AFRICAN FINFOOT | *Podica senegalensis*

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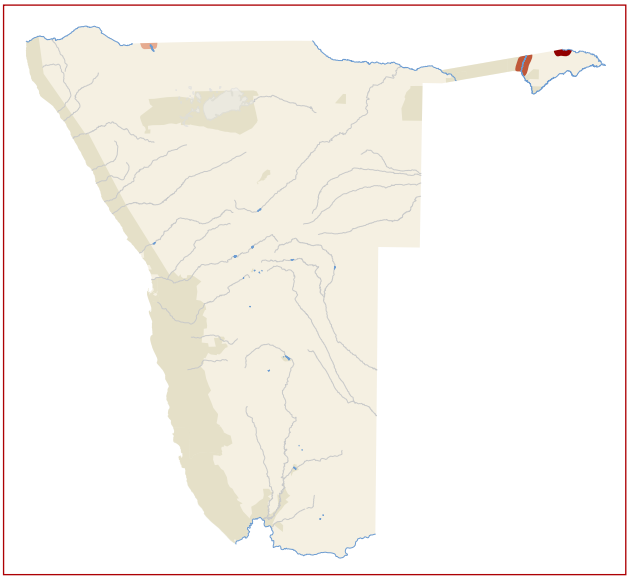
Conservation Status:	Endangered
Southern African Range:	Northern Namibia, northern Botswana, northern and south-east South Africa, Zimbabwe
Area of Occupancy:	2,300 km^2
Population Estimate:	Fewer than 100 birds
Population Trend:	Slow decline
Habitat:	Slow-moving rivers, backwaters with overhanging trees
Threats:	Wetland degradation through wood and reed cutting, fires, disturbance

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

This secretive and retiring wetland bird is widespread, occurring throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa, except the more arid regions of north-eastern and south-western Africa (Urban *et al.* 1986). In southern Africa, it has a patchy distribution in northern South Africa, and throughout Zimbabwe. It occurs infrequently in the Zambezi region, particularly along the Zambezi and Chobe rivers (Allan 1997k) and along the Etaka Canal in the Omusati region. Curiously, it is not present in the Okavango Delta (Penry 1994). It occupies an area of 2,300 km^2 and was recorded only nine times in the Namibian atlas period at a reporting rate of 5% (Jarvis *et al.* 2001). Given densities of one pair per 1.5 to 2.2 kms of river (Irwin 1981, Urban *et al.* 1986) and its presence along a maximum of about 54 km (two quarter-degree squares) of the Zambezi River, the total number of birds in Namibia is likely to be less than 100. It has also been recorded from one quarter-degree square



along the central Kwando River, at a reporting rate of 3%, and may be overlooked in the many oxbows there (Allan 1997k). It was not, however, recorded in an 81 km survey of the Kwando River in August 2004 (CJ Brown unpubl. data), but is known to occur rarely in the Linyanti River (M Herremans pers. obs.).

ECOLOGY

The African Finfoot is an easily overlooked species, occurring along slower-moving tropical rivers and streams with reeds and overhanging trees and shrubs (Maclean 1993). It is not found in stagnant river margins, or fast flowing waters, presumably because its main food comprises aquatic invertebrates such as dragonflies and spiders, as well as frogs, fish and occasionally snakes (Chittenden 2005). Foraging occurs both in and out of the water, with birds patrolling the river banks, turning over stones and leaf-litter in search of invertebrates (Loon & Dennis 2001). It is not limited to tropical waterways, however, since it also occurs in temperate waterways on South Africa's southern coast. It occurs mainly in monogamous pairs that nest and roost in overhanging tree branches above water. Nests are well concealed in the branches or in reeds, and breeding birds are active mainly between September and March (Chittenden 2005). A clutch commonly consists of two eggs, as did the only record for Namibia, which was laid in October (Brown *et al*. 2015). Birds may be nomadic, as suitable pools form in times of flood and subsequently dry up, forcing birds to move to more permanent habitats (Loon & Dennis 2001).

THREATS

The pressures of fishing, hunting, wood-cutting and burning by local people along Namibia's northern rivers suggest that the specialised habitat requirements of this species are rarely met by present-day conditions. This is evidenced by the large gap in distribution that occurs between the healthy Zimbabwe population east of Kasane and the known Namibian population centred on Katima Mulilo. While the best 'Maningimanzi' riverine woodlands in Namibia coincide with the African Finfoot's core range in Namibia (Allan 1997k, Jarvis *et al.* 2001), east of Katima Mulilo the Okavango woodlands and grasslands are dominated by cattle at densities as high as 40 to 60 head per km^2 (Mendelsohn & Roberts 1997). Deliberate burning of grasslands in north-eastern Namibia is also at epic proportions, affecting 60% of the area in 1996. This, as well as the cutting of wood for building homes and cooking, and cutting reeds and grasses for thatching, puts great pressure on the eastern floodplain and particularly its river bank resources (Mendelsohn & Roberts 1997). Despite remnants of suitable woodland habitat, there are no records of this species in this somewhat denuded area.

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CONSERVATION STATUS

Although the species is currently not considered globally threatened (IUCN 2012a), it is ranked as *Endangered* in Namibia because its range encompasses less than 5,000 km^2 and it has an inferred population decline through degradation in the area of its preferred habitat (IUCN criterion B1(iii)). It also meets the criteria of less than 2,500 mature individuals and no subpopulation estimated at more than 250 mature individuals (IUCN criterion C2a(i)). Its population in Namibia also does not exceed 250 mature individuals (IUCN criterion D). It is considered *Vulnerable* in South African assessments (Taylor *et al*. in press). It occurs inside the Bwabwata National Park and is part of the East Zambezi (previously the East Caprivi) Important Bird Area (Simmons *et al.* 2001b). In addition, future Namibian Parks and Wildlife legislation should give it *Specially Protected* status.

ACTIONS

This wetland species appears to be in long-term decline due to the heavy human pressure on the riverine woodlands along the Zambezi and Kwando rivers. While the Kwando and the Okavango rivers have sections that are protected (including in Nkasa Rupara (Mamili) National Park and the Mahango area of the Bwabwata National Park) the Zambezi River has no protection. The Chobe River is partially protected by conservancies such as Kasika, Kabulabula, Nakabolelwa and Salambala and by virtue of the Chobe National Park on its southern bank, but the best-known site for the species on the Chobe River, the Kasane rapids, is outside any protected area. There is urgent need, therefore, to designate appropriate sections of all these rivers, particularly the Zambezi River, as national parks, with strict rules governing the off-take of fish and riverine woodland resources (Mendelsohn & Roberts 1997).