

The Southern Black Tit *Melaniparus niger* in Tanzania with comments on the Northern Black Tit *M. leucomelas*, White-shouldered Black Tit *M. guineensis* and the White-bellied Tit *M. albiventris*

We follow Johansson *et al.* (2013) in using *Melaniparus* rather than *Parus* for the genus.

Britton (1980) did not admit the Southern Black Tit to the Tanzania avifauna, commenting only that Hall & Moreau (1970) had extended the range of *Parus niger* north to southeast Tanzania based on the type of *P. fuelleborni* from Songea District which Sclater (1930) had earlier considered to be a young bird.

Parus fuelleborni (Reichenow 1900, *Ornithologische Monatsberichte* 8: 5) was collected by Friedrich Fülleborn at Undis south of Tunduru near the Tanzania – Mozambique border (11°17'S, 37°20'E) in 1898, but was not referred to by either Mackworth-Præd & Grant (1955), White (1963), Peters (1967) nor by most subsequent authors. Meanwhile, Hall & Moreau (1970) mapped a specimen from southern Tanzania but the locality shown was 230 km west of Tunduru.

During visits to southeast Tanzania in February 1996, July 2005, November 2014 and August 2016, birds were seen that were suspected to be this species, but it was not until a visit in September 2016 that photographs were obtained that conclusively



Figure 1. Southern Black Tit *Melaniparus niger* a female from the smoky grey lower belly and pale tips to the under-tail coverts, southeast Tanzania, 3 September 2016.

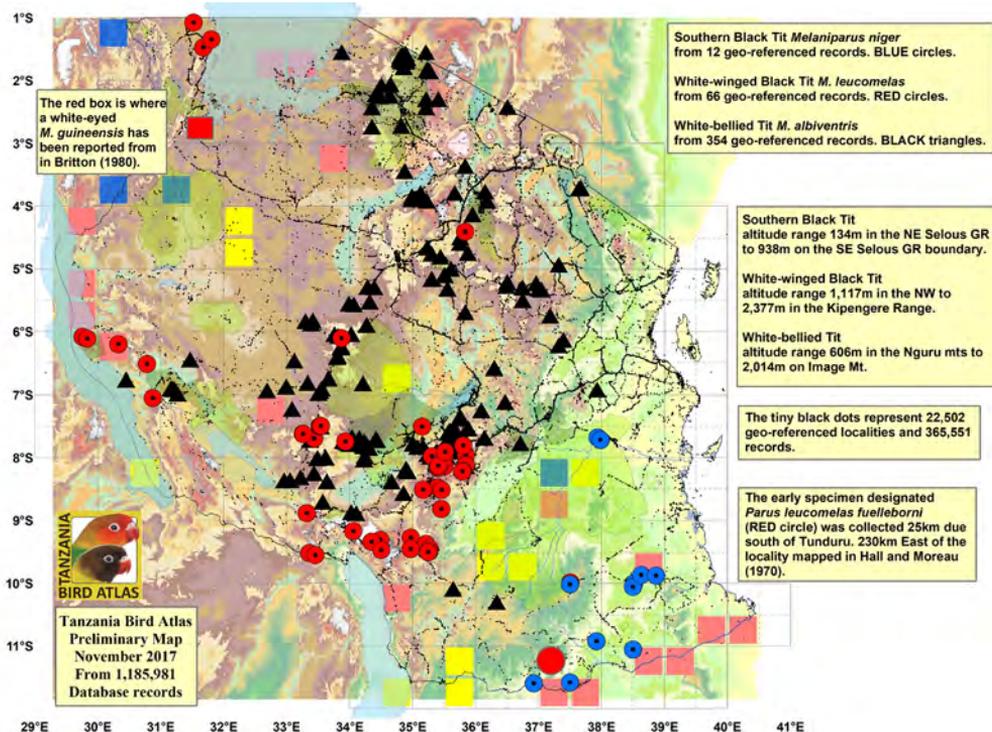


Figure 2. Southern Black Tit *Melaniparus niger* a second view of the diagnostic wing pattern.

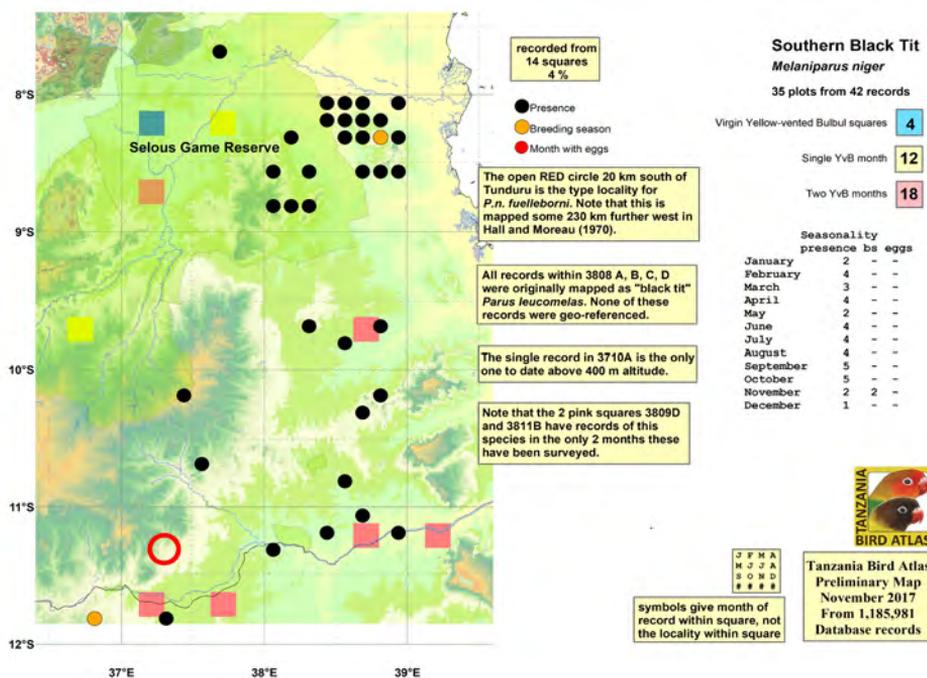
show that these birds are indeed *M. niger* (Figs. 1 & 2). The black wing coverts with bold white edges are diagnostic of *M. niger* while the pale grey belly and pale-tipped under-tail coverts of the female are also clearly seen. Having established that *M. niger* was perhaps widespread in southeastern Tanzania we

checked all records in the Tanzania Atlas database. We are now of the opinion that the following records all relate to *M. niger* and these are included as such in the species maps (Maps 1 & 2).

- Masasi; September 1939 C.J.P. Ionides (might a specimen exist?)
- Nachingwea; October 1966 (R.J. Stjernstedt)
- Chitowe; February 1996 (pers. obs.)
- Ndechela Forest Reserve; September 2000 (M. Baker)
- 70 km southeast of Liwale 4 July 2005; (pers. obs.)
- Tunduru-Masasi road; May 2009 (D. Peterson)
- Mwambesi Game Control Area; 22 November 2014 (pers. obs.)
- Ruvuma River 77 km southwest of Tuduru 27 November 2014; (pers. obs.)
- Selous Game Reserve southeast boundary; 28 August 2016 L. Mlawila
- Selous Game Reserve southeast boundary; 31 August 2016 (pers. obs.)
- Mirui to Ruangwa; 3 September 2016 (pers. obs.)
- 12km north of Ruangwa; 7 September 2016 (pers. obs.)



Map 1. The distribution in Tanzania of *M. niger*, *M. leucomelas* and *M. albiventris* from the geo-referenced records in the Atlas database.



Map 2. The distribution of Southern Black Tit *M. niger* suggested in this account.

Further to these 12 records there are 27 observations by Neil Stronach from February 1991 to April 1993 from the Selous Game Reserve. Localities named are Kingupira West, Utungu, Ngarambe, Tundu Hill, Kingupira southwest and Kandwale. These were all originally submitted as *M. leucomelas* because *M. niger* was not known from Tanzania and was not included in any reference books or field guides. None of these records are geo-referenced, simply recorded to Atlas square, roughly a 50 km x 50 km grid (a quarter of a degree square). All are shown on the standard Atlas map (Map 2). All of the 39 records mentioned above are from south of the Rufiji River, a known barrier to bird populations. There are also three observations from just north of the Rufiji River within the Selous Game Reserve. One of these by Neil Stronach from Kimeru / Nbassa in October 1991. The other two by Walter Jubber from the vicinity of Beho Beho Lodge in June 2011. A South African birder, Mr Jubber originally identified these birds as *M. niger* but included them as *M. leucomelas* after reading that the former did not occur in Tanzania.

Of the 11 records admitted here that are geo-referenced, the highest altitude is at 988 m along the southwestern boundary trace of the Selous Game Reserve at 10°01'S, 37°30'E in mature Miombo woodland dominated by *Brachystegia* spp. All other records to date are below 400 m the lowest altitude is at 211 m north of Ruangwa in dry broad-leafed woodland at 9°52'S, 38°52'E. There is one further geo-referenced record from Miombo woodland at 9°52'S, 38°38'E. From what is known to date this bird prefers the dryer woodland rather than the richer Miombo and this would restrict its distribution in south-eastern Tanzania. The breeding season of this population is not known so we cannot state that any birds are resident within the Miombo belt rather than seasonal visitors from adjacent woodlands.

The Atlas database includes six further records from eastern Tanzania that have been assigned to *M. leucomelas* (Map 3). These records from north of Bagamoyo to Pembe-Abwe south of Pangani include a specimen from November 1929 (Bangs & Loveridge 1933). This specimen needs to be re-examined to confirm its identity. If it is indeed *M. leucomelas insignis* as reported then it and the few other extralimital records can be considered as wanderers from the core range.

The Atlas database holds 262 records that we now assign to *M. leucomelas*. These are shown on standard Atlas maps (Map 3). The 65 geo-referenced records are shown on Map 1. Ignoring potential wanderers to north-eastern coastal areas the altitude range of these geo-referenced records is from 1117 m to 2377 m near Mangangarawa at 9°20'S, 34°20'E.

There is a clear ecological and altitude gap between known populations of *M. leucomelas* and *M. niger*. The closest known localities are 252 km (straight line) apart with an altitude difference of 570 m.

M. leucomelas is nowhere common but there are now 24 records north of 3°S in northwestern Tanzania (*cf.* Britton 1980), but rarely has eye colour been described. Britton (1980) allows a specimen of the race *M. l. guineensis* from Nyarumbugu given as 2°46'S, 31°20'E in the gazetteer. The most recent record from Minziro Forest Reserve in July 2016 (*pers. obs.*) was clearly a dark-eyed *leucomelas* rather than a pale-eyed *guineensis*. It has been established in south-western Uganda that pale-eyed and dark-eyed birds overlap in range (Turner & Pearson 2015). This overlap would appear to extend well into north-western Tanzania, but more careful observations are required to confirm the limits of both taxa. Nyarumbugu is shown by a red square on Map 3.

The fourth species of black and white tits in Tanzania is the White-bellied Tit *M. albiventris*. The 340 geo-referenced records for this widespread species are shown as black triangles on Map 1. Note this is the most widespread of the four species with minimum overlap in range with *M. leucomelas* and no overlap with *M. guineensis* or with *M. niger*.

