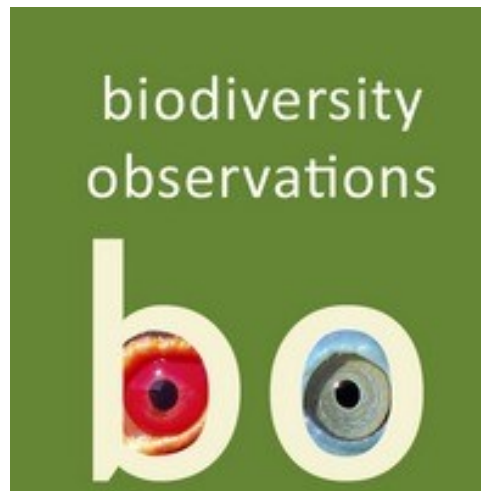


# Capped Wheatear *Oenanthe pileata* breeding in association with Brant's Whistling Rat *Parotomys brantsii*

Les G Underhill



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## Ornithology

### Capped Wheatear *Oenanthe pileata* breeding in association with Brant's Whistling Rat *Parotomys brantsii*

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#### Abstract

This short note reports an observation of Capped Wheatears breeding in burrows made by Brant's Whistling Rat. It points out that there is no record of the rodent species associated with the Capped Wheatear or whether there are preferred rodents. It also points out that there are large areas where the ranges of Capped Wheatears and Ant-eating Chats overlap. The latter species also breeds in association with mammals. There are possibilities of joint studies.

#### Observation

Capped Wheatears *Oenanthe pileata* breed almost exclusively inside rodent burrows (Steyn 1996, Tarboton 2011). The nesting association has been known since at least the start of the 20th century: "The nest

... is almost invariably placed in the hole of some small mammal, about eighteen inches to two feet from the entrances" (Stark 1901).

In spite of this unusual bird-mammal association, the Capped Wheatear appears to be one of southern Africa's least researched bird species. For example, the species text in the Handbook of the Birds of the World (del Hoyo et al. 2005) lists 36 references, and Roberts 7 (Hockey et al. 2005) cites 18; in both handbooks, these references are to regional bird books, annotated checklists of the birds of a locality and to atlas species texts and a few are to short notes (like this one) describing individual observations about aspects of the biology of the species. There seem to have been no studies of Capped Wheatears; certainly, there are no full-length papers.

The observation reported here was made on 26 September 2015, at the small sewage works (31°36.41'S, 18°14.79'E) near the village of Ebenhaezer, 1.5 km northwest of the R362 which links the town Lutzville to Papendorp at the mouth of Olifants River, and near the northern boundary of the Western Cape. The observations were made on the outside of an earth wall of one of the pans at the sewage works.

A juvenile Capped Wheatear, almost adult-sized and presumably close to fledging was seen near the entrance to a burrow in the earth wall (Figure 1). Within minutes, an adult wheatear arrived with an insect, and fed it to the juvenile (Figure 2). The adult flew off within seconds and the juvenile disappeared into the burrow. On the next visit of an adult, a juvenile emerged from a nearby burrow and was fed by the adult. The behaviour was repeated several times during about 15 minutes of observation.

While this was happening, two other burrows on the bank had Brant's Whistling Rat *Parotomys brantsii* standing at their openings, but did not venture out of them (Figures 3 and 4). Presumably, all the burrows had been made by this rodent. This note thus reports a breeding in association with Brant's Whistling Rat; this appears to be the first reported association, with the rodent identified to species level.



**Figure 1:** Juvenile Capped Wheatear at the entrance of a burrow constructed by Brant's Whistling Rats. Ebenhaezer Sewage Works, 26 September 2015. [BirdPix record 20928](#) in the Virtual Museum.



**Figure 2:** Juvenile and adult Capped Wheatears interacting immediately prior to being fed at the entrance of a burrow constructed by Brant's Whistling Rats. Ebenhaezer Sewage Works, 26 September 2015. [BirdPix record 20928](#) in the Virtual Museum.



**Figure 3:** Brant's Whistling Rat at the entrance to its burrow. Ebenhaezer Sewage Works, 26 September 2015. [MammalMAP record 15673](#) in the Virtual Museum.

There does not appear to be a list of the range of species whose burrows are used by Capped Wheatears. We do not know if there is a preference for certain rodent species. It might be feasible to use the Capped Wheatear to monitor rodent occurrence.

The Ant-eating Chat *Myrmecocichla formicivore* is another species which breeds in the burrows of mammals, often those of the Aardvark *Orycteropus afer*. By contrast with the Capped Wheatear, it has a detailed description of its breeding biology (Earlé & Herholdt 1988).



**Figure 4:** Two Brant's Whistling Rats at the entrances to their burrows on the outside of an earth wall of a pan at the Ebenhaezer Sewage Works. The pan is out of sight behind the wall. 26 September 2015. [MammalMAP record 15673](#) in the Virtual Museum.

These two species are sympatric over a large proportion of their ranges in southern Africa, so there must be opportunities for a joint study of both species.

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