

## New records for Orange-winged Pytilia *Pytilia afra* in Central Kenya

The Orange-winged Pytilia *Pytilia afra* (a.k.a. Golden-backed Pytilia) is a colourful estrildid finch with a widespread occurrence in Africa, where it is found in the northeast (Sudan, Ethiopia), east (Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda), southeast (Mozambique, Malawi), south (Botswana, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe) and central regions (Angola, Congo, The Democratic Republic of the Congo). Within its 2.3 million km<sup>2</sup> range it is often listed as uncommon (BirdLife International 2008). Though its global population has not been quantified, there is evidence of a likely population decline (Fry *et al.* 2004). Nevertheless, the species is not believed to approach the thresholds for the population decline criterion of the IUCN Red List (i.e., declining more than 30% in ten years or three generations), and it is therefore listed as 'Least Concern' (BirdLife International 2008).

In Kenya, Orange-winged Pytilia was formerly listed as an uncommon and local Kenyan resident, but is now regarded as 'rare, perhaps largely extirpated by habitat change' (Zimmerman *et al.* 2005). Stevenson & Fanshawe (2002) describe the species as 'local and generally uncommon in much of its East African range'. Kenyan specimens are known from the coastal region (Lamu, Arabuko-Sokoke Forest and Mombasa), and inland near Voi, Kikuyu, Murang'a, Ngong Escarpment and Mt. Kenya. According to Zimmerman *et al.* (2005), the species has not been recorded in Central Kenya for the past 50-75 years, although there have been four post-1960 records from Kilifi (1968), Shimba Hills (1990), Kongelai Escarpment (1989) and northeast Mt. Elgon (1994).

Orange-winged Pytilia are described as residents of forest edge, miombo woodland and moist wooded grasslands from sea-level to 1800 m, avoiding dry areas (Stevenson & Fanshawe 2002). The species reportedly feeds on the ground in pairs or small groups, mostly on small seeds (Zimmerman *et al.* 2005), or on grass seeds and insects (FOM 1998). Although the species is rare and has largely disappeared in Kenya, two new records confirm that Orange-

winged *Pytilia* has not been extirpated in its Central Kenyan range.

The first of these was by the first author at the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy (LWC) in Central Kenya, who had an excellent sighting of a pair of Orange-winged *Pytilia* on the late morning of 9 August 2006. The birds were observed feeding on the ground and were not shy, and the author was able to observe them from a distance of 8-12 m for at least five minutes and take digital photographs. The site was located on the northeastern boundary of LWC (0°15'20"N, 37°30'56"E), and consisted of a dry river bed lined with mixed acacia species (*Acacia tortilis*, *A. drepanolobium*, *A. mellifera*), *Commiphora* and *Grewia*, at an altitude of 1445 m. A perennial freshwater stream was located nearby at about 150-200 m, as were agricultural fields with beans and maize (> 200 m distance).

The second observation was by the second author at the 18 km<sup>2</sup> Ol Donyo Sabuk National Park, managed by Kenya Wildlife Service. The park is located 25 km east of Thika and primarily consists of the Ol Doinyo Sabuk Mountain, which is an isolated mountain that rises to 2146 m a.s.l. Forest on the eastern slopes is dominated by *Albizia*, *Podocarpus*, *Ficus*, *Olea* spp. and *Acacia abyssinica*, along with *Tabernaemontana stapfiana*, *Croton macrostachyus*, *Rhus natalensis* and *Rubus* spp. in patches of secondary shrubland in disturbed patches and along the roads. Open patches of bush, scrub and grassland clearings on the western slopes are dominated by *Acacia drepanolobium*, *Lantana camara* and *Carissa edulis*.

The birds were seen on 14 January 2007 while the author was going up the track leading to the mountains' summit. Half way up a finch-like bird was noticed feeding along the road. At first, a female was observed, which could have been the more common Green-winged *Pytilia*, but the habitat was wrong and the bird appeared too dark grey. Luckily, the male soon joined the female, and identification was unmistakable, because it had red on the whole face and not extending halfway down the neck. The author was able to observe both birds for about 20 minutes and take photographs.

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**Wim Giesen**

*Mezenpad 164, 7071 JT Ulft, The Netherlands; E-mail: wim.giesen@mottmac.nl*

**Chege wa Kariuki**

*Ornithology Section, Department of Zoology, National Museums of Kenya, P.O. Box 40658 00100, Nairobi; E-mail: chege@birdwatchingeastafrica.com*

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