

Hessequa Bird Atlas Newsletter 4 – January 2022

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1. Introduction

The U3A Stilbaai Bird Group has successfully completed another atlas year. In this newsletter we want to give as little statistics as possible and would rather, with a few photos, give the reader some perspectives into the reasons why volunteers keep on participating in the Southern African Bird Atlas Project and similar projects.

2. Background

The background to the Bird Group's participation in the Southern African Bird Atlas Project 2 (SABAP2), as well as in the Virtual Museum project is covered in detail in previous newsletters, as well as in two published articles. Internet links to all the relevant information are given in the references at the end of this newsletter.

3. Progress with atlasing in Hessequa for the year from 1 December 2020 to 30 November 2021

Since the beginning of December 2017 the Bird Group has intensified the monitoring of the 75 pentads of Hessequa by systematic surveys that are spread evenly over the four seasons and the whole area in two-year cycles. Each pentad is surveyed twice per year and this reporting year was the second year of the the second two-year cycle that was successfully completed.

The biggest challenge this year was to also do the autumn surveys for those pentads that could not be covered in 2020 due to the hard lockdown for Covid-19. This put additional demands on the members of the group, but it was successfully completed.

4. Overview of the contributions of the Bird Group to the project

The Southern African Bird Atlas Project relies fully on citizen scientists to do the surveys for the project. This is done on a voluntary basis and all costs are carried by the volunteers themselves.

The number of observers (individuals or pairs) of the Bird Group has increased since the beginning of 2015 to the end of 2021 from 6 to 18 with a maximum of 14 participating in any one year. Over this period the group did more than 1 300 surveys, travelled more than 160 000 km and spent an estimated R240 000 on fuel.

5. Motivation for continuing participation

With the above mentioned in mind the question could most certainly be asked what the motivation is for the members of the Bird Group to continue year after year with these surveys for the project. This is a complex subject and it differs from person to person but below are some examples.

5.1. Hobby with a purpose

Birding is a popular hobby for many people and there are many ways to keep it interesting. It is, however, very satisfying to do it with a purpose where the results could be used beneficially.

The purpose of SABAP2 is twofold

- The updating of the distribution maps of bird species in Southern Africa
- The monitoring of the changes in the occurrence and distribution of the bird species

The SABAP2 information is already being used in many ways. All new bird guide books use the latest distribution maps from SABAP2 and the information is also being used in environmental impact assessments. A number of research projects flowed from the data i.e. the research on the reasons for the decline in Secretary Birds. A recent article discusses the various uses of SABAP2 data and the internet link is given in the references at the end of this newsletter.

Photos submitted to the Virtual Museum are used to compile distribution maps for a wide range of species i.e. mammals, butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies, reptiles and more. The bird photos that are submitted are also being used to compile distribution maps that are then compared with the more detailed maps of SABAP2 to determine the level of accuracy that could be obtained with this method. This is a very important input to the maps of other species.

5.2. Travelling in a beautiful environment

The surveys “force” the observers to drive around in the Hessequa area and to experience with great appreciation the variety and diversity of the area. The photos below give but a small perspective.



Golden early mornings



After harvest early morning



Winter in Hessequa is green



And there is much more than birds to see

5.3. Expanding of knowledge

The Bird Atlas Project relies on accurate and honest observations of each observer with a clear guideline of “if in doubt, leave it out”. To justify the time and cost of this activity each observer is “forced” to improve observation and identification skills. Species can be

identified by sight or calls, and the identification of calls is playing a growing role as the observer's experience grows.

The majority of bird species have habitat preferences and the skill to focus the eyes and ears on the right species in a specific habitat is of huge assistance and develops over time.

5.4. Interesting observations

Every species is important for the project every time a survey is done and every observer can get excited even when observing a House Sparrow, Speckled Pigeon or Hadedda Ibis.

Replying to a question from a reporter on a "lucky" shot Gary Player said "the more you practice, the luckier you get". This is definitely applicable to birding as well and the atlas project gives each participant the opportunity to get "lucky" with interesting observations and the following photos are examples of this.



A Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark which is very rare in Hessequa



The very rare Red-winged Francolin with a white throat and with a lot of red/brown on the neck that distinguishes it from the more common Grey-winged Francolin in the next photo.



Grey-winged Francolin with a speckled throat and less red/brown on the neck



The very shy endemic Victorin's Warbler that occurs on the southern slopes of the Fynbos mountains. They have a distinctive call and are recorded often, but are seen very seldom.



Cape Penduline Tit, one of the smallest birds in Southern African and rare in Hessequa



The fairly common Grey Heron, but probably warming many a farmer's heart with the number of Egyptian Goslings it caught and swallowed in a few minutes



Two juvenile Black-winged Kites quibbling over a Four-striped grass mouse. The top one ate its mouse quickly and then tried its luck with its sibling

5.5. Widening of interests

Members of the Bird Group started submitting photos to the Virtual Museum since the Covid-19 lockdown. The taking of photos for the Virtual Museum brought a whole new dimension to surveys and extended the horizons of birders to all the other species covered in the museum.

5.5.1. Mammals

The observation of mammals in Hessequa is very opportunistic and they occur in between the observation of birds. It is encouraging to encounter many species of small mammals.



Bat-eared foxes early one morning



A Striped polecat which is actually nocturnal, one morning digging for insects or a mouse



A Scrub hare busy with its early morning sand bath



A very inquisitive Small grey mongoose

5.5.2. Butterflies

It is a challenge to take photos of butterflies as they often just fly around, but with patience you can get lucky. The experts of the museum will do the identification and it is thus not necessary to know the species before submitting the photo.



Buquet's vagrant



Eastern dotted border

5.5.3. Dragonflies and Damselflies (Odonata)

Observation of Odonata combines well with birding. When the day heats up and the birds become inactive, the Odonata species get active. In contrast with the butterflies they often return to exactly the same perch and the photographer can focus and wait for the shot. Below are photos of a few of the 38 species already recorded in Hessequa.



Broad Scarlet (dragonfly)



Rock Hooktail (dragonfly)



Common Citril (damselfly)



Sooty Threadtail (damselfly)

6. Liaison with landowners

The Bird Group is extremely fortunate to do surveys in an area with probably the most friendly and supportive farmers in the country. The list of “Friends of the Bird Group” is still growing and currently contains contact details of 169 landowners.

The good relationship that the Bird Group has with landowners is very important for the project and every landowner will receive this newsletter, as well as an updated bird list for the relevant pentad.

7. Summary

The members of the U3A Stilbaai Bird Group have for another year participated enthusiastically in SABAP2 and the Virtual Museum project and have spent wonderful hours in the Hessequa area.

The group has for the year from 1 December 2020 to 30 November 2021 achieved the monitoring aims it has set for itself and has by doing so made another useful set of data available to SABAP2.

Members of the Bird Group have also actively taken photos of a range of species and submitted it to the Virtual Museum.

8. Acknowledgements

- 8.1. All 169 landowners who are friendly and helpful and still allow access for members of the Bird Group, or who are just interested in the project.
- 8.2. All 18 atlasers (individuals or couples) who have participated in surveys for SABAP2 in Hessequa and who are still willing to adhere to the priorities that are set in order to achieve the Bird Group’s objectives.
- 8.3. All the visitors who laid the basis in the Hessequa area since the start of SABAP2 in 2007, and who are still doing a significant number of surveys in this area each year.
- 8.4. All members that are contributing photos to the Virtual Museum project.
- 8.5. The administrative and technical personnel of SABAP2 who are always ready to solve queries about card problems and who handle the submitted “Out-of-Range Forms” promptly and professionally.
- 8.6. The administrative and technical personnel of the Virtual Museum who do the identification of all the species and who, with great patience, correct the errors that are made when submitting photos.
- 8.7. Estelle van Rooyen for all the photos in this newsletter

9. References

- 9.1. Organisations
 - 9.1.1. [U3A Stilbaai](#)
 - 9.1.2. [U3A Stilbaai Bird Group](#)
 - 9.1.3. [Southern African Bird Atlas Project 2](#)
 - 9.1.4. [Virtual Museum](#)

9.2. Previous newsletters

9.2.1. [Hessequa Bird Atlas Newsletters 1, 2 and 3](#)

9.3. Articles

9.3.1. [2018: Systematic atlasing in Hessequa - From mapping to monitoring](#)

9.3.2. [2020: Systematic atlasing in Hessequa - Report on first cycle of seasonal monitoring](#)

9.3.3. [The SABAP2 legacy: A review of the history and use of data generated by a long-running citizen science project](#)