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Burchell's Courser

Burchell's Courser *Cursorius rufus* is largely confined to southern Africa, with its range extending marginally into south-western Angola. It occurs in a diversity of open habitats from the sparsely vegetated Namib Desert eastward to the heavily grazed grasslands of eastern South Africa, feeding primarily on insects. It undergoes complex and poorly understood movements, with influxes in summer into Botswana and in winter into the south-west of its range. These movements render it almost impossible to estimate the global population size, but it is unlikely to exceed tens of thousands of individuals.

Although the species does not occupy what would be classified as threatened habitats, both its numbers and its range have been decreasing for the past 150 years, most noticeably in the east of South Africa. It has become extinct as a breeding species in KwaZulu-Natal. In the late 1800s it was described as abundant on South Africa's Highveld and it was still common in the vicinity of Kroonstad until the early 1900s and around Potchefstroom until at least the 1930s, but there have been no breeding records from those areas since then. It now occurs only as an irregular visitor in the eastern Free State and North West Province. As recently as the 1940s it was locally common and breeding in the Eastern Cape, but recent records from there are few and far between. Since the 1950s, there has been a decrease in Burchell's Courser numbers in the central and south-western Kalahari.

Both the timing and extent of the decreases in the eastern parts of the species' range closely mirror a drop in the numbers and range of another open-country insectivore, the migratory Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni*. In the mid-1800s, flocks of Black-winged Pratincoles, described as being 'in their millions', were documented in the Eastern Cape, an area where the species is now effectively extinct. By the 1950s, a flock of a few hundred Black-winged Pratincoles anywhere in South Africa was deemed noteworthy. A significant contributor to the pratincole's demise was almost certainly locust control, including the use of organic chemicals such as BHC (benzene hexachloride). As early as 1909, the Committee of Control of the South African Central Locust Bureau made comment that '[these] birds seem by far the most important of the checks on the South African migratory locusts'. The same report dismissed poisoning of locusts as a threat to the birds. In 1986, a major spraying programme against locusts was undertaken (using BHC, which had been banned some years previously). Bird mortalities were reported and an extensive survey in the Karoo from January to March of that year failed to record a single pratincole.

The parallel losses of these two species suggest a common causal agent: poisons. At face value, however, this should not explain the decreases in numbers of Burchell's Coursers that have occurred in the Kalahari. But the Kalahari birds are migratory and we do not know where they are in the second half of the year: if they move to areas where insecticides are widely used, they do not have to face threats in the Kalahari itself for their numbers there to decrease.

These are charismatic birds, with their white legs and characteristic bobbing feeding behaviour. Because the species is effectively endemic, it is high on the lists of international birders' 'must sees', yet for many visitors it is one of the last with which they manage to connect. Finding these coursers is becoming increasingly difficult (the approach road to Sossusvlei in Namibia is one of the best places). It seems that their migratory behaviour may work against them, especially for those individuals that spend part of their year on agricultural lands.

At present, Burchell's Courser is not included in either the South African or the International Red Data Book. It is also much more difficult to monitor than, for example, large and conspicuous raptors, cranes or storks. There is no doubt, however, that its downward population trend is real and worrying: this is very definitely a species to watch.

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