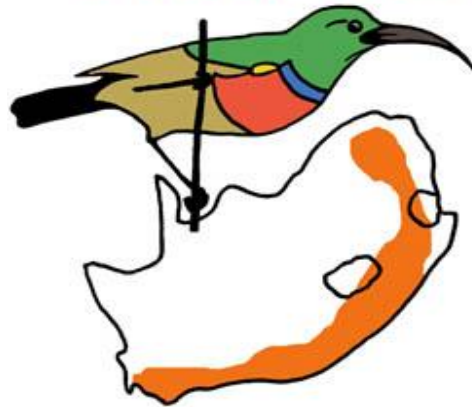


SABAP2



Solo Bash

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Winter 2020

Southern African Bird Atlas Project

SABAP2 Reports Series 15



SOLO BASH

I was appointed the coordinator of the newly formed Wider Standerton Area subproject (WSA) in the beginning of the year 2020. The aim of the latest SABAP2 subproject is to link up the Wakkerstroom subproject to the east and the Free State – KZN subproject to the south and obtain species coverage and distribution data for several threatened species. Species that are particularly noteworthy and important to monitor include Blue and Grey Crowned Crane, Blue Korhaan, Southern Bald Ibis, Secretarybird and Denham's Bustard. It is particularly important to determine how the ever-encroaching agriculture and mining industries might be affecting the local populations. I have been atlasing around Standerton for years, but I decided I should do a solo bash (again!) over a six-week period this winter. My goal was to turn the last remaining pentads green and to atlas all the pentads at least once for the year.

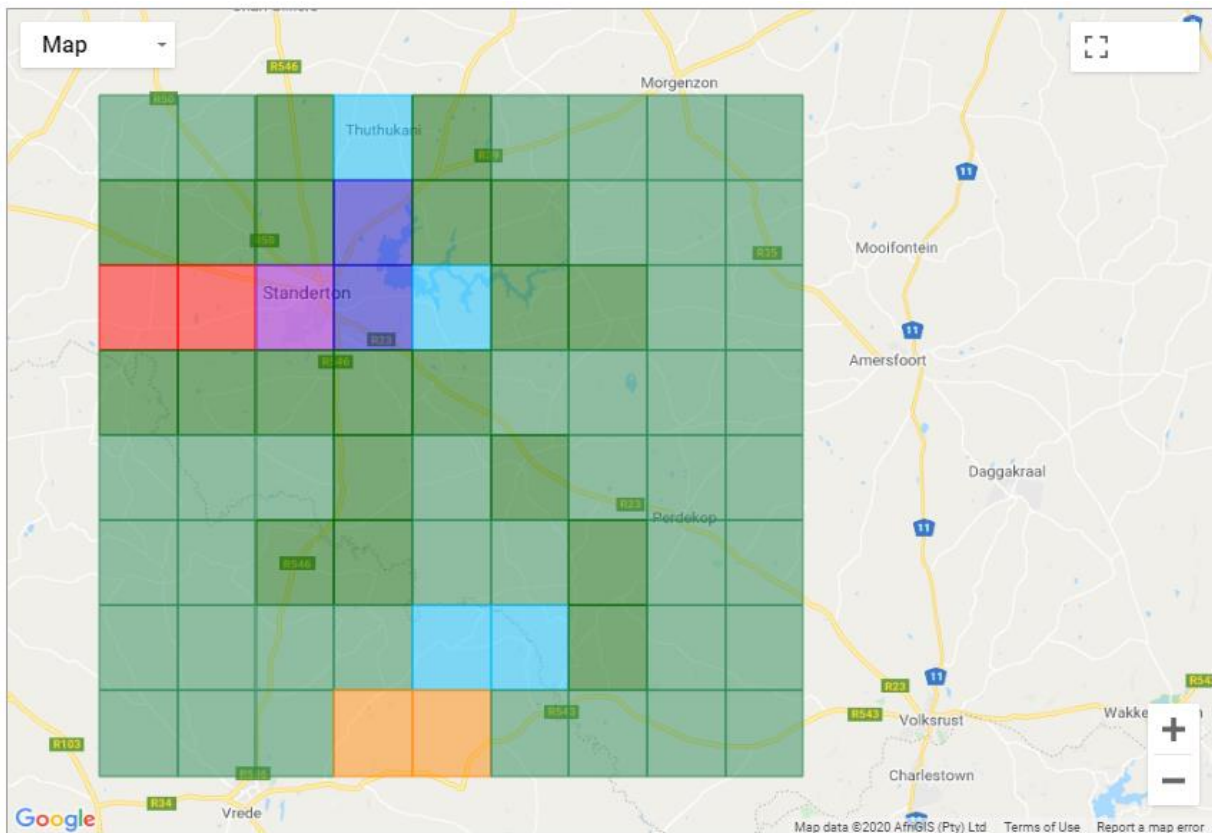


Figure 1 SABAP2 coverage for the Wider Standerton Area Subproject in April 2020. See current coverage at http://sabap2.birdmap.africa/coverage/group/12093_WdrStnfrtn

My garden looks out over the Vaal river, which creates a corridor for birds to travel along. Birding from this vantage point is part of my daily routine and delivers fantastic records on a regular basis, especially raptor wise. I recorded two different **European Honey-Buzzards** putting in five separate appearances, **Rufous-breasted Sparrowhawk** (twice!), **African Fish-eagles**, **African Harrier-hawks**, **Long-crested Eagle** (probably the biggest surprise), the last few remaining **Amur Falcons** coming in to roost. **Black Sparrowhawk** too make an appearance



almost on an almost daily basis making the doves scatter and the garden fall silent with fear just before sunset. A **Barn Owl** screeching at night adds to the scene. But the highlight for me (and only for me!) was a juvenile **Lanner Falcon** swooping in to grab a recently hatched chicken not ten meters from my front door!

Other amazing sightings were three **Lesser Honeyguides** seen while I sit and write this story, and a few days later **Greater Honeyguide**, **Olive Woodpecker** and a **Giant Kingfisher** at my garden pond on a misty morning.

The pentads immediately surrounding Standerton contains the Vaal river, Grootdraaidam and lots of farm dams, making them quite productive for waterfowl. A visit to these meant I quickly passed the 100 species mark adding: **Maccoa Duck**, **Greater Flamingo**, **Black-necked Grebe**, **Caspian Tern**, **Goliath Heron**, and **Marsh Owl**. The sightings of note were two **Black Herons** with a reporting rate of only 1.3% in 850 full protocol cards for the WSA! I also saw numerous **Blue Korhaan** – in fact at least one in every pentad. Every now and then I would come across a small group of **Blue Crane**, in total over 400 **Southern Bald Ibises** (128 in one field), a pair of **Secretarybirds** and a lonely **White Stork**. **Pink-billed Lark** (in total I recorded seven lark species), **Greater Kestrel**, **Namaqua Dove** and **Cinnamon-breasted Bunting** (2%RR) were other special sightings.

After two weeks I had already done 14 full protocol cards, logged over 1000 observations on Birdlasser and the 150 species mark was not far. But I knew I had to go to the southernmost pentads of the WSA to keep the list ticking over.



Figure 2 One of the Lesser Honeyguides spotted in the garden from my desk



Figure 3 Chestnut-backed Sparrowlarks



So, I headed south to Perdekop and the decision almost immediately paid off with six **Cape Vultures** soaring overhead – a new species for the WSA! The same pentad produced a pair of **Chestnut-backed Sparrowlarks** (1.2%RR) and a pair of **Grey Crowned Cranes**. The next day I headed even further south adding **Ground Woodpecker**, **Alpine Swift**, **Buff-streaked Chat**, **Cape-rock Thrush**, **Rufous-naped Lark** (a summer visitor), **Eastern Long-billed Lark** and **Horus Swift** (a great sighting with a 0.2% RR). A few days later I went back to look for the birds that I knew I had missed out on, adding **Mocking Cliff-chat**, **Lazy Cisticola**, **Cape Grassbird**, **Forked-tailed Drongo** and **Long-billed (Nicholson) Pipit**. I decided to revisit some of the more productive pentads around town and my efforts yielded **Common Greenshank**, **African Snipe** and **Half-collared Kingfisher** (0.6%RR). Stopping at the edge of town where overflowing sewage has created a wetland over the years, **Little Rush Warbler** and glimpses of two **African Rails** were great finds, thanks to the negligence of man!

After four weeks I stood on 23 full protocol cards in 20 pentads, and I logged 184 species and 1752 observations on Birdlasser.



Figure 4 Denham's bustard.



Figure 5 Long-billed (Nicholson) pipit.

One last throw of the dice in my home pentad delivered a few small groups of **Orange-breasted Waxbill** and **Wattled Starling**, both winter specials for the WSA. On a cold, wet and windy morning, I reluctantly headed out to a nearby pentad on the edge of the Grootdraaidam that has the habit of delivering vagrant species, stopping at a locked gate with a mist rain setting in, I had all but given up. Soldiering on, I felt rather bemused to find a pair of **African Black Ducks** in a recently harvested soybean field, but my eye caught movement in the background. Not one...Not two... but five **Denham's Bustards**! The rarest of the endangered species in the WSA with a reporting rate of only 0.6%!

After five weeks my luck still had not run out, and on a cool but crystal-clear morning I came across a rather confiding and out of range **Sickle-winged Chat**, a WSA lifer for me!



Once more unto the breach... with pentad 2710_2925 delivering a pair of **Secretarybirds**, a pair of **Grey Crowned Cranes** and a pair of **Denham's Bustards**! I felt a bit conflicted about the latter, as the road I observed them from, forms part of my CAR count route and I have never recorded them during a CAR count. The next day I set out to turn the last two pentads green and was rewarded with a **Rock Kestrel**, another winter special. The last morning I made a rather nostalgic visit to my late grandparent's farm, I recorded a **Purple Heron** and only my second ever sighting in the WSA of a **Golden-breasted Bunting**, the first being five years ago in the same month and the neighboring pentad!



Figure 6 Sickie-winged Chat – a lifer for this subproject!



Figure 7 A special sighting of a Golden-breasted Bunting

During my six-week solo bash I submitted 34 full protocol cards in 26 pentads, with 191 species and 2236 observations logged on Birdlasser. I also drove about 2000km!

I hope that my solo bash makes atlasers realize that you don't always need to travel to some far-off destination to have a great birding adventure, atlasing begins at home. Get to know your surrounding pentads, seek out all the different habitats and learn the calls, different plumages, migration and distribution patterns so that we can get even more accurate reporting rates and coverage. For atlasing truly is one of the best ways to sharpen your bird ID skills. After nine years and 507 full protocol cards in the Wider Standerton Area, I am still amazed at what I find every time I go out, and I never stop learning. **The more you look, the more you will find!**

