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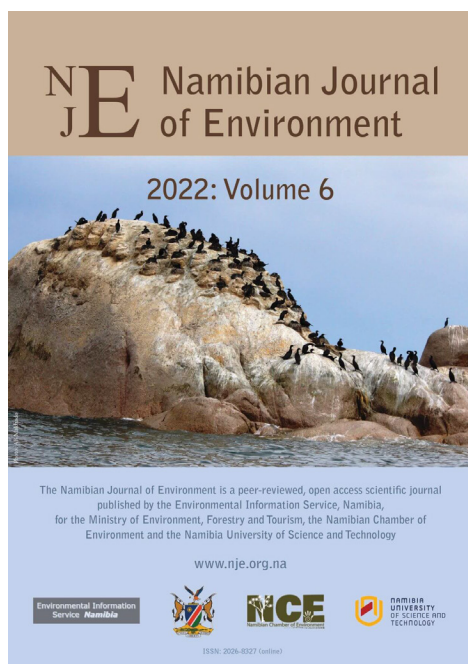
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First records for Namibia of Lesser Masked Weaver *Ploceus intermedius* subsp. *beattyi*

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Abstract

The presence in Namibia along the Kunene River and border of Angola of the *beattyi* subspecies of *Ploceus intermedius* (Lesser Masked Weaver) is reported for the first time. Observations suggested that *beattyi* probably grades into birds of the *cabanisii* subspecies from Epupa Falls and further upstream along the Kunene River, while typical *cabanisii* occurs south of the Kunene River.

Keywords: Lesser Masked Weaver, Namibia, *Ploceus intermedius* subsp. *beattyi*, range extension

In January 2020, the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) arranged a biodiversity survey of the Namibian side of the Kunene River mouth and upstream to about 15 km inland. The riverine vegetation upstream from the mouth consists of *Phragmites* reeds with woody shrubs, trees and climbers, and annual herbs as undergrowth. The river valley is rocky and narrow with the steep slopes mostly covered with sand from the adjacent sand sea located to the south.

A significant result of the avifauna survey was the first record for Namibia of the *beattyi* subspecies of Lesser Masked Weaver *Ploceus intermedius*. This species occurs from eastern Africa south to northern South Africa and west to Botswana, Namibia and western Angola. In Namibia, it occurs locally from central to northern Namibia, including the Zambezi Region. In north-western Namibia, the weavers inhabit riverine vegetation along the major ephemeral rivers and the perennial Kunene River. Since the first Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP₁; Harrison *et al.* 1997) the species has expanded its range to reach the coast where the birds have been recorded in Swakopmund and Henties Bay (SABAP₂ data & W. Swanepoel [pers. obs.])

Three subspecies are currently recognised (Oschadleus 2004, 2005):

- ***Ploceus intermedius intermedius*** from Ethiopia and Somalia to central Tanzania. Breeding males have the black forehead and forecrown merging with the dark brown hind crown; nape and sides of neck are golden yellow tinged brown; lower breast, belly and flanks bright yellow, upper breast washed brown.
- ***P. i. cabanisii*** from coastal Tanzania southwards to southern Africa, including Namibia and the interior of southern Angola. Breeding males differ from nominate *intermedius* in having the hind crown and breast brighter yellow, less washed with saffron.
- ***P. i. beattyi*** from western Angola, north of Benguela. Breeding males differ from nominate *intermedius* in that the chestnut wash on the hind crown is darker, extending over the hind neck; the chestnut wash on the breast is also darker, extending over the flanks. The chestnut wash around the mask is conspicuous (Oschadleus pers. com.).

On 29 January 2020 two male Lesser Masked Weavers were seen and photographed some 11 km upstream of the Kunene River's mouth. Their foreheads and forecrowns were black, the bills black, the eyes bluish white, and the bellies yellow – all features of the Lesser Masked Weaver. However, these birds differed from Lesser Masked Weavers normally seen in Namibia which belong to subsp. *cabanisii* (Figure 1) in that the Kunene birds had a chestnut wash around the black mask, the hind crown was chestnut, extending over the hindneck, and the breast had a chestnut wash which extended over the flanks – perfectly matching the description of *beattyi* from coastal Angola. Images of the birds (Figure 2) were sent to Dieter Oschadleus from SAFRING in South Africa, who confirmed the identity of the birds as indeed being *Ploceus intermedius beattyi* (Oschadleus pers. com.).

The finding of *Ploceus intermedius beattyi* prompted us to have a careful look at other Lesser Masked Weavers along the Kunene River and north-western Namibia. Breeding colonies were subsequently found further inland along the Kunene River at Otjinhungwa (September 2020 and April 2021) (Figure 3) and at Epupa Falls (September 2020) (Figure 4), indicating that the subspecies probably occurs all along the Kunene River, possibly as far as Ruacana (Figure 5). Breeding males from Otjinhungwa had the same features as the birds from the Kunene River mouth area although with less

pronounced chestnut colouration. Birds from Epupa lacked the chestnut wash over the flanks although some individuals still had the chestnut wash around the mask as in *beattyi*. Unlike the breeding males from these colonies, breeding males (March 2020) from the Galton Gate at Otjovasando in the Etosha National Park (200 km to the south of the Kunene River) (Figure 1b), had little if any chestnut wash on the hind crown or chest. This indicates that the birds at Otjovasando belong to *cabanisii* and might mix with birds from Epupa (and probably further upstream).



Figure 1: *Ploceus intermedius cabanisii*. Note pure yellow underparts and lack of chestnut wash around mask. **a)** Henties Bay, January 2018. **b)** Otjovasando (Galton Gate), Etosha National Park, March 2020. Photographs: W. Swanepoel.



Figure 2: *Ploceus intermedius beattyi*. **a)** Note chestnut wash over breast, extending to flanks. **b)** Note chestnut wash on the hind crown, extending over hind neck. Kunene River Mouth, January 2020. Photographs: W. Swanepoel.



Figure 3: *Ploceus intermedius beattyi*. Variation in extent of chestnut on crown, nape and flanks. **a)** Bird well-washed with chestnut (early morning light caused the effect of an orange filter). **b)** Bird with less pronounced chestnut wash. Otjinhungwa, Kunene River, September 2020. Photographs: W. Swanepoel.



Figure 4: *Ploceus intermedius intermediate* between *beattyi* and *cabanisii*. **a)** Bird nearer to subsp. *cabanisii*; note the narrow chestnut wash around the mask **b)** Bird nearer to subsp. *beattyi*; note the faint chestnut wash around mask and over breast; chestnut over flanks is lacking. Epupa Falls, September 2020. Photographs: W. Swanepoel.

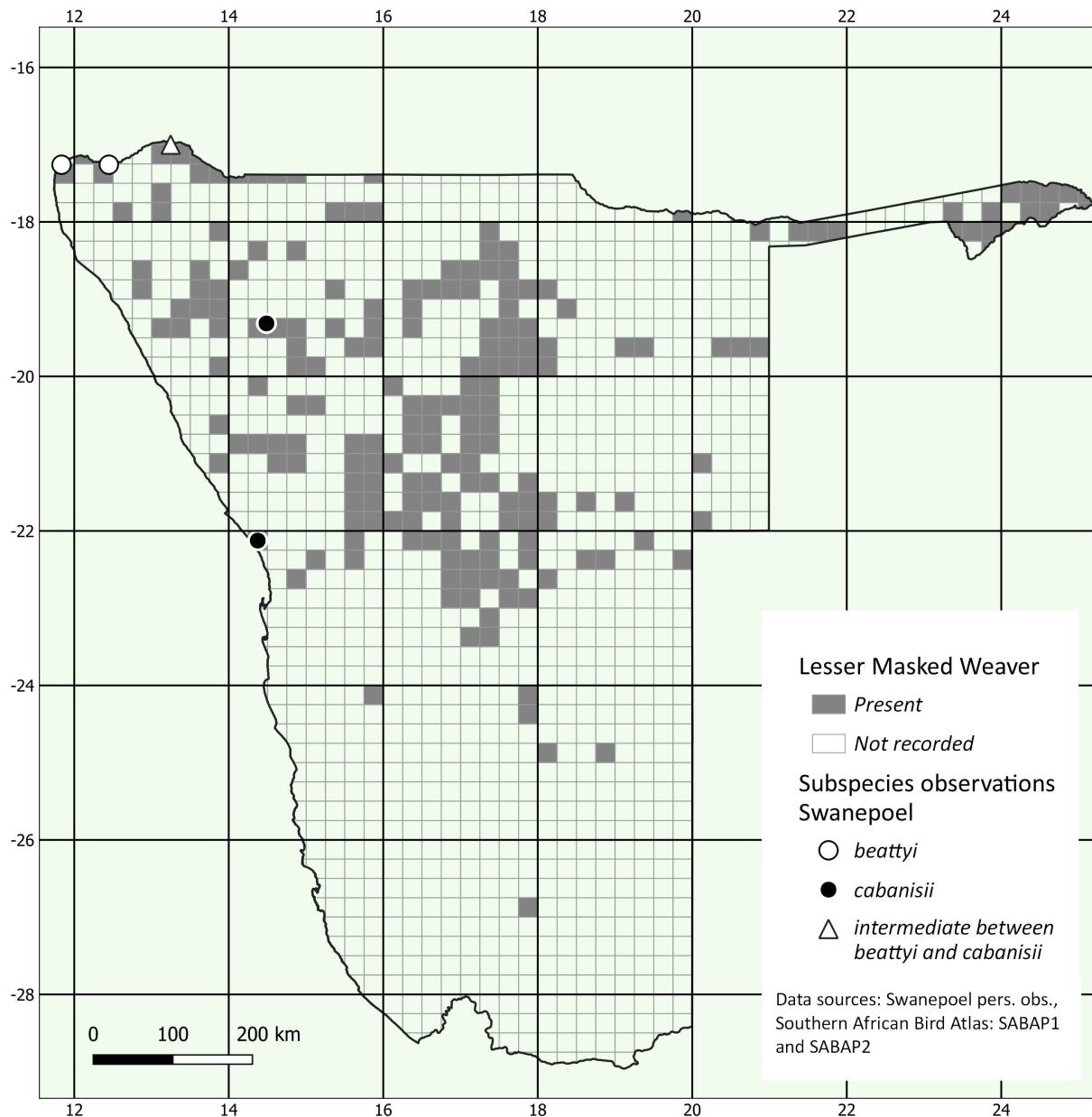


Figure 5: The distribution of Lesser Masked Weaver in Namibia and the location of records of subspecies described here.

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