ANGOLA CAVE-CHAT | *Xenocopsychus ansorgei*

W Swanepoel | *Reviewed by: CJ Brown; RE Simmons*

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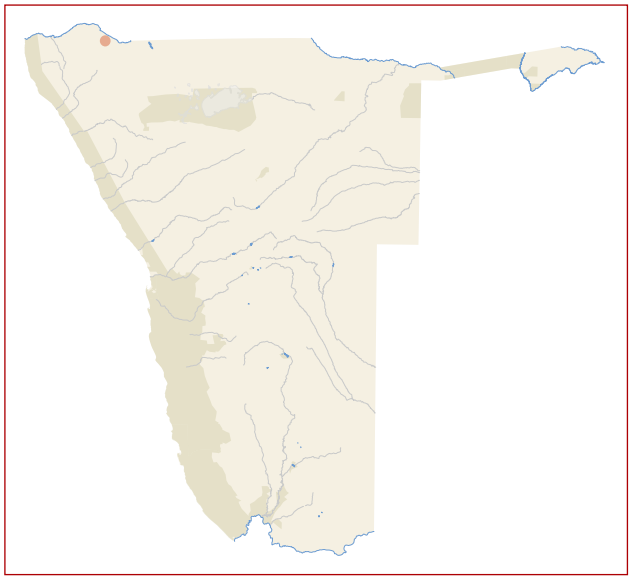
Conservation Status:	Near Threatened
Southern African Range:	Northern Namibia
Area of Occupancy:	220 km²
Population Estimate:	405 pairs
Population Trend:	Unknown
Habitat:	South-facing scree slopes of the Zebra Mountains
Threats:	Small population

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

This rare species is endemic to Angola and Namibia. Until May 2012, it was not known to occur in Namibia and was recorded only in Angola. There, it is localised in four isolated areas on the Angolan escarpment, occupies an area of 37,500 km² and is considered common (Dean 2000, BirdLife International 2012). In Namibia, it is also extremely localised, occurring only in the Zebra Mountains, where it is uncommon (Swanepoel 2012). To date, it has been recorded only in one quarter-degree square (1713 Bc), approximately 240 km to the south of its nearest known population in Angola, near Lubango. Despite extensive searches since 2004 in suitable habitat in the other major mountain ranges south of the Kunene River, including the Otjihipa, Okakora, Baynes, Omavanda and Ehomba mountains, no other Angola Cave-Chats were found (W Swanepoel pers. obs.). However, none of these mountains contain the extensive areas of mountain scree that is typical of the Zebra Mountains.

Three pairs were seen in the Zebra Mountains during a 12-hour survey on foot over 10 km in May 2012. The survey covered three south-facing mountain slopes separated by plains. No Angola Cave-Chats were seen during another 12-hour survey of flat areas and north-facing slopes in the Zebra Mountains over a distance of nine kilometres. Considering just the mountain slopes, this species occurs at a density of one pair per km of transect in suitable habitat (W Swanepoel



pers. obs.). It is likely that it is found in suitable habitat throughout the Zebra Mountains, amounting to a probable area of occupancy of approximately 220 km^2. A preliminary population estimate of about 405 pairs is based on survey width and suitable habitat (W Swanepoel, unpubl. data).

Although the Angola Cave-Chat and the Mountain Wheatear *Oenanthe monticola* share similarities in plumage colouration and habitat preference, it is unlikely that there has been confusion in Namibia, given the Angola Cave-Chat's localised distribution and apparent absence from adjacent mountain ranges. During the above-mentioned surveys in the Zebra Mountains, Mountain Wheatears were not recorded, although they are common in the mountain ranges where the Angola Cave-Chat is absent.

ECOLOGY

In Angola, it prefers habitats that consist of cliffs, rocky hills and gorges, especially where there are jumbles of weathered sandstone boulders with adjacent forest patches (Oatley *et al*. 1992, Dean 2000). In Namibia's Zebra Mountains, it is found on south-facing scree slopes, at altitudes from 1,000 m to 1,600 m. These slopes consist of thick layers of bare rocks and boulders of igneous origin (anorthosite and troctolite) of different sizes, with alternating vegetated areas between the scree areas. Vegetation of these areas can be described as dry woodland with thick undergrowth and consists of tall *Euphorbia eduardoi*, *E. guerichiana* and *Steganotaenia araliacea* trees and lower-growing *Terminalia prunioides* and species of *Grewia* and *Searsia*. Fruit-bearing trees such as *Ficus bubu*, *F. glumosa* and *Pappea capensis* are thinly distributed. In the undergrowth, *Sanseviera pearsonii* and a shrubby species of *Blepharis* are dominant. Vegetation of the flat mountain plains, from which the Angolan Cave-Chat is absent, consists of *Colophospermum mopane* and *Acacia kirkii* woodland with annual grass species on sand or clay

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substrate. Apart from the wooded areas that support higher biodiversity than the bare areas, the Zebra Mountains are hot and arid, with maximum temperatures reaching 34°C to 36°C. Annual rainfall of 200 mm to 250 mm (Mendelsohn *et al*. 2002) is much lower than on the Angolan escarpment, and probably the reason for the Angola Cave-Chat's preference for generally moister and cooler south-facing slopes in Namibia. No open water was found during the survey in the area where the Angola Cave-Chat was recorded (W Swanepoel unpubl. data).

The Angola Cave-Chat is resident and probably territorial (Oatley *et al.* 1992). In Namibia, it is fairly inquisitive and investigates the presence of humans by flying past at close range, after which it perches briefly on nearby boulders. It uses the lower part of vegetated areas through which it moves with great agility.

THREATS

Apart from a small population size, no immediate threats are known, given that it occurs in a remote mountain range that is unused by people. However, since it is suspected to be territorial, the use of playback recordings of its song may have negative effects on breeding and sustainability of the population, if birders flood the area. Currently, however, the Zebra Mountains are not a bird-watching destination.

CONSERVATION STATUS

This species is classified as *Near Threatened* in Namibia because of its range-restricted single small population occupying an area of less than 500 km^2 (IUCN Red List criterion B2a) and should be given *Specially Protected* status under any revised or future Namibian Parks and Wildlife legislation. It is not considered globally threatened (IUCN 2014).

ACTIONS

Further studies to determine whether it also frequents north-facing slopes and adjacent mountain ranges are required. This would enable more accurate information on its range and population size.