula, northern Botswana, placed by Roberts, *Ann.Transv.Mus.*, vol. xvi, 1, 1935, p.141, as *B.b.tongensis* appears to me to fit in better with *transvaalensis*, which race may reach the Zambesi in the north-west of Rhodesia and adjacent areas immediately to the west.

In the whiter ventral surface *B.b.transvaalensis* reveals a shift towards *B.b.msiri* Neave, 1909: Bunkeya R., Shaba, Zaïre, which latter race is present only narrowly within South African Sub-Region limits in the Okavango Swamp region of northern Botswana. North of this it extends through eastern Angola and Zambia mainly west of the upper Zambesi, to Shaba, in Zaïre, thence east through the northern districts of Zambia to the Luapula and Northern Districts. It probably also reaches south-eastern Tanzania, because its influence can be seen in northern Malawi specimens presently before me. *B.b.msiri* is a form closely associated with papyrus swamp, its occurrence within South African limits being virtually confined to this particularly habitat. The race concerned differs from *transvaalensis* and *tongensis* in having the upper-parts sepia, the under-parts rather greyer white than in the former, the lower fore-throat almost invariably lightly streaked, and the flanks and under tail-coverts darker. There is no difference in dimensions between *msiri*, *transvaalensis* and *tongensis*.

Immediately to the north of *msiri* in equatorial Africa lies *B.b. centralis* Neumann, 1908: between Mkingo and Muhera, Rwanda, while *B.b. benguellensis* Bannerman, 1927: Chicuma, Benguela, Angola, is present to the west, where it occurs over the plateau from western and northern Huila and extreme eastern Benguela to Huambo and adjacent Bié. Other races lying to the north and north-east of *centralis* are *B.b. elgonensis* Madarász, 1912: Buchungu, Mt. Elgon, western Kenya/Uganda, *B.b. sudanensis* Grant and Mackworth-Praed, 1941: White Nile at 9° 30' N., 30° 40' E.=Lake No, Sudan, and *B.b. abyssinicus* (Blundell and Lovat), 1899: L. Chercher, eastern Ethiopia. While these taxa are admitted by Mackworth-Praed and Grant, *Birds Eastern and North Eastern Africa*, vol. ii, 1955, pp. 369 - 371, the characters given for them are all but worthless, and the north-eastern populations of the species are in need of a re-appraisal along lines similar to this report on the species in southern Africa. *B.b. chadensis* Bannerman, 1936: Lake Chad, based on a singleton obtained by Boyd Alexander, is of understandably uncertain status at this stage.

The names, characters and ranges of the four southern African forms of the Rush Warbler will now stand as follows:

***Bradypterus baboecala baboecala* (Vieillot)**

Sylvia baboecala Vieillot, *Nouv. Dict. d'Hist. Nat.*, vol. xi, 1817, p. 172: South Africa=Knysna, southern Cape (*ex* Levaillant).

Sylvia brachyptera Vieillot, *Nouv. Dict. d'Hist. Nat.*, vol. xi, 1817, p. 206: Knysna, southern Cape (*ex* Levaillant). Sclater, *Syst. Av. Aethiop.*, part ii, 1930, p. 508, gives Plettenberg Bay as the type-locality.

Size relatively large. Dorsum dark Saccardo's Umber (Ridgway (1912), pl. xxix), reddening over the rump and upper tail-coverts. Below, pale creamy or buffy white, the lower fore-throat lightly streaked with brown, the breast with ground pale buff and lateral breast, body sides and flanks pale Tawny-Olive (same pl.); under tail-coverts dark tawny-olive.

Wings of 20 ♂♀ 59 - 66,5 (62,9), SD 1,97, SE 0,44, culmens from skull 17 - 19 (17,8), SD 0,52, SE 0,12, tails 64 - 79 (71,0), SD 4,16, SE 0,93 mm.

Material examined: 27 (Cape: Kersefontein (Berg R.), French Hoek, Fish Hoek, Muizenberg, Strandfontein, Durbanville, Cape Flats, Somerset West, Stellenbosch, Bontebok National Park, Knysna, Port Elizabeth, Swartkops R., Grahamstown, East London).

Range: South-western and southern Cape, east to about the Great Kei R.

***Bradypterus baboecala tongensis* Roberts**

Bradypterus brachypterus tongensis Roberts, *Ann. Transv. Mus.*, vol. xiv, 3, 1931, p. 241: Kosi Bay, north-eastern Zululand.

Bradypterus brachypterus moreaui Sclater, *Bull. Brit. Orn. Club*, vol. lii, 1931, p. 57: Amani, Usambara Mts, north-eastern Tanzania.

Moderately well differentiated from last. Dorsally, averaging rather more reddish, less dark olivaceous, than in nominate *baboecala*. In newly assumed dress differs taxonomically in having the lower fore-throat streaking vestigial or absent, and entire venter tinged with pale yellow or buffish yellow, and with the breast, sides and flanks warmer, more yellowish or orange tawny; under tail-coverts paler. Tail often a little redder. Ranging shorter in the wing, bill and tail. Several of these characters are greatly modified or lost through abrasion and the action of the sun after five or six months.

Wings of 20 ♂♀ 54,5 - 60 (57,1), SD 1,38, SE 0,31, culmens 15+ - 17,5 (16,3), SD 0,70, SE 0,16, tails 55 - 66,5 (62,8), SD 2,92, SE 0,65 mm.

Material examined: 55 (*Transkei:* Port St. Johns, Mtafufu R.; *Natal:* Durban, Umhlanga Rocks, Pinetown, Kloof, Pietermaritzburg, Greytown; *north-eastern Zululand:* Gollel, Mkuzi R., Mangusi Forest, Mosie Store (Maputa); *Transvaal:* Nelspruit, Zoutpansberg; *Mozambique:* Bela Vista, Panda, Vilanculos, Lagoa de Ura (Beira district), Mopeia; *Rhodesia:* Haroni/Lusitu confluence; Salisbury district, 48 km E. of Chirundu on Zambesi; *Malawi:* Chiromo, Namwera, Chinteche; *Zambia:* Chipata (Fort Jameson), Lundazi, Mpika, Namwala, Busanga Plain (Kasempa); *Caprivi/Botswana:* Serondelas, Kabulabula, Kasane).

Range: Transkei coast, coastal and lower Midland Natal and Zululand, eastern Swaziland, and eastern and north-eastern Transvaal, Mozambique, south-eastern and northern Rhodesia (in Mashonaland from about Salisbury northwards), northern Botswana and adjacent Caprivi along the lower Chobe R., Zambia south and east of *B.b.msiri*, in the Eastern District, Mpika, and Central and Southern Districts to about 25° E. (Kasempa samples are somewhat intermediate between *tongensis* and *msiri*), Malawi, Tanzania, and the lowlands of south-eastern Kenya to the Tana R. (*vide* Mackworth-Praed and Grant, *Birds Eastern and North Eastern Africa*, vol. ii, 1955, p. 370).

Remarks: Smaller size, and yellower tinged ventral surface and rustier and paler flanks and under tail-coverts in newly moulted condition, the lower fore-throat streaking vestigial or absent, distinguish this race.

***Bradypterus baboecala transvaalensis* Roberts**

Bradypterus transvaalensis Roberts, *Ann.Transv.Mus.*, vol. vi, 3, 1919, p. 116: Wakkerstroom, south-eastern Transvaal.

Not separable from nominate *B.baboecala* on the upper-parts, but differs in series ventrally, having the throat whiter, the streaking over the lower fore-throat darker; centre of breast and medio-ventral plane much whiter, and more contrasted against the sides and flanks, which latter are paler, less saturated, than in the nominate subspecies; under tail-coverts paler, less olive tinged. Ranging smaller and shorter in the bill than *B.b.baboecala*.

Whiter venter, dark throat streaking and duller, less tawny, flanks separate the present race from *tongensis*.

Wings of 20♂♀ 55 - 61,5 (58,5), SD 1,37, SE 0,31, culmens 15 - 18 (16,2), SD 0,77, SE 0,17, tails 62 - 69,5 (65,1), SD 2,10, SE 0,47mm.

Material examined: 27 (*East Griqualand and Natal:* Mount Fletcher, Cedarville, Blood River; *Transvaal:* Wakkerstroom, Potchefstroom, Moordrift, Zoutpansberg; *northern Cape:* Kuruman; *Rhodesia:* Matopos Hills, Selous, Banti Forest Reserve, Lusitu R., Salisbury district).

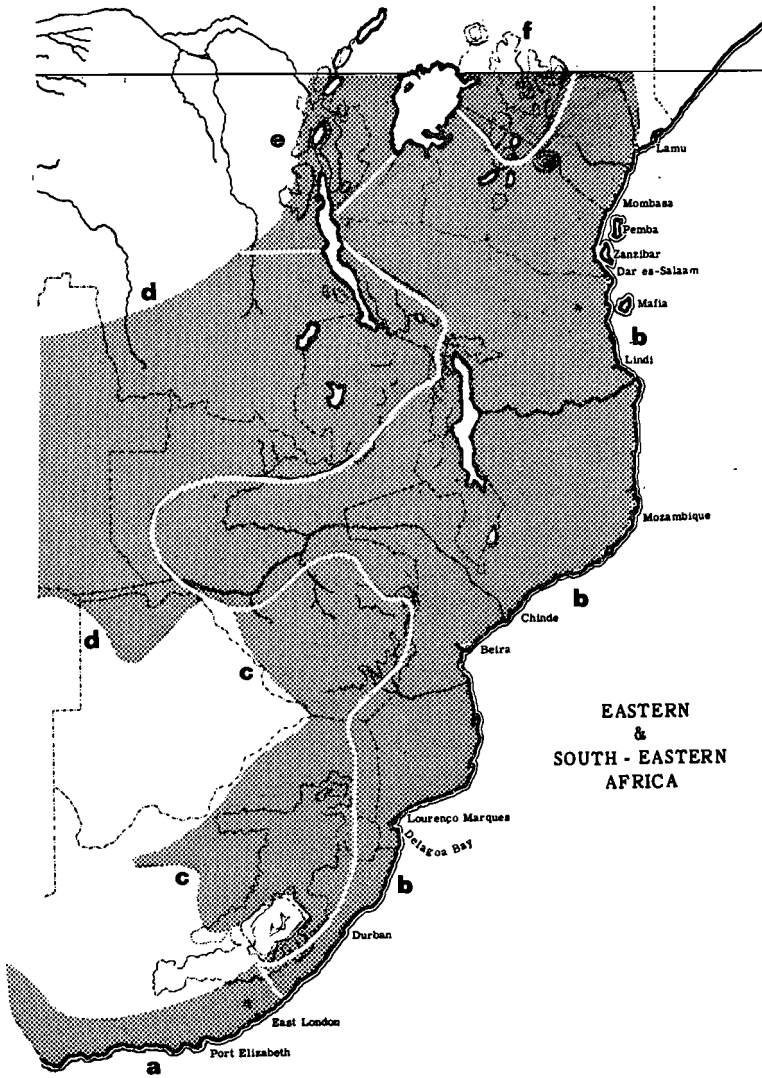
Range: East Griqualand, Upper Natal and adjacent Zululand above about 1 370 m. a.s.l., western Swaziland, Orange Free State, the lowlands of Lesotho, the northern Cape (Kuruman), the highveld of the Transvaal, the plateau of Rhodesia in Matabeleland, the Midlands, Mashonaland (north to Salisbury), and the Eastern Highlands.

Remarks: Heavier lower fore-throat streaking and whiter throat, mid-breast and medio-ventral streak distinguish *transvaalensis* from both nominate *baboecala* and *tongensis*. Size as in the latter.

Roberts, *loc.cit.*, described *transvaalensis* as generally rather paler than *B.brachypterus*=*B.b.baboecala*, and with the bill shorter. *B.b.transvaalensis* is not lighter than *baboecala*, though clearer white below; while the bill-length is statistically significantly different, it is not a taxonomic character because of the overlap.

***Bradypterus baboecala msiri* Neave**

Bradypterus msiri Neave, *Bull.Brit.Orn.Club*, vol. xxv, 1909, p. 25: Msiri's village, Bunkeya R., Shaba, Zaïre.



MAP I

The south-eastern quadrant of the Ethiopian Region showing the disposition of the subspecies of *Bradypterus baboecala* (Vieillot).

- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| a. <i>B.b.baboecala</i> | d. <i>B.b.msiri</i> |
| b. <i>B.b.tongensis</i> | e. <i>B.b.centralis</i> |
| c. <i>B.b.transvaalensis</i> | f. <i>B.b.elgonensis</i> |

Bradypterus bedfordi Ogilvie-Grant, *Ibis*, 1912, p. 382: Mbabe= Mababe Flats, northern Botswana.

Darker and more saturated on the dorsum than in the case of *B.b.transvaalensis*, especially over the vertex, hind neck and mantle centre (near to Sepia (pl. xxix)), the rump and upper tail-coverts also darker red-brown. Below, darker over the sides and flanks, but otherwise much as in *transvaalensis*, though somewhat greyer white medio-ventrally. Wings and tail darker.

Juvenile generally darker, more strongly yellowish below, and with darker sides and flanks. Size closely similar to *transvaalensis*.

Wings of 20 ♂♀ 54,5 - 61 (57,9), SD 1,75, SE 0,39, culmens 15 - 17, (15,9), SD 0,62, SE 0,14, tails 60 - 71,5 (66,3), SD 3,08, SE 0,69 mm.

Material examined: 29 (*Botswana*: Shorobe, Maun, Chanokhe Drift (Botletle R.), Kasane; *Caprivi*: Linyanti; *Zambia*: Shangombo, Nasiongo, S. Kasiji R. (Balovale), L. Mwangi (Balovale), Lungwebungu R. (Balovale), Nkulwashi R. (Balovale), Kabeti (Mongu), Kabompo Boma, Mutangini (Kabompo), Manyinga R. (Angola border), Luamala R. at 27° 08' S., 14° 06' E., L. Lusiwashi (Kabwe), Chambeshi/Lubansenshi R. confl., Monongwa (Luwingu), mouth of Luapula R., opposite Kasenga (Luapula), Bulaya (Mporokoso)).

Range: The Okavango Swamp and Botletle R. of Botswana, north to Angola east of the range of *B.b.benguellensis* (Traylor, *Check-list of Angolan Birds*, 1963, p. 145, lists it only from Macondo in the extreme east of Angola), Zambia from Barotseland north to Mwinilunga, and east across the north of the territory to the Luapula and Northern Districts, Shaba, Zaïre, and, probably, south-western Tanzania. Intergrades with *B.b.tongensis* to the south-east of its established range.

Remarks: Sepia top of head, hind neck and mantle centre distinguishes this race from all others here considered, which taxon appears to be mainly an endemic of papyrus swamp. Ventrally, the colouration is much as in *transvaalensis*, being medially whiter than in nominate *baboecala* and *tongensis*. The lower fore-throat is usually distinctly streaked with dusky in contrast to the condition present in *tongensis*.

THE SUBSPECIES OF THE BLACKCHESTED PRINIA *PRINIA FLAVICANS* (VIEILLLOT)

The Blackchested Prinia *Prinia flavicans* (Vieillot) of much of the South West Arid District and some adjacent areas of the Ethiopian