

## THE RED-BILLED QUELEA

*Quelea quelea*

Apart from domesticated bird species the Red-billed Quelea is the world's most abundant bird, with an estimated adult breeding population of 1.5 billion. It is a small passerine weaver of the family *Ploceidae*, native to sub-Saharan Africa.

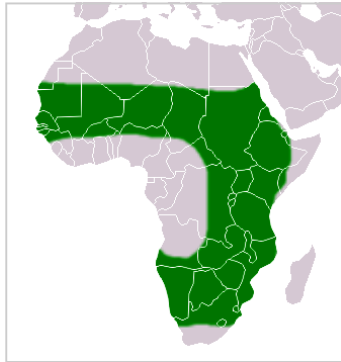


PORTION OF A FLOCK OF QUELEAS AT REST

Photo: Alastair Rae

The Red-billed Quelea is about 12.5cm long and 15 to 20g in weight. During the breeding season the male is distinguished by its more colourful plumage and red bill. The breeding plumage of male Queleas is variable: consisting of a facial mask which ranges from black through to white in colour, while the breast and crown plumage can vary from yellowish to bright red. In the non-breeding season the male's plumage resembles that of the female, which is a cryptic beige colouration. The female's bill is yellow during breeding, and red during the non-breeding season.

These birds live and breed in very large flocks. Which can take several hours to fly past a given point. They mainly inhabit open grasslands and



**DISTRIBUTION**

Map: Jonathan Hornung

savannah, but don't avoid human settlements. When foraging for food they can fly large distances without tiring. In the wild their life expectancy is just two to three years.

They mainly feed on grass seeds and grain. At first light, they come together in huge flocks and seek out a suitable feeding place. After a successful search, they settle rapidly and often cause serious damage to crops. When feeding the birds at the back of the flock, where most of the food has been eaten, fly forward over the front of the flock to find a new food supply. This gives the feeding flock the look of a huge rolling entity devouring almost all before it. In the middle part of the day they rest in shady areas near water and spend their time preening. In the late afternoon they once again swarm in search of food.

The breeding season commences with the seasonal rains, which occur at varying times in different parts of the range. In the north-west breeding starts around the beginning of November. The males first weave half-complete oval nests from grasses and straw. The female then examines the construction and if she is satisfied with his efforts, mating occurs. Both partners then complete the weaving of the nest. The female lays two to four light blue eggs, incubation takes twelve days. After the chicks hatch, they are at first nourished for some days with caterpillars and protein-rich insects. After this time the parents change to a mainly seed feeding regime. The young fledge after approximately two weeks in the nest. They are fully independent approximately three weeks after leaving the nest. They are sexually mature after just one year, but many females die before this time, there are therefore many males without a partner.



**A QUELEA FLOCK IN FLIGHT**

Photo: Alastair Rae

Red-billed Queleas are regarded as pests by farmers because of their perceived greed, and are often compared to locusts. As they have hardly any natural enemies, their population is enormous. Even extreme control measures, such as dynamiting the nesting colonies and the use of organophosphate poisons, have not significantly reduced their numbers.

Reference: "Wikipedia"