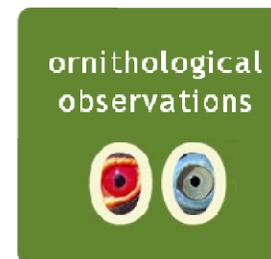
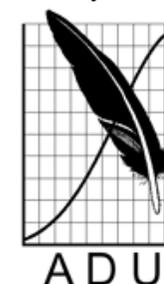


# Ornithological Observations



An electronic journal published by BirdLife South Africa and the Animal Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town



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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## CONFUSION ABOUT THE DISTRIBUTION OF GREY-BACKED AND WAILING CISTICOLAS IN THE SOUTHERN CAPE

**Alan Collett**

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## CONFUSION ABOUT THE DISTRIBUTION OF GREY-BACKED AND WAILING CISTICOLAS IN THE SOUTHERN CAPE

Alan Collet\*

\* Corresponding author: [arcollet@telkomsa.net](mailto:arcollet@telkomsa.net)

Ornithological Observations publishes a broad spectrum of papers on birds, not only the technical scientific ornithology. That suits me because I am writing about bird identification, about making correct and incorrect identifications, IDs for short.

I start by admitting that I have made more wrong IDs in my birding career than I like to talk about. This is especially the case when I have gone on birding trips to places where I did not know the birds that well. But it is also true closer to home where for a long time I recorded Common Tern as non-breeding Whiskered Tern on the Wilderness Lakes. I have embarrassed myself to distraction. But there is one thing I have never done: I have never left an incorrect ID remain once I have discovered the error. Most birders have got IDs wrong – these things happen. What does not need to happen is that an incorrect ID is knowingly left in a database, such as the SABAP2 database, forever causing confusion. It is absolutely incumbent on any serious birder to rectify his or her incorrect IDs.

The first time I heard Wailing Cisticola *Cisticola lais* was on 7 August 2010, I was 20 km west of George, Western Cape. I identified it and submitted it to SABAP2 as a Grey-backed Cisticola *Cisticola subruficapilla*. But something worried me and I went back the next week. Again, I heard the trrrt call diagnostic of Wailing Cisticola. This time I made both a recording and took a photograph and I submitted it as Wailing Cisticola and for an Out-of-Range form. The Regional

Atlas Committee (RAC) deemed the recording and photograph as not solid enough evidence, so I went back and tried to improve on the next visit and then the record was finally confirmed as a Wailing Cisticola, and the SABAP2 database was rectified.

Since then I have recorded Wailing Cisticolas in six more pentads in a study area consisting of the coastal plain bounded by Knysna in the east, Mossel Bay in the west and the Outeniqua Mountains to the north. I have recorded both Wailing and Grey-backed Cisticolas together in only one pentad: 3405\_2200 (this lies north of the N2 and slightly west of Mossel Bay). I have recorded Grey-backed Cisticola in mountain fynbos, but I have not recorded them on the coastal plain within the area I have described. I have atlased all 39 pentads which make up this study area; I have atlased pentads 3355\_2235 and 3355\_2240 a total of 291 times and not once have I recorded Grey-backed Cisticola. West of Mossel Bay near the Gouritz River mouth, and adjacent to Voëlvlei, Grey-backed Cisticolas are common. They have been recorded in 15 of the 39 pentads for SABAP2 – with the highest reporting rate being 20% but mostly less than 5%. North of the Outeniqua Mountains in the Little Karoo they are common, and there they have reporting rates above 80%.

### IDENTIFICATION

It is common cause that Wailing and Grey-backed Cisticolas are difficult to tell apart, but it is not impossible. They are two separate species and when time has been spent with them it is possible to detect the differences. The most obvious difference is that Wailing Cisticola has clearly defined black streaking on its back whereas Grey-backed Cisticola has less well defined marking that makes its back look smudged. Wailing Cisticola has a lighter, more fawn breast, whereas Grey-backed has more of a grey wash.



**Fig 1** – The Grey-backed Cisticola displaying a grey breast.



**Fig 2** – The Wailing Cisticola displaying a fawn breast.

They are comparatively easy to tell apart by their physical appearance. It is when it comes to telling them apart by their calls that it gets more complicated. Both species make short clicking and buzzing sounds that intersperse their other calls. It is virtually impossible to tell them apart by listening to these. Both species have a trilled component to their call and both have a piped component. Grey-backed Cisticola's trill is a lower, slower, bubblier trill than that of the Wailing Cisticola. The trill of the Wailing Cisticola is higher pitched, faster and more staccato than that of Grey-backed. One way of explaining the difference is this. If you make a trilling sound by pressing your tongue against your pallet and forcing air through the

gap you are reproducing Wailing. If you make a trill by letting your lips vibrate as you blow air through them you are reproducing Grey-backed Cisticola. The piped component can be extremely difficult to tell apart because both species utter piping notes that are of equal length and both species make them by combining shorter and longer notes. Grey-backed Cisticola mainly makes about four "peee, peee, peee, peee" sounds in quick succession after the trill but sometimes there is a very short note before the long one and more of a pause when they do that sequence. Wailing Cisticola also goes "peee, peee, peee" and if it were not for the difference in the trilled part it would not be possible to tell them apart. Wailing Cisticola also makes



**Fig 3** – The Grey-backed Cisticola with back-markings more smudged.

a "pe, pe, peee" call which I have not heard Grey-backed Cisticola make. This sounds complicated. But to summarize, listen for the parts that are different – the trills are distinct and only Wailing Cisticola goes "pe, pe, peee" – forget the rest, it will only confuse you. Do not expect a pipe after every trill; both species can trill for extended periods without piping and in general they trill more than they pipe.

The photos of Wailing Cisticola were taken on the farm Uitkyk (3355\_2215) about 20 km west of George. The photos of Grey-backed Cisticola were all taken in the Zebra area 10 km after the turn off to Oudtshoorn along the N12. The sound clips submitted to the RAC were also recorded in these areas.



**Fig 4** – The Wailing Cisticola showing crisper markings on the back

#### HABITAT

One of the factors which determines where species occur is habitat. Grey-backed Cisticolas are generally dry country birds and this is confirmed by the fact that they occur west of Mossel Bay as the rainfall gets less going west and in the Little Karoo. There are a number of other Karoo species that occur west of Mossel Bay and which do not occur in the coastal plain study area; examples are Karoo Scrub Robin, Yellow Canary and Pied Starling. The areas in which Wailing Cisticola occurs are characterised by the presence of *Bobartia*, a tall Restio-like member of the Iris family and they also occur in areas with long grass. I have mentioned that Grey-backed Cisticolas occur in Mountain Fynbos. This does not mean that Wailing Cisticolas do not occur in Fynbos. There is a Fynbos



component to a lot of the vegetation on the coastal plain and the presence of *Bobartia* is an indication of Fynbos. I have recorded Wailing Cisticola in true Restio vegetation in a field adjacent to where *Bobartia* grows but which had not been ploughed.

### CONCLUSION

While these two species are similar they are by no means impossible to tell apart. It is worthwhile getting to know them well enough to make the distinction and thus ensure that they are always reported correctly.

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The calls as discussed above can be accessed via the following links:

**Wailing Cisticola** – piping call:

[http://internal.adu.org.za/upload/uploads/Wailing\\_Cisticola-pipe.mp3](http://internal.adu.org.za/upload/uploads/Wailing_Cisticola-pipe.mp3)

**Wailing Cisticola** – trill:

[http://internal.adu.org.za/upload/uploads/Wailing\\_Cisticola-trill.MP3](http://internal.adu.org.za/upload/uploads/Wailing_Cisticola-trill.MP3)

Grey-backed Cisticola:

[http://internal.adu.org.za/upload/uploads/Grey-backed\\_Cisticola\\_Zebra.MP3](http://internal.adu.org.za/upload/uploads/Grey-backed_Cisticola_Zebra.MP3)