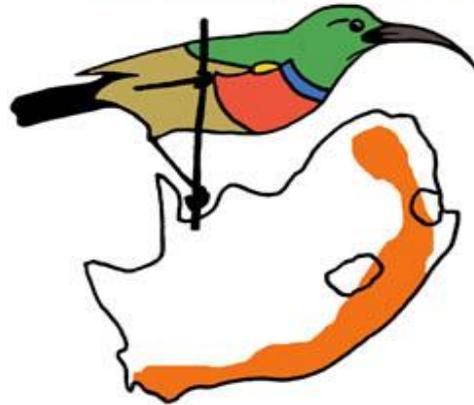


SABAP2



BIRDING BIG DAY 2018 A SINGLE PENTAD EFFORT

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BIRDING BIG DAY 2018 - A SINGLE PENTAD EFFORT

Following a relatively late decision to participate in Birding Big Day in 2018, I thought it would be nice to set a slightly different challenge and stick within the confines of a single SABAP2 pentad. There are some very diverse pentads across the wider Gauteng region and it was not easy deciding where to head. I settled on Vaalkop Dam. My home pentad birding buddy, Jerome Ainsley decided to join in for the fun. Team SABAP2: Vaalkop was born. We arrived in the pentad late on Thursday afternoon having done about as much online mapping, SABAP2 data dissecting, planning and general resourcing as we could. Lance Robinson provided a few useful tips on where to go. On Friday morning we followed our route options in-between early morning fishing with my sons (riverine habitat review), a family game drive (open grassland review) and a late afternoon braai (evening chorus review). Our route was massaged extensively during the day with numerous iterations and all permutations considered. Like many participants we retired early with heightened anticipation for the day that lay ahead.

A child related midnight wakeup prompted a somewhat earlier start than planned. Coffee in hand seated on the stoep with a full moon above, avian activity was high. Species in earshot of the stoep included Spotted Eagle Owl, White-faced Scops Owl, Black-crowned Night Heron, Temminck's Courser, numerous lapwings and Dikkops. At 01:30 we ventured out onto the local roads adding Fiery-necked and Rufous-cheeked Nightjars, Red-crested Korhaan, Pearl-spotted and Barn Owl to complete the quartet. A quick check on the terrific Birdlife Birdlasser BBD Datacentre showed that there were quite a few other active teams out there!

At 04:00 we arrived at the reedy and overgrown settling ponds downstream of the waterworks with 27 birds on the list. After some success, we worked our way along the waking riverine habitat picking up a steady stream of species from the rising chorus. We then moved onto the bridge where things started gaining real momentum. Red-chested, Diederick and Levallants Cuckoo called incessantly and three species of Kingfisher flew past. For the next hour and half we birded the riverine thicket and agricultural lands, arriving at the reserve gate at 06:30 having just passed 100 species. While there was nothing of real regional excitement, a very active flock of Lesser Kestrel hunting over the parched agricultural land in the morning light was memorable.

The buffalo thorn thicket below the dam wall supported a host of riverine species including Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Speckled Mousebird and both bush shrikes. A quick scan over the dam provided distant Ruff, Glossy Ibis and many of the usual shoreline species. The Lesser Spotted Eagle seen around the hill the day before was no longer around. We headed westwards towards the bird sanctuary picking up Ashy and Southern Black Tit, Burchell's Starling, the first of three Grey Tit-Flycatchers for the day and a Black-headed Oriole. The open woodland near the western boundary revealed Northern Black Korhaan, Pearl-breasted Swallow, Coqui Francolin and Black-chested Snake Eagle. Moving north the wooded valley provided Shikra, Red-breasted Swallow a very obliging Buffy Pipit and the ubiquitous Spotted Flycatcher and Willow Warblers.

We then headed back to the shoreline where a single Marabou Stork and a handful of Yellow-billed Stork stood tall amongst Greenshank, Marsh Sandpiper, Little Stint and handful of Black-winged Stilt. It was 08:45 and we were pushing into the late 150s. Two of our "more reliable" stakeouts (from the day before) in the form of Groundscraper Thrush and African Pied Wagtail were nowhere to be found. We headed to the south east hoping to cash in on some late morning acacia thicket. After a false start with a locked gate, we eventually got over the dam wall and into the thicket. The area was dry and completely dead. A White-backed Vulture flew overhead. We had added two species in the last hour and a message from my father who wanted to know if we were sitting having our breakfast somewhere as our score had not really moved in 45 minutes, brought a wry smile. A Common Buttonquail flushed from near the shoreline lifted the spirits. This was followed quickly by a selection of waders and a Grey-headed Gull dotted along the shoreline. Quite bizarrely, we managed to spish a Monotonous Lark into song just before we left. It was now getting very warm.



At midday we were back at the water works for a few bits and pieces. Our first Woodland Kingfisher of the season and the previously elusive Groundscraper Thrush moved us into the 170s. We headed north east to some moister acacia and found a few mixed groups with Icterine Warbler, Black Cuckooshrike, both Lesser and Greater Honeyguide calling boldly, Yellow-throated Petronia and a Lesser Masked Weaver. White-browed Sparrow Weaver and Red-billed Buffalo Weaver were added to the list.

It was now 14:00 and we were in the upper 180s. After a quick plunge in our swimming pool and a cup of tea to cool Jerome down, we headed back to the agricultural lands and found our first Red-backed and Lesser Grey Shrikes of the season followed by a solitary distant Golden-crowned Bishop atop an *acacia tortilis*.

We drove westwards to the upper reaches of the dam. It was past 16:00 and new birds were hard to find. Like many concentrated birding events there are a handful of distant or fleeting sightings that tease and tempt one. Our day was no different with a few possible additions narrowly avoiding certain identification. In the shallow upper reaches of the dam, groups of Yellow-billed Duck, Black Egret and Cape Teal obliged taking us to 197. A large storm moved steadily from the south. Birding our way back to the dam wall we found the missing African Pied Wagtail and a distant Water Dikkop on the opposite bank...199. Stopping at the base of "Bullkop" we had hoped to hear something from the rocky slopes above. It was almost impossible to hear each other for the music coming out of the campsite below. We had heard Double-banded Sandgrouse flying over our accommodation on the previous two nights so decided that after a quick stop on the dam wall we would head back home. At 18:20, almost 18 and a half hours after we started, a single male Violet-back Starling brought up 200 for the day for the pentad with a fly-by! There was still a bit of light available, but with dusty throats and a little sunburn around the edges, we decided to call it a day and left for home to reflect on a spectacular day.

There is no doubt that the broad adoption of technology and Birdlasser in particular has made Birding Big Day and regional challenges so much more compelling and exciting to be part of. The ease at which data is collected, transferred and stored is simply terrific and real credit needs to go to all involved. Lastly, it's probably worth mentioning that any birding challenge linked to a formal atlas project needs to be approached with a degree of caution. My personal view is that as long as the protocol is followed, then the two activities are certainly compatible!

