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Ornithological Observations accepts papers containing faunistic information about birds. This includes descriptions of distribution, behaviour, breeding, foraging, food, movement, measurements, habitat and plumage. It will also consider for publication a variety of other interesting or relevant ornithological material: reports of projects and conferences, annotated checklists for a site or region, specialist bibliographies, and any other interesting or relevant material.

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ESTABLISHMENT OF A RESIDENT NESTING PAIR OF SCALY-FEATHERED FINCH IN THE MAKULEKE CONTRACT PARK, NORTHERN KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

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ESTABLISHMENT OF A RESIDENT NESTING PAIR OF SCALY-FEATHERED FINCH IN THE MAKULEKE CONTRACT PARK, NORTHERN KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

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Over a period of 15 months Scaly-feathered Finch *Sporopipes squamifrons* sightings were recording on a monthly bird monitoring data sheet, based on guide sightings for that month. Nesting and breeding behaviour was documented over this period. It was also recorded in which months observations were made. This is the first documentation of Scaly-feathered Finch breeding and residing in the Makuleke Contract Park, Northern Kruger National Park.

Introduction

Scaly-feathered Finch is a species which prefers the drier *Acacia* woodland areas of the north-western section of South Africa (Herremans, 1997), with limited sightings of them coming as far east as Pafuri, in particular the study area of the Makuleke Contract Park which is their furthest eastern distribution. Scaly-feathered Finch is divided into two different subspecies, *Sporopipes squamifrons* occurring in the more western regions of southern Africa, whilst *S. s. fuligescens* is the subspecies occurring in the central stretches eastwards, and the subspecies that is found in the Pafuri, Makuleke Contract Park region (Dean et al. 2006).

No records of Scaly-feathered Finch nesting or breeding within this region have been recorded. This communication presents data on a resident pair which successfully bred and reared chicks within the Makuleke Contract Park over a study period of 15 months.

Study Area and Methodology

The study area is located within the Makuleke Contract Park in Northern Kruger National Park, between the Limpopo and Luvuvhu Rivers. This region is approximately 24 000 ha and incorporates five main landscapes (Gertenbach, 1983).

Within the study area, all sightings of Scaly-feathered Finch have been seen within the Luvuvhu Floodplain landscape type along the access road and other related road networks of the Pafuri Camp (Wilderness Adventures) (Gertenbach, 1983). The dominant woody species in this region of the Makuleke Contract Park is *Acacia tortilis* which was determined by doing a 100 m transect at various sites, and dominant grass species are *Panicum maximum*, *Digitaria eriantha* and *Urochloa mossambicensis* - also determined with the 100 m transects.

Sightings of Scaly-feathered Finch were recorded by the guides operating for Pafuri Camp and a monthly bird data sheet is filled in with all records of birds seen that month by the guides (there is also a daily sightings journal). These data were captured from the first sighting of Scaly-feathered Finch in the region from January 2010 to March 2011. A Samsung Omnio smart phone with Garmin capabilities was used for the GPS co-ordinates of the locations of the sightings, and photographs were taken of birds on several occasions; with either a Canon 1Ds Mark3 or Canon 50D camera, with either a 400mm fixed or 28 x 300mm telephoto L-range lens to confirm sightings. A pair of Swarovski 10x42 binoculars was used for viewing these birds.

Distribution and Habitat Association

Scaly-feathered Finch are usually associated with dry *Acacia* woodland or Thornveld and also associated with habitat close to rivers (Feather, 1986). They are a near endemic species within the sub region, and are found throughout the arid western section, from Namibia, Botswana, southern and western Zimbabwe, into the western sections of the Limpopo Province and north-western sectors

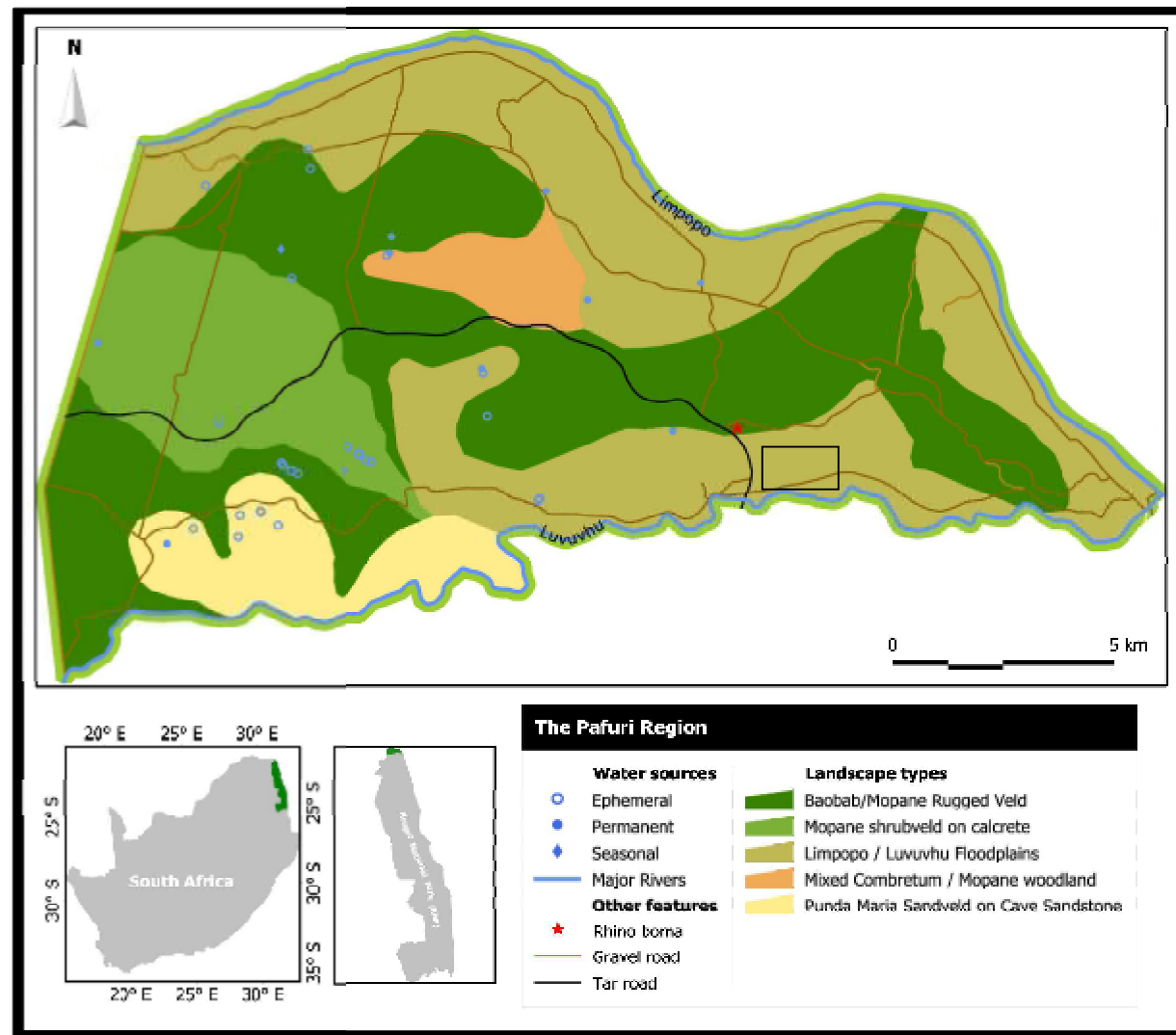


Fig. 1. Vegetation map (after Gertenbach, 1983) of the Makuleke Contract Park; the rectangle represents the study area.



of Mpumalanga province into the north western regions of South Africa (Dean, 2000; Herremans, 1997).

Within their Limpopo Province range, which is associated with our study area, they are predominantly in mixed *Acacia* woodland dominated by *Acacia tortilis*; with the pair occupying a 20 ha area (Tarboton, 1980) within the Luvuvhu Floodplain landscape (Gertenbach, 1983) and avoiding the more broad-leaf associated woodlands.

Breeding Biology

Scaly-feathered Finch often nest in either *Acacia* spp. or in *Ziziphus mucronata*, at a height of approximately 1.7 m above the ground concealed within the protective confines of the thorny branches (Fry & Keith, 2004; Maclean, 1993). They are described as a monogamous, possibly co-operative breeder (Tarboton, 2001; Skead, 1995); in the case of the individuals seen in around Pafuri Camp and the associated road network only a one pair was observed and juveniles were reared.

On the 31 March 2010, the first record of Scaly-feathered Finch was observed feeding a juvenile. Based on this observation I suggest that the pair had laid their clutch of eggs in February; as they have an incubation period of 10 - 12 days and the nestling period of 14 - 18 days (Maclean, 1993).

In accordance to results of laying dates observed within the Limpopo and North Western Provinces, the main laying dates would be from January to June (Tarboton et al; 1987), with 2 - 7 eggs being laid (Maclean, 1993). This coincides with findings within the Makuleke Contract Park within the Limpopo Province of South Africa.

Discussion

Within the 15 month study period, which started with the first confirmed sighting of Scaly-feathered Finch in January 2010, a successful clutch was reared in March and April 2010; although only

one juvenile was observed soliciting food from the parents. The pair had been seen collecting nesting material and creating a nest during December 2010, January and February 2011, using *Acacia tortilis* as the selected nesting tree. This suggests that a breeding pair became resident in and around the Pafuri Camp (Wilderness Adventures) area of the Makuleke Contract Park. This coincides with the territorial and breeding behaviour described by WR Tarboton, 1980, when a pair will occupy a 20 ha territory.

Scaly-feathered finch were seen regularly and consecutively over the 15 month study period (Jan 2010 to Mar 2011), which is conclusive of this species establishing itself within the Makuleke Contract Park and also the first record of successful breeding and nesting within the study area.

Acknowledgements

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