



## Olive Woodpecker

### Gryskopspeg

*Mesopicos griseocephalus*

This Afrotropical endemic is represented in southern Africa by two disjunct populations. The nominate race is confined to the southern and eastern parts of South Africa, and Swaziland. The race *M. g. ruwenzori* is at the southernmost edge of its central African range in eastern Caprivi and adjacent Zimbabwe. It hybridizes with the Grey Woodpecker *M. goertae* in Rwanda (Short 1982) and Angola (Fry *et al.* 1988) at their zone of contact, and is therefore possibly conspecific. The isolation of the southern population warrants genetic investigation into the possibility that it might be specifically distinct and thus a endemic to southern Africa.

Olive Woodpeckers are common in areas of suitable habitat and a density of 1 pair/4.5 ha has been recorded from forest in the eastern Transvaal (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). They are usually encountered in pairs, but are also found singly and in family groups. With an estimated 3090 km<sup>2</sup> of Afromontane forest in South Africa (Siegfried 1989), a conservative extrapolation of this density suggests that the South African population exceeds 100 000 birds. This is a distinctive and easily identified woodpecker when seen, but it is fairly secretive and inhabits dense cover, and is therefore easily overlooked unless its characteristic call is recognized.

**Habitat:** The vegetation analysis shows that it had its highest reporting rates in Afromontane Forest. Its absence from the Afromontane forests in the eastern highlands of Zimbabwe has not been explained adequately (Irwin 1981). It

also ranges into surrounding fynbos, thornveld and even scrub vegetation such as Ouhout *Leucosidea sericea*. It is also attracted to wooded suburban gardens, especially those with dead trees or branches. It is occasionally found in coastal forest in KwaZulu-Natal and eastern Swaziland, but may not be resident there; it does not frequent commercial monocultures of alien trees. The Caprivi–Zimbabwe population occupies riparian forest.

The distribution of the South African population is closely tied to the distribution of Afromontane forest. From sea-level in the southern Cape Province, northwards it is recorded at increasing altitudes, following the increasing elevation of Afromontane forest towards the equator (Liversidge 1959). Thus, in the Transvaal, it is found only above altitudes of about 1000 m, and in northern Malawi where it reappears, it is restricted to areas above 1800 m (Dowsett-Lemaire 1983a).

**Movements:** It is resident and sedentary. The models reveal no evidence for seasonality, but the possibility exists that there is a limited movement of birds from forests in the interior to the coast in KwaZulu-Natal in winter, matching the movement performed by a number of Afromontane forest species in this region (Cyrus & Robson 1980).

**Breeding:** Breeding was recorded during the atlas period in every month, except for April and May. Breeding in the southwestern Cape Province (Zone 4) peaked in October–December, and slightly earlier in the Transvaal (Zone 6). In the eastern Cape Province and KwaZulu-Natal (Zones 7 and 8) there was a less clear-cut pattern to breeding, which occurred June–February, with a November peak in the eastern Cape Province. Winterbottom (1968a) recorded egg-laying in the western Cape Province (Zone 4) in October, and Tarboton *et al.* (1987b) in the Transvaal during August–October.

**Interspecific relationships:** It is, for the most part, the only woodpecker represented in the Afromontane forests in southern Africa, but it occurs alongside the Goldtailed Woodpecker *Campethera abingoni* in northwestern Swaziland (Parker 1994). It frequently joins mixed feeding flocks (Fry *et al.* 1988).

**Historical distribution and conservation:** Although its past distribution has not been documented, it is unlikely to have been different from its present distribution.

The Olive Woodpecker is not a listed South African Red Data species (Brooke 1984b) and is not considered at risk in southern Africa. A large proportion (*c.* 70%) of South Africa's Afromontane forest falls inside formally conserved areas (Siegfried 1989).

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Recorded in 274 grid cells, 6.0%  
Total number of records: 3935  
Mean reporting rate for range: 10.5%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types



