

AGULHAS NATIONAL PARK BIRDING PROJECT

YEARLY REPORT 2012 (Revised)

INTRODUCTION

The AGNP Birding Project is now in its third year and what a wonderful birding destination it has been. Due to the heavy rains the Agulhas Plain were flooded for many months and certain areas was still inaccessible in December.

Many new milestones were achieved in 2012. For the first time all pentads were covered at least once in a year. This was all the more of an achievement because of the new approach to pentads where we tried to spend 5-10 hrs per pentad to improve our statistical value.

Significant changes in the habitat has occurred in the past 2 years since the fire has ravaged the Park. The removal of aliens seems to have improved the wetlands noticeably and the fynbos seems to have recovered well after the veld fire. It will still need a few years to be a food source to some species.

To an outsider who has visited regularly over the past three years, it is clear that the flora and fauna has improved. Rabbits, Grey Rheebuck, Springbok and Ostrich numbers have increased significantly and hopefully this would lead to an increase of raptors in the area. Maybe a visit from the Cape Vulture will soon be on the cards!

METHODOLOGY

Each field trip is well planned in advance so that all habitats can be covered effectively. Where necessary we phone the relevant managers of the farm or AGNP area. We usually leave between 05h00 and 06h00 as the best birding time is probably between sunrise and the following 5 hrs(season dependend).

We go out armed with binoculars, scope and camera. We use the SABAP maps for planning and a GPPS to assure we stay in a specific pentad. Reference tools used are:

SASOL Bird of Southern Africa – Sinclair,Hockey,Tarboton and Ryan

Birds of Southern Africa. Complete Photographic Field Guide. Sinclair, Ryan

SASOL Southern African LBJ's Made Simple. Doug Newman, Gordon King

The Raptor Guide of Southern Africa. Oberpriller and Cillie.

Pipits of Southern Africa. Faansie Peacock

Roberts Birds of Southern Africa. Laptop version.

Birds are identified by viewing but also bird calls. The use of recorded bird calls have increased our accuracy significantly. Birds are listed in the order they are seen. Hourly counts are marked.

In the planning stage, we would watch the weather forecast in order to target the days with sunshine and little wind(if possible). Overcast or windy days negatively influence the counting. We would often in preparation visit the SABAP website to study the birds already listed for that specific pentad and study the species not yet ticked for that pentad. This would include studying habitat, habits and calls.

All bird lists are then submitted electronically to SABAP2. SABAP2 scrutinizes the lists for “out of range” species and if there are any, sends us an “out of range” form which we have to submit. If substantial evidence can be produced, these species are accepted for that specific pentad.

AGNP OVERALL STATISTICS

As mentioned we have covered all 20 pentads at least once this year. 22 cards were submitted this year and over a three year period we have now submitted 55 lists to SABAP. This means we have upped our work rate significantly as these cards sometimes were done over as much as 5 days because of weather constraints.

The overall tally for birds observed in the AGNP in this project now stands at 194 species which is 33 new species for 2012.

The most birds observed on one day was 84 species in the De Mond pentad.

The most species recorded on one card was 90 species in the Zoetendals vlei pentad. This was over a 5 day period and 7 hrs of observation. This is the highest number of species ever submitted at SABAP for these specific AGNP pentads.

STATISTICS BY PENTAD

NUWEDAM PENTAD(3435_1935)

The NUWEDAM pentad Includes the northern half of Waterford area and some agricultural land. This area has some of the best untouched fynbos in the Western Cape.

43 new species was recorded for this pentad. This was because little birding was done previously. The most interesting being the first record of the Greater Honeyguide as well as the Black Sparrow-hawk on the farm Nuwedam.

SABAP has recorded 88 species for this pentad.

VILJOENSHOF PENTAD(3435_1940)

This pentad includes an alien infested area south of Elim. It is encouraging to see that the protea farmer in the area is currently clearing the alien vegetation. It also includes the Viljoenshof community which is a birding haven.

17 new species were recorded of which the elusive Rufous-chested Sparrow-hawk was the most interesting. SABAP has 82 species for this pentad on record.

ELIM PENTAD(3435_1945)

This pentad includes Elim town, the Nuwejaars river wetland system, the Waschkraalvlei area(Dirk Human) and some dry agricultural land. This area is important for the Nuwejaarsrivier SMA and has tremendous opportunity for birding tourism to complement its wine tasting.

14 new species was recorded this year of which the Common Swift was the most interesting as it has never been recorded in this pentad. It is a very good area to see LBJ's such as the larks, cisticolas and pipits. The African Black Duck Hide is near the Zoetendals Winery and gives birders the opportunity to try and see this elusive species.

SABAP has 125 species listed for this pentad, but I believe this pentad is highly under reported.

BO-VOËLVLEI PENTAD (3435_1950)

This pentad includes the Northern part of Voel्वlei which is a birding paradise as well as the Nuwejaars river wetland. There are some agricultural land which delivers well on LBJ's. A Bird hide was planned for Voel्वlei, but work on it has been suspended unfortunately.

16 new species was recorded for this pentad of which the Little Stint was interesting. SABAP has listed 113 species so far for this pentad.

HEUNINGRUG PENTAD(3435_1955)

This pentad is mostly farm land, but includes a southern tip of the Nuwejaarsrivier which has been very lucrative for water bird.

21 new species were recorded of which the Marsh Sandpiper was the most interesting. SABAP has recorded a total of 117 species for this pentad

GROOTEILAND PENTAD(3435_2000)

This pentad almost exclusively is made up of the farm Zeekoeivlei(Pieter Albertyn). It has a wetland system which drains into the Heuningnes river via man made ducts and has some of the best birding on the Agulhas plains.

10 new species has been recorded for this pentad, but the most excitement was caused by the identification of the first Whiskered Tern of this project. These terns kept at a vlei/marsh on the De Mond road for more than a month.

SABAP's official list has 103 species recorded for this pentad, but I believe this is highly under reported.

PRINCEKRAAL PENTAD(3435_2005)

This pentad is mostly agricultural land but is well reported probably because it is en route to De Mond.

37 new species was recorded simply because it was not covered well in the past. The most interesting identifications was Forest Buzzard and Klaas's Cuckoo. SABAP has 127 species recorded for this pentad.

WATERFORD PENTAD(3440_1935)

The Waterford pentad includes the southern half of Waterford, the wetland north of Die Dam(which has been very dry lately) and a small coastal area.

23 new species were identified for this pentad including African Marsh-Harrier and African Spoonbill. . SABAP has listed 83 species for this pentad.

The wetland in the south eastern side of the pentad urgently needs to be cleared of alien plantation as this could become an excellent birding spot.

WOLVENGAT PENTAD(3440_1940)

This pentad includes the northern Ratel river area(which includes the farmstead) as well as the Viljoenshof settlement. A Large part of the Ratel river is in this pentad and although it is overgrown with alien forest currently, if possible this should urgently be cleared in order to save this wetland system.

31 new species were recorded in this pentad including African Dusky Flycatcher and Black Crake. SABAP has 98 species for this pentad currently.

RIETFONTEIN PENTAD(3440_1945)

This pentad will always be a major birding destination in the AGNP due to the Melkbospan and Rietfontein pan and homestead. The veld has been restored to a degree and birdlife is beginning to return. The fountain next to the pan could be an excellent site for a bird hide.

15 new species have been recorded, none of which was spectacular. The area between Rietfontein pan and Melkbospan can be marketed as an LBJ's viewing area. Especially the Cloud Cisticola can be observed particularly well as they call each other in early morning.

SABAP has 117 species listed for this pentad

A highlight of this pentad was to see 1400 Greater Flamingo mirrored on the pan in early morning.

VOËLVLEI PENTAD(3440_1950)

Voelvlei Pentad includes the largest portion of the Voelvlei as well as the Bergplaas and Springfield farms of AGNP. It also includes the largest portion of the Anysberg.

11 new species were recorded. One of the interesting ones was the Grey-winged Francolin. This species was known to occur here, but has not been seen in the past three years by us. This year we have suddenly seen it in three different pentads! This could be due to the good rains. It could be that the AGNP has rehabilitated enough to carry more francolin.

SABAP has recorded 104 species for this pentad, but this is probably underreported.

ZOETENDALSVLEI PENTAD(3440_1955)

The Zoetendalsvlei pentad includes part of the Springfield Saltpan, Soutbos pan and Petrus Swart pan to the west, the Zoetendalsvlei perimeter, Nuwejaarsriver up to Wiesdrif, cultivated land near Wiesdrif and the first kilometer of the Heuningnesrivier . This is certainly the most exciting birding destination in the AGNP.

8 new species were recorded. Interestingly we recorded the first Secretary bird in this pentad since the start of the project. Since we have seen Secretary bird in 5 of the pentads this year, it begs the question whether they are on the increase in the AGNP. Grey-winged Francolin was also seen on the gravel road for the first time just south of Zoetendalsvlei. Little Rush-warbler was listed for the first time but the highlight of the year must be the secretive African Rail identified on the Nuwejaarsrivier in the reed bed near the vlei.

For the past three years we have been trying to prove to SABAP that the Long-billed Pipit occurs in the AGNP. Three previous reports have been turned down due to what they called lack of evidence. In December we were lucky to 100% positively identify the long-billed Pipit by call and recording.

SABAP has listed an impressive 143 species for this pentad.

The "Friends of the Park" has developed some interesting viewpoints for birdwatching at the Springfield Saltpan. This will be appreciated by all birders. Care should be taken of the positioning though. As stated in my last report, the removal of the alien vegetation on the road, has taken away the protection for the Caspian Tern breeding colony. They have all but abandoned their breeding site. During this year I noted one breeding pair has returned, but since the building of the hide near their nesting site, has left again. Ideally the approach to the hide should be hidden and not be exposed to their breeding site. This could be done with a dekriet passage perhaps.

One way of addressing the problem could be to shift soil and build a protective wall behind which the terns can breed without being visible from the road. By using soil near the birdhides, the last of the water in the pans will be near the hides which will be excellent for birding tourism. Birdlife SA could be approached for advice as they have done similar work for the Flamingoes in Kimberley.

KLIPFONTEIN PENTAD(3440_2000)

This pentad is mostly agricultural land but includes a beautiful piece of the Heuningnes river on the farm Visserdrift(Johannes Uys). There are also large fynbos areas to the south.

20 new species were identified of which the Marsh Sandpiper and Gey-winged Francolin caused the most excitement. SABAP has listed 121 species for this pentad.

DE MOND PENTAD(3440_2005)

This is by far the most popular pentad for birders and 48 cards has been submitted to SABAP. The main attraction being the De Mond Nature reserve and the wetlands north of it.

47 new species was recorded for this project mostly because this pentad was not covered well in the first two years. Bar-tailed Godwit, Eurasian Curlew, Curlew sandpiper and Neddicky created some excitement for us.

SABAP has listed 182 species for this pentad so far which is the highest of all the pentads, but 40 more cards have been submitted for this area than the average AGNP pentad.

QUOIN POINT PENTAD(3445_1935)

This pentad was surveyed because it forms part of the greater Agulhas Plain and is a nature reserve. It is also an important reserve because of Quoin Rock which is one of the last breeding colonies of the Bank Cormorant. This could have huge marketing value if incorporated into the AGNP.

It consists of coastal dunes and fynbos and a small fishing village and is a very dry, arid pentad.

45 species was recorded on one outing. SABAP has 80 species listed for this pentad. The Bank cormorant was the highlight of the visit. A possible nesting site of a Black Harrier caused us to go back to investigate, but no nest could be found.

DIE DAM (3445_1940)

This pentad includes “Die Dam” settlement, coastal birding, southern fynbos area of Ratel river and the mouth of the Ratel river. This area would have tremendous birding tourism value once the alien trees are cleared. At this stage it is very difficult to see the mouth.

38 new species were identified mostly due to the fact that we spent more hours in this pentad. Water and Spotted Thicknee, Southern Tchagra, Rock and Brown-throated Martin, Olive Thrush and Orange-breasted Sunbird were to be seen . SABAP has 77 species listed for this pentad.

RIETFONTEIN SE BAAI (3445_1945)

This very small pentad has fynbos overgrown by aliens as well as some fine coastal viewing. There is a interesting old river mouth which needs to be cleared of aliens. This could prove to be a beautiful picnic site/birding spot. The “Drie Vleie” is also in this pentad and when flooded produces interesting wader birding.

21 new species were recorded of which Common Whimbrel, Curlew Sandpiper and Little Stint was the highlight.

BRANDFONTEIN PENTAD(3445_1950)

The Brandfontein pentad is a small pentad which includes the southern slopes of the Anysberg and a few private nature reserves. The road between Renosterkop and Brandfontein has some pristine fynbos for fynbos birding. There is a few small pans which fills up in good rainy seasons.

11 new species was recorded this year of which Cape Batis the most colourful. Because of the rain this year a few ducks(Yellow-billed and Red-billed Teal) were seen for the first time in three years.

The elusive Hottentot Buttonquail was probably seen for the first time in this pentad but because it is so secretive, a definite identification could not be made. This species could be a major attraction for birding tourism once identified. This species will not be flushed until you just about step on it. Once flushed, it will fly low for about 30m, land behind a bush, never to be seen again. One of the targets for 2013 is to identify this species.

According to SABAP statistics, 103 species have been recorded for this pentad.

SUIDERSTRAND PENTAD (3445_1955)

The Suiderstrand pentad includes urban area, coast line (including the fresh water inlet east of Suiderstrand), Sandberg, Renosterkop chalets and the dunes behind them. It includes part of the Renosterkop Pan as well as Pietie se Punt(but so far I have not been able to obtain access).

11 new species was identified. Some new species for this pentad was: Black-shouldered Kite, Cape Sugarbird, Chestnut-banded Plover, Greater Flamingo, Little Stint, Southern Masked Weaver, White-necked Raven, Yellow Bishop and Yellow-billed Duck. No rare bird was seen. SABAP has listed 92 species for this pentad.

The best birding spots in this pentad for tourism purposes is:

1. Renosterkop farm and pan. The pan needs a hide. It is easily accessible and excellent for waders when flooded.
2. Agulhas to Suiderstrand road for seabirds. The freshwater fountain near Suiderstrand being a highlight. A path to a hide in this area could be a good idea.

STRUISBAAI PENTAD (3445_2000)

Struisbaai pentad includes coast-line, urban areas, fynbos areas above Agulhas including lookout road and golf course development, sewage works near Struisbaai North, dunes north of Struisbaai and agricultural land (Zoetendalsvlei).

So far 105 species have been recorded in this pentad with 72 species recorded this year on one list. This is the highest ever for this pentad according to SABAP. African Pipit, African Marsh-Harrier, Pied Crow and Red-capped Lark was ticked for the first time for this project.

SABAP reports 126 species for this pentad which means we need to identify another 21 species.

The best birding spots in this pentad for tourism purposes is the

1. Struisbaai Sewage Works - Yellow-billed Duck, Red-billed Teal, Cape Teal, Cape Shoveler, White-faced Duck, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Little Grebe, Common Greenshank and Black-winged Stilt occurs regularly. Municipal Manager Ollie informs me that a new sewage dam will be developed and that the old one will be kept to improve this site as a prime birding site like so many sewage works in the country.
2. The Boardwalk and Harbour area – Caspian, Damara, Swift, Sandwich, Common Tern, African Black Oystercatcher, White-fronted and Grey Plover, White-breasted and Cape Cormorant, Southern Double-banded and Malachite Sunbird and Southern Tchagra can be seen.
3. Coastal Road to Agulhas and beyond – As above but be on the look-out for vagrant sea birds after stormy weather. Grey Plover and Ruddy Turnstone appears often. This area is especially good for various terns.

CONCLUSION

We now have 188 verified species for this project over the three year period with some applications still to be judged. In 2010 135 species were identified, 2011 it was 154 and now in 2012 it is 174. This is due to increased experience, better knowledge of the pentads and better knowledge of where birds occur.

We have for the first time covered all pentads in one year which is an achievement taking into account the improve way of doing it(which takes much longer). We have covered an estimated 2200km just between our homes and the different destinations in the park.

Above all this has been a wonderful year for birding as many pans were water logged for the first time in three years. This could account for the higher numbers achieved. Achievements in terms of identification lists were:

1. 55 verified cards have now been submitted to SABAP
2. In 14 of the 20 pentads we have identified the most species by card. This is a specific target because to be statistically of value, we should identify more birds than anyone else simply because of the time we spend here compared to other birders.
3. We for the first time identified 90 species on one card. The highest being 100 species in the De Mond area.
4. The highest number of birds on one day identified was 84. This is the best ever of this project.

THE FUTURE

The strategy for the year would be:

1. Cover each pentad at least once
2. Target pentads where we are not the leading list by number
3. Target the 100 species per single card challenge
4. Begin a process of GPS marking species in the AGNP and NSMA with the idea of maybe eventually writing a book on "Where to find birds in the AGNP and Agulhas Plain"
5. Birdslists of Renosterkop, Bergplaas, Rietfontein, Ratelrivier and Pietie se Punt to be completed.
6. Intensive birding of Zeekoeivlei(Grooteiland Pentad), Waschkraalvlei(Elim Pentad) to improve the profile of these underrated birding spots
7. Find the Hottentot Buttonquail!

THANK YOU

I would like to thank the management and staff of the AGNP for their support in this project. I also must thank the many NSMA farmers and farm managers who showed an interest in the project and often accompanied us on their farms. It has been a privilege to monitor birdlife on your properties.

Please understand that the opinions raised in this report is by no means professional and simply meant to stimulate thought. It is clear that much has been achieved in this year and especially the clearing of the alien trees has markedly improved the Agulhas Plains.

A special thanks to my birding buddies Chris van Gass and wife Lolize for joining me on early morning expeditions while others still sleep!

There is no doubt in my mind that the Agulhas plains should be marketed as a birding destination internationally. Before that can be done, the necessary bird hides need to be built at strategic places and kept in good condition.

May 2013 be a year to remember for all the right reasons.

Wim de Klerk