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CHESTNUT WEAVER MOVEMENTS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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The Chestnut Weaver *Ploceus rubiginosus* is found disjointly in south-western and in eastern Africa. The southern race occurs in Namibia, Botswana and Angola. It is a nomadic species and appears to move in response to rainfall in its arid environment (Braine & Braine 1971, Winterbottom 1971). Similarly, in eastern Africa its extensive movements are stimulated by rainfall, and occurrence is seasonal in most areas (Lewis & Pomeroy 1989). There is one published account of a long distance movement. A full grown bird ringed on 6 December 1974 at Ngulia, Kenya, was recovered on 3 May 1975 at Migwani, Kenya, a distance of 213 km (Backhurst 1977); the bird was caught and not released. Here the movements of Chestnut Weavers in southern Africa, based on ringing and published records, are briefly reviewed.

Results and Discussion

The ringing data for Chestnut Weavers was extracted in January 2011. A total of 5108 Chestnut Weavers have been ringed to this date, with 16 reports (11 recaptures and 5 recoveries). Of these reports, two birds were recoveries in Namibia involving long distance movements and the rest moved less than 7 km. Adult BC96737 was ringed on 6 September 2002 at Farm Blydskap by Bernd Brell, and recovered on 4 March 2004 at Ongenga, northern Namibia (Fig. 1, short blue line). The distance moved was at least 284 km and this record was published in a summary without details (Oschadleus & Brooks 2005). Adult male BH15335 was ringed on 25 January 2004

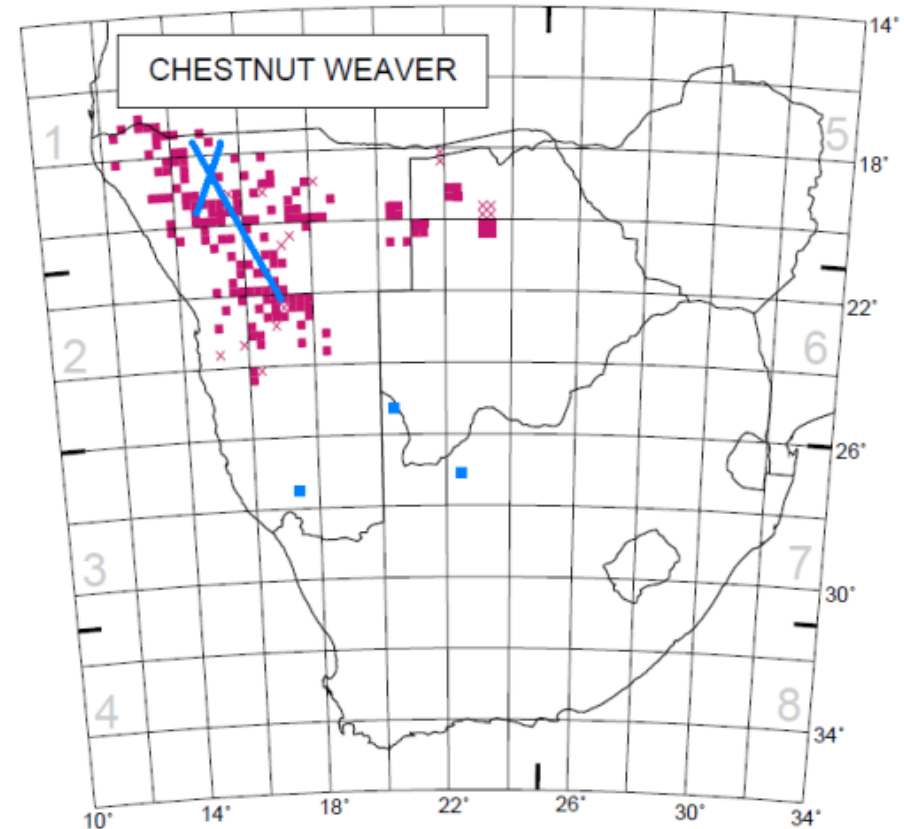


Fig 1. Distribution of Chestnut Weavers in Namibia and Botswana based on SABAP1; blue squares indicate additional out of range records and blue lines are long distance ringing recoveries (see text)

at Okapuka by Dirk Heinrich and recovered on 26 April 2007 at Onesi village, northern Namibia, in a mahangu (pearl millet) field. The distance moved was at least 580 km, making this the greatest distance moved for a ringed bird of this species in Africa (Fig. 1, long blue line). It is to be expected that more long distance movements for the Chestnut Weaver will be recorded as more weavers are ringed.



Several sightings outside of the usual range of the species indicate additional long distance movements. A sighting far south of its range in Namibia was made in April 1999 (Swanepoel 2005). A male in full breeding plumage and a female were observed for two days at the confluence of the Löwen and Fish Rivers, on farm Elizabeth 383 (Fig. 1, 27°11'S 17°40'E). The author noted that the birds were probably vagrants which moved south along the Fish River from the Kalkrand area. It was a wet year and the Fish River was still in flood. The distance from the nearest SABAP1 record in the Naukluft Mountains (2416AC) was 360 km SSE, or 350 km due south from the Kalkrand area.

Madel Whittington reported the first record of this species in South Africa at Nossob, in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, on 9 January 2011 (Whittington 2011). It was an adult male in full breeding plumage that was photographed and it remained in the camp area with Southern Masked Weavers *Ploceus velatus* for three days. The closest known site for Chestnut Weavers to Nossob (Fig. 1, 25°25'S 20°35'E) is 285 km away in Namibia.

Two days later bird ringer Ben Smit saw an adult male in full breeding plumage on 14 January 2011 in the lodge garden at Tswalu Kalahari Reserve, Northern Cape (reported to Sabirdnet, 14 January 2011) (Fig. 1, 27°18'S 22°26'E). Again it was seen with a Southern Masked Weaver and the Chestnut Weaver male started building a nest. A team of bird atlasers drove to Tswalu for that weekend and Tony Archer submitted a photo of this nest to PHOWN (Photos of Weaver Nests, http://weavers.adu.org.za/phown_vm.php?vm=502) on 16 January. The bird was last seen at Tswalu lodge on 24 January (S Cunningham, pers. comms). The closest known site for Chestnut Weavers to Tswalu it is 560 km. These minimum distances involved in these new South African records are less than the recovery distance recorded in Namibia of 580 km. It is possible that the same individual flew from Nossob to Tswalu, in which case it moved at least 275 km in 1 or 2 days.

Conclusion

The Chestnut Weaver is subject to seasonally erratic fluctuations in numbers and poorly understood dispersal and nomadism during the non-breeding season, but the species remains present throughout the year in northern and central Namibia (Herremans 1997). After breeding some numbers appear to move to the Kunene River as indicated by the long distance recoveries, and the large numbers roosting at the river (Thomson 2009), but with some overwintering in central Namibia (Thomson pers. comm.). The South African bird(s) appear to have moved in the opposite direction, probably in response to the large amount of rain that fell in the interior of southern Africa in January onwards.

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Neil Thomson provided helpful comments on this paper.

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Footnote

The SAFRING recoveries may also be viewed on the SAFRING web:

BC96737:

http://afring.adu.org.za/m3/retrap_process.php?ringno=BC96737&inscription=safring

BH15335:

http://afring.adu.org.za/m3/retrap_process.php?ringno=BH15335&inscription=safring