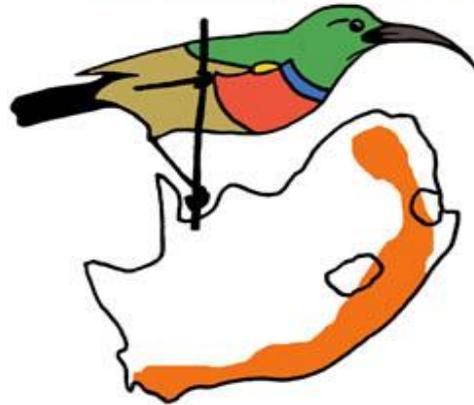


SABAP2



Karoo-Gariep Nature Reserve birding: A Northern Cape atlasing “record” attempt

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152 different bird species found in less than five days in about 56 square kilometers in the Karoo? No ways! Yes ways... This is the story of a couple who, with the kind help of a number of people, managed to set a new record for the number of species in a [full protocol atlas card](#) in a Northern Cape pentad.

My name is Janelle Verster. My husband, Pieter Verster, and I are “citizen scientists” – normal members of the public who contribute bird species lists to the Southern African Bird Atlas Project 2 for research purposes (the “SABAP 2” project: visit <http://sabap2.birdmap.africa/> for more information or to get involved). In short, we record bird species we encounter (seen and/or heard) in a specific area, which is called a “pentad”, in a specific period of time, and this is referred to as “atlasing”. We capture and submit our data via the BirdLasser app on our cell phones (<https://www.birdlasser.com/>).

Southern Africa is divided into several thousands of these pentads, of which the fixed borders of approximately eight-by-seven kilometers can easily be seen on the map in the BirdLasser app. The app tracks your location, detecting when you enter a “new” pentad in order to start a new list everything you cross a pentad boundary. A *full protocol card* may be submitted if a minimum of 2 hours is spent birding in a specific pentad within a maximum period of five days. Ad hoc cards can also be submitted, but I will not go into detail about that here.

Although one needs to record all the bird species you observe in a pentad as part of a full protocol card, it is important to note that the purpose of atlasing is not specifically to chase large species totals within a limited geographical space and time. However, Pieter and I along with some of our birding friends enjoy it very much to now and again do what we call a “big card” – when we invest a lot of time and energy to find as many species as we can. This requires a lot of planning, for example, in terms of who will take part; where will we bird (which pentad); which habitats can be found in the specific pentad (an in-depth analysis of the map and gathering information from the locals of the area contributes significantly to this); where will we stay; what time of year we want to do this; which species have been found in this pentad before, etcetera.

Pieter is a prolific planner (yes, I love my husband, but I can give him this compliment without bias). He will start making plans and arrangements often several months before we attempt a “big card”. Carefully gathering and analysing information about the greater area we are targeting; selecting a pentad in which we are most likely to achieve our own pre-set goal, such as 100 or 150 or the highest number of species for the pentad or even the province in a full protocol card; finding details of and contacting property owners to ask them if they can assist us with access; preparing a spreadsheet of potential species and the likelihood of finding each. I, in turn, am blessed with a lot of energy and I really enjoy a lot of walking, running, and (sometimes foolishly) persisting and bundu-bashing, so together I think we make quite a good team for finding a lot of species over a five-day period.

So, we decided to try set a new atlasing record in January 2022 for the Northern Cape province. This province consists of thousands of pentads, so Pieter did an analysis of the data on SABAP2 and selected the promising Karoo-Gariep Nature Reserve pentad in the KhoiSan Karoo Conservancy, near Hanover. With a variety of different habitats and the consisting predominantly of nature reserve, pentad 3050_2435 could potentially deliver more species than the previous highest Northern Cape pentad record of 128. The highest number of species on a full protocol card for pentad 3050_2435 was 123 (atlased by John Randell in 2020), which was already not far from the provincial record. You check for yourself using the “Pentad quick find” on the home page of the SABAP2 website using these pentad numbers. Select “Species list” to obtain a list of all the species that have been atlased in the pentad to date.

Pieter contacted P.C. Ferreira, owner-operator of New Holme Guest Farm in the reserve. Prolific communication ensued, so that by the time we arrived on Sunday afternoon, 2 January 2022, P.C. said he felt like we were old friends! P.C., an experienced conservationist, and birder, is extremely knowledgeable and helped us with lots of gen (tips on where to look for a specific species). Visiting New



Holme for the first time, we were not familiar with the reserve and nervous about where to go and look for birds and repeatedly asked poor P.C. the same questions and directions. However, he was very patient and excited to be part of the record attempt. He gave invaluable insights into where he normally found birds such as the African Rail and the Cape Penduline-tit (which we found exactly where he said we potentially could!). Neighbour Theuns also kindly gave us access to his farm.

We stayed in the Karoo Gariep Tented Camp at New Holme for four nights. The facilities are great and the serviced, furnished safari tent is spacious and so comfortable and clean. I slept like a baby after each day's adventures. Marisca, P.C.'s wife, and her team prepared the most delicious meals for us even at the strangest of times to fit in with our birding program, and we felt at home in the beautiful dining area and gardens.

Day 1: We found 87 birds since our arrival around 15:00. We felt that this was a great start and that there was lots of opportunities to find amazing birds, especially after spotting a Black-chested Snake-eagle that has only been reported on a full protocol card once before in the pentad. Other good birds for the pentad were the Western Barn Owl, loads and loads of Common Swifts, a Yellow-bellied Eremomela and a Little Bittern. The Greater Flamingo we expected to find easily was at the large dam, but little did we know that we would not see it again on days 2-5.

Day 2: We got up at 4:40 and started birding basically as soon as I had my morning coffee and Pieter his ProNutro. Progress was still very good and the surroundings were beautiful, but both us and P.C. were surprised at regulars such as Pied Avocet and Black-winged Stilt hiding from us. Bird of the day was a Knob-billed Duck, a Northern Cape rarity that we immediately reported to our friends at the SA Rare Bird News (SARBN: <https://groups.google.com/g/sa-rarebirdnews>; one can subscribe for free to receive e-mails) - so that they could inform the birding community thereof. It was also very exciting to see and hear Blue Korhaans and a Ludwig's Bustard. We finished day 2 on a total of 121 species seen and/or heard and were very excited about the lurking record.

Day 3: As with all the "big cards" we have done, we found that the first approximately 90% of the target species come much quicker than the later ones. Approximately from day 3 onwards, a lot of resilience is normally required, as literally hours may pass before a single new species is added to the list (although the number of birds in general may be abundant and still nice to see or hear). Now we had to "dig deep" and fatigue was creeping in from the long hours and lots of walking, driving, looking, opening gates (we basically started days 2 – 4 around 05:00 AM and birded at least until darkness set in, with a relatively short break and wonderful sandwiches in the hottest hours of midday). We visited now familiar spots again, as experience has taught us that the same spot can deliver different birds during different visits. Good birds included, the Sickle-winged Chat at the top of a *koppie*, a pair of Secretarybirds, a Lanner Falcon, Mountain Wheatear, Booted Eagle and Cape Bunting. We were amazed at the diversity of species in the pentad. A mix of so many species that one would typically not expect to find in the Northern Cape or in the same pentad. We were delighted when we found a Kalahari Scrub-robin, the record-breaking bird and an unexpected find for the specific area, around 9:00 that morning. We ended day 3 on 141 species.



Figure 1 Northern Cape birding can seem barren at times! However, our perseverance paid off with lots of special species recorded.



Day 4 was our last full day before we had to head back to Gauteng and took us up to a final total of 152 species. The “Elsies” that we were looking for since day 1 and the African Sacred Ibis eventually made their appearance. We saw two Western Yellow Wagtails, a Red-backed Shrike as well as a Sand Martin, and also the sought-after Caspian Plovers that has been reported from New Holme a number of times before. I took one of P.C.’s kayaks and rowed to get closer to the waders, and a Curlew Sandpiper allowed a close-up, followed by an African Marsh-harrier being chased by Pied Crows overhead. On the vegetation forming an “island” in the middle of the dam, Pieter spotted a Black-winged Pratincole, far south of its normal distribution range.

The visit was an adventure that we will never forget. Thank you, P.C., Marisca and the rest of their family, employees, and friends, for taking care of us and making us feel so welcome, and for all the guests and neighbours who were excited to hear about where we stood in chasing the record and what we found.

For a full list of species we observed during the period from the afternoon of 2 January up to the morning of 6 January, P.C. Ferreira can be e-mailed at info@karoogariep.co.za.



Figure 2 Setting a new SABAP2 record for the Northern Cape! Left to right: Janelle, PC and Pieter.

