

REFLECTIONS

BIRDEYE VIEWS

Birding in SANParks Limpopo parks

Grassland Owls in the Kruger National Park

Chris Patton

When Peter Steyn wrote his beautiful book, "A Delight of Owls", he could easily have been writing about owls and 'owling' in the Kruger National Park, because 11 of South Africa's 12 owl species are found in the Park... The Pel's Fishing Owl is of course part of the Park's Big 6 Birds and is often regarded as the Holy Grail of Kruger Birding, but they are relatively reliable to find along the Levuvhu and Olifants Rivers, and found too in lower densities along most of the Park's other major rivers. Verreaux's and Spotted Eagle-Owls are widespread and regularly seen on night drives through the Park, while African Wood Owl are relatively easy to at least hear calling along the Levuvhu River and parts of the Sabie River. Western Barn Owls are widespread, particularly in the rest camps, while the more diminutive African Scops Owl and

Pearl-spotted Owlets' calls make them ubiquitous members of the nocturnal choir performing throughout most of the Park. Even the Southern White-faced Owl and African Barred Owlet are widespread, though perhaps not as common as their respective cousins the Scops and the 'Pearlie'...

But when it comes to seeing the Park's two grassland owls, judging from records of the South African Bird Atlas Project 2, within the boundaries of the Park, African Grass Owl and Marsh Owl are two species that in my and the opinion of others, are vastly under-recorded.

Many readers will know that it would be more apt if the names of these two grassland owls were reversed, with the Marsh Owl being better described as a grass owl, with African Grass Owl having a preference for more moist marshy grassland conditions.



Above Unlike its name suggests, Marsh Owl is more frequently encountered in rank grass © Derek Engelbrecht.

When one consults the old Kruger Bird Field Guides (remember we had those before the development of smart phone Apps) the status of these two grassland owls in the Park makes interesting reading... Of the Marsh Owl in Kruger's bird bible of the 1980s and 1990s, Kenneth Newman's Birds of the Kruger National Park it reads: "Uncommon and localised, but resident. Usually breeds during the period March-May in Kruger". It then goes on to read "Occurs regularly in the Hlamalala flats east of Punda Maria and may prove to be more widespread than is presently known." The Newman's guide aged and fell out of print, and was replaced in the 2000s

by the Roberts Bird Guide – Kruger National Park and Adjacent Lowveld by Hugh Chittenden and my former colleague and Park large mammal ecologist, Dr Ian Whyte, who served almost four decades living, working and birding in the Park. His Roberts guide described the Marsh Owl status as "Locally common resident with fragmented range. Numbers in KNP fluctuate with rainfall and grass cover, most common on the eastern basaltic grasslands in wet summers."



ABOVE Marsh Owl on the H1-8 near Kloppefontein turn-off in January 2011
© Chris Patton.

Despite the convictions of the Park bird books that Marsh Owl is localised, uncommon to common in suitable habitat in wet years, and that it is regular in the Hlamalala Flats east of Punda Maria, and most common on the eastern basaltic grasslands I received a full out of range query for a February 2018 record I submitted of Marsh Owl to SABAP2.

This record was in the very same area east of Punda Maria on the main H1-8 tar road south east of Kloppefontein Dam, somewhere between the S59 and S61 turn-offs. Regular attendees of the annual West Rand Honorary Rangers/SASOL Punda Extreme Birding Weekends would find such a query bizarre as we regu-

larly found them in this area for over a decade, when I was still guiding on one of these vehicles.

The time on a Saturday morning the participating 10-seater vehicles would pass through the area in question would be around 03h00. From 2003 to 2009 when only single weekends were run, Marsh Owl was only recorded in 2003 and 2007, but from 2010 to 2018 when two Punda Extreme weekends were held every late January and early February (and indeed still are and should continue to be), Marsh Owls were recorded

by between one and all four of the participating vehicles' occupants on both weekends in 2011, 2012 and 2018, recorded on one of the two weekends in 2010, 2013 and 2015, and unrecorded in 2014, 2016 and 2017. Failure to record the species in some years does not mean they categorically were not around, as the trucks are on a deadline to get to Pafuri before dawn and hence do not linger in the area and it is dark, but it would be an interesting exercise to see if the years of non-reporting were possibly drier years when the veld conditions were not as favourable.

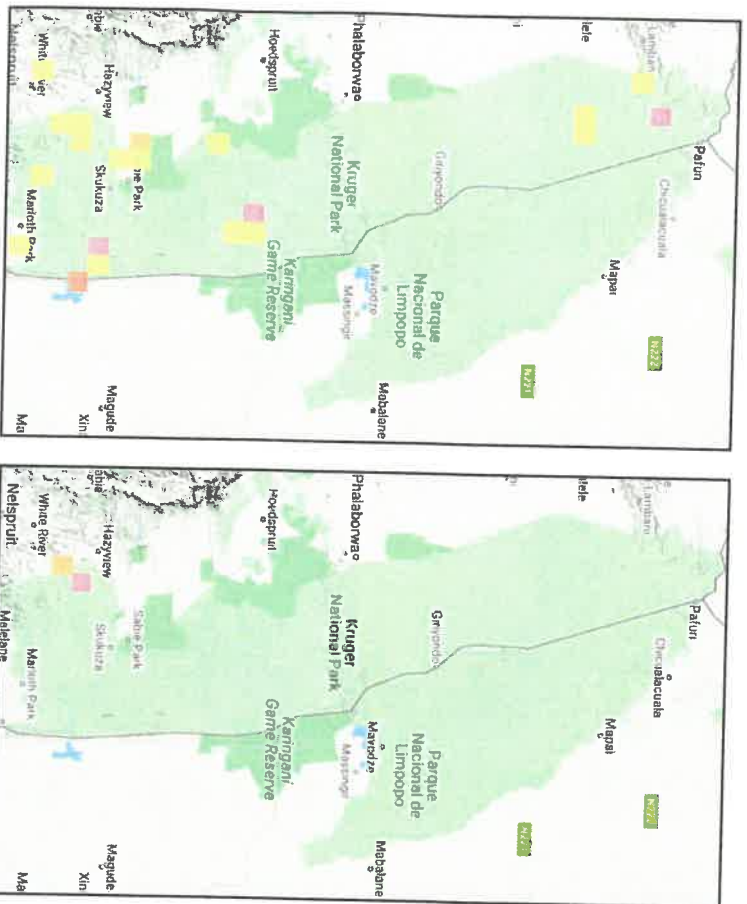
Obviously as nocturnal species, owls are generally harder to see, and the Park Night Drives that do allow visitors access to areas outside of rest camps, will not as a rule travel to areas of suitable habitat. For instance, Punda Maria is the only camp in the Park close enough to potentially take guests to the suitable habitat in the Kloppefontein area, but the Camp's night drive guides usually focus on the Mahonie Loop and seldom travel to the area around Kloppefontein, where atlasers might be able to record this species.

When I dig a little deeper and consult the reporting rate during SABAP2 for Marsh Owls inside the Kruger National Park, I find that north of the Olifants River they are recorded from only 4 pentads: from the Kloppefontein pentad as incidental records (that would include my 2018 now accepted record); a

little further south in the pentads where Sirhemi Bushveld Camp and Babalala Picnic Site are located – both these pentads feature areas of good grassy plains, that can become saturated in wet years and match the distribution and habitat description from both field guides; and lastly from the Punda Maria pentad itself, where despite being well wooded in parts, this pentad does still have sections of suitable grassland.

South of the Olifants River the records and affected pentads are more numerous, and this will be a combination of areas of suitable habitat, but also the far greater number of guests that visit the south of the Park, and a higher level of road infrastructure into suitable areas closer to rest camps, so that night drives can travel into the suitable habitat on their circuits. The grasslands around Satara, east of Orpen, north of Lower Sabie and around Pretoriuskop are the predictable locations where Marsh Owls have been recorded in the southern half of the Park.

Despite working for SANParks, apart from the Punda Extreme weekends, I would not often have the occasion to be outside of rest camps at night roaming the Park looking for birds. I am confident Marsh Owls do occur in suitable habitat throughout the Park, but just go unatlassed primarily because atlasers are not active in such suitable often remote areas at night. For my two decades working in Kruger between 1998 and



Above Distribution of Marsh Owl (left) and African Grass Owl (right) in the Kruger National Park. Data courtesy of SABAP2 (<http://sabap2.birdmap.africa/>; data accessed on 4 October 2020).

2018 apart from the regular Punda Extreme sightings, I had two other sightings of Marsh Owl in the Limpopo portion of the Park:

1. From the grasslands around Talamati Bushveld Camp on a night drive in April 2005, and
2. Between Phalaborwa and Letaba on the H9 near Rhidonda Pan in February 2008 – on this occasion I was driving to Letaba from Head Office in Pretoria with a colleague and we had an after hours' late permit.

If we turn our attention to the other grassland owl in Kruger, the African Grass Owl, the SABAP2

records are even more thin on the ground and this species has only been reported from two pentads, both near Pretoriuskop – one to the south-west of the Camp where the Outer Circle Loop and the Fayi Loop go through some suitable grassland, and the other to the north-east of camp where there is plenty of ideal habitat in the vicinity of Shithave Dam.

The Newman's guide described them as "Rare, but probably resident in grassy localities. Has been reported from many scattered points in both summer and winter..." while the Roberts guide describes their status as "Uncommon resident oc-

curing throughout the Park, but may be more common than expected especially in the eastern grasslands... Probably reasonably common in wetter years when grass is abundant, but almost absent during droughts".

In the two decades I was regularly in Kruger for work I encountered African Grass Owl just three times.

Once on a night drive from Pretoriuskop in the mid-2000s; once when I found a pair that looked

like they had a nest, in rank grass on the roadside on the tar access road into Punda Maria Camp – this record was during day-time and drizzling conditions, and the veld had plenty of long grass and was completely saturated; and the third occasion was in the very same general area that all the Marsh Owl sightings get made on Punda Extreme Birding Weekends, i.e. near Klopfontein. On this occasion there were Marsh Owls nearby suggesting a certain



Above The sought-after African Grass Owl © Warwick Tarboton.

degree of potential competition between the two.

So my parting message to the readers is... the grassland owls are out there in the Park, just difficult to see given the restrictions of an average trip, but it's part of their appeal to try and find them...

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