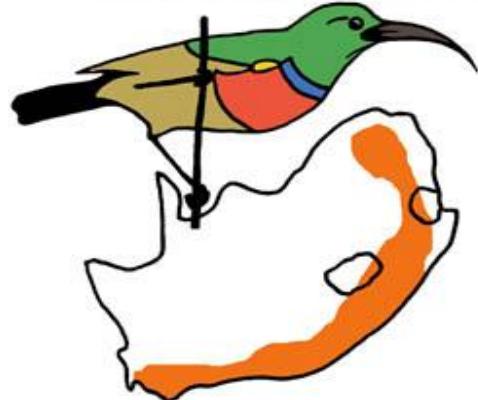


SABAP2



KZN South Coast Christmas Atlasing

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KZN SOUTH COAST CHRISTMAS ATLASING

My 2019 Christmas holidays were spent at Ramsgate on the KwaZulu-Natal South Coast. While the main focus was the beach and family, I did manage two to three hours a morning (the sun rises early in the east in mid-summer) and the odd afternoon outing. My father also managed the 3:50 wake up on most mornings. We focused on three pentads including Ramsgate (3050_3020), the pentad immediately west of Ramsgate (3050_3015) and the pentad to the west of Shelley Beach (3045_3015). The last pentad included much of the spectacular Mbumbazi Nature Reserve. I could not find out much about the reserve or even if it has formal status. Over the eleven days, we completed six full protocol cards and recording just under 200 species.



Figure 1 Southcoast forest and grassland.

The following are holiday highlights:

I spent a few hours watching the sea. This was mostly small children swimming in the surf or exploring rock pools. However, if you lift your gaze slightly, and use a pair of binoculars (be careful on the main beach!), there were some seabirds on offer. In addition to the ubiquitous Cape Gannets, Cory's Shearwaters were surprisingly common and on more than one day, 5 to 6 could be seen in one single sweep of the horizon. Other interesting species were a single Indian Ocean Yellow-nosed Albatross that came close enough to allow identification and the occasional Parasitic Jaegers harassing Common Terns. Estuaries were generally a little disappointing, most likely due to the high-water levels and the intensity of use at this time of year. A pair of Palm-nut Vulture on the Southbroom Beach with Grey Plover and about 40 Water Thick-knee was a notable exception. Most coastal reedbeds support colonies of Eastern Golden and Thick-billed Weaver. Coastal scrub around Ramsgate was home to a few pairs of Southern Tchagra.



Albeit a little fragmented and overgrown with invasive species, there is still a fair amount of coastal bush around. While access can be an issue, if you can find a quiet undisturbed patch, the birding is good. The riverine forest to the north of the Southbroom lagoon produced Knysna and Purple-crested Turaco, Lemon and Tambourine Dove, Buff-spotted Flufftail and Dark-backed Weaver. Grassy thicket revealed Red-backed Mannikin, African Firefinch and accompanying Dusky Indigobird. Mountain and African Pied Wagtails patrol rocky stream banks. In addition to Crowned Eagle, we recorded Brown Snake Eagle and Black Sparrowhawk in the riverine mosaic.

A few kilometres away from the sea, the landscape is dominated by rolling sugarcane covered hills and an increasing number of macadamia plantations. Valleys supported thick forest with high species numbers. Almost every valley had a pair of Wood Owls who called just before dawn. The early morning chorus coming out of these forest patches was pretty impressive with regular contributions from Lemon Dove, Brown Scrub Robin, Square-tailed Drongo, Knysna Turaco, African Goshawk, Terrestrial Brownbul, Cape Batis, Ashy Flycatcher, Dark-backed Weaver and Narina Tropicbird. With a vantage point over one of the largest forest patches, we could hear up to four different Tropicbirds calling on one particular morning. Crowned Eagles are fairly common, mostly emerging later as the day heated up.

The sugarcane and patchwork of remaining grassland and wetland edge supported Croaking, Rufous-winged, Levaillant's and Zitting Cisticola. Orange-breasted Waxbill shoot passed in tight groups. Yellow-throated Longclaw, Rufous-naped Lark and Fan-tailed Widow are common. The Oatlands Waste Disposal Site attracted a congress of White-necked Ravens, a single young Palm-nut Vulture and ensured that the Yellow-billed Kite were more common than normal. A single Black Kite was seen. A few Lanner Falcon worked the fringes of the forest and open sugarcane stubble. Fiery-necked Nightjar seemed to prefer the gum plantations. Further inland the fairly inaccessible Mbumbazi Nature Reserve held some very impressive looking habitat. Honing in on a reasonably sized wetland from the roadside above, we could hear Fan-tailed Grassbird (ex Broad-tailed Warbler) from a few hundred meters up. Red-chested Flufftail followed suite, calling from near the wetter centre of the marsh. The sides of the valley had Cape Grassbird and Greater Honeyguide passing between forest patches.

Working our way further north, small patches of proteas on a rock strewn hillside supported Gurney's Sugarbird and Malachite Sunbird. Lazy Cisticola and Striped Pipit called from rocky areas and we chanced upon a family of Cape Rock Thrush. The grass covered hills revealed a variety of different species, some a little unexpected. Wing-snapping Cisticola and Quailfinch called from above, while Common Quail and Plain-backed Pipit flushed ahead of us. Cape Canaries flew passed. The strong morning wind carried one or two distant notes of promise. Moving closed and after a bit head tilting we honed in on the spot and with a little bit of playback managed to great views of Short-tailed Pipit. Without any further playback, we located at least three additional birds in the area, some showing well on the ground in the track in front of us.

We did not have the time to explore the deeper valleys of the Mbumbazi Nature Reserve, but they looked extremely promising and there is no doubt that any birders making the effort, would be rewarded. Perched on a cliff top above, we listened down into the forest and could hear both Gorgeous and Orange-breasted Bush Shrikes and Red-fronted Tinkerbird. African Olive Pigeon flew between forest patches while Jackal Buzzard surveyed the grasslands from a prominent rock.

Towards the end of the trip, we ventured to the northern side of pentad 3045_3015. The area has lots of sugarcane fields with patches of highly disturbed forest in the low lying wetter areas. It was still early and we stopped to catch a bit of the dawn chorus in some of this mixed habitat.



Croaking Cisticola and Little Rush Warbler called from the sugarcane, Olive Sunbird called from the forest and then we heard the unmistakable trilling end to a call of Knysna Warbler. The bird has been recorded to the south of the pentad and was thus not totally unexpected. We drove onward, stopping frequently in the patchwork of sugarcane fields and fallow grassland. Cape Crow, Orange-breasted Waxbills, African Reed Warbler and a flock of Grey-Crowned Cranes were worthy of mention. Mixed thorn and south coast thicket on a rocky ridge produced Greater Double Collared Sunbird, our first and only Willow Warbler and a Wailing Cisticola from the adjacent slopes. We drove through the small village of Paddock recording African Yellow Warbler near a farm dam and a large flock of African Black Swift. Leaving Paddock on our way back east, we disturbed two Southern Ground Hornbill, a fitting end to our stay in the area and the bird of the year 2020!

