

new endemic

Red-winged Francolin

It is always exciting to know which birds are endemic to an area. Endemism is where a species' range is localised to a defined geographic location, such as an island, country or other specific zone, and the species is found nowhere else on earth. The status of being endemic carries various connotations, from being the only place where one can see that species in the wild to carrying special responsibility for the conservation of sustainable populations of that species. Fundamental to the conservation of biodiversity is to understand the currency of conservation (which in essence are the species) and to recognise which species can act as flagships for their preferred habitats and thus play a role as umbrella species to help secure the viability of other species against human-induced threats in the landscape.

Recent research into the classification of spurfowls and francolins based on morpho-behavioural and genetic evidence has suggested a variety of changes to their taxonomy that are important for their conservation. One of these taxonomic changes is the elevation of the subspecies of the Red-winged Francolin *Scleroptila levaillantii crawshayi* to full species, Crawshay's Francolin *S. crawshayi*. Crawshay's Francolins are found north of the Zambezi River, occurring in Angola, Zambia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda.

Comparing the appearance of the two species in the accompanying photographs you can see that the Red-winged Francolin lacks Crawshay's Francolin's prominent white collar that extends from the base of the bill down



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the sides of the neck and meets below the white and orange throat patch. The black-and-white collar of the Red-winged Francolin is also more extensive on the lower neck and upper breast than that in Crawshay's Francolin.

The good news emanating from that research is that the Red-winged Francolin now enjoys the status of being endemic to South Africa and Eswatini. It is found in the eastern parts of South Africa and western Eswatini, where it thrives in rank, vigorous highveld grasslands, usually over deep soils. It is more sensitive to the burning or grazing of grasslands than other members of the red-winged group of francolins. In heavily grazed and frequently burnt grasslands, it can be restricted to wetland fringes and rocky outcrops.

There are numerous examples of local declines in its numbers and confirmed absence in areas of apparently suitable habitat where annual burning and overgrazing occur, as well as in unburnt moribund grasslands. However, grassland management that includes biennial burning and light grazing, particularly by wild herbivores, provides sanctuaries for this species. Other major threats are expanding commercial forestry and the damming or draining of wetlands.

Fortunately, there are secure habitats in various formally protected areas, including the Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Park, a World Heritage

above *Red-winged Francolin* in the Rietvlei Nature Reserve, Gauteng, South Africa.

above, left *Crawshay's Francolin* on the plateau in the Nyika National Park, northern Malawi.

Site in KwaZulu-Natal; the Mkambati Nature Reserve, which is almost at sea level on the Pondoland coast in the north-eastern Eastern Cape; the Verloren Vallei Nature Reserve near Dullstroom in Mpumalanga; and other reserves across to the Rietvlei Nature Reserve in Gauteng. This protection bodes well for maintaining viable populations of Red-winged Francolins and is important because the francolins act as a flagship species for these sensitive grasslands and play a role as an umbrella species for other grassland birds in these areas.

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References

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