

AGULHAS PLAINS BIRDING PROJECT

2015 YEARLY REPORT(Revised)

INTRODUCTION

The Agulhas Plains Birding Project is now completed and 2015 was mostly used to digest the information gathered and to decide what is required to protect the birds of the Agulhas Plains for future generations.

Birding of the area in 2015 was still based on the SABAP2 approach but more emphasis was placed on the MYBIRDPATCH method of recording as this makes more sense in terms of tourism in the area -AGNP, farmers, wineries and guest houses want to know more about birds occurring in specific areas e.g. the AGNP would like to be able to give tourists a list of birds occurring in the Main Rest Camp.

The Agulhas Birding Project as a scientific study had many flaws:

- The level of experience increased each year and differed dramatically between 2010 and 2014.
- The method of identification improved every year because of improved tools such as books, cameras, birding apps.
- The number of pentads increased every year which meant that direct comparison between different years was difficult.
- The habitat changed dramatically during the 5 years, firstly because of the "big fire" and secondly because of alien clearing programs.
- Not all the pentads feeding into the protected area was studied.
- Outcomes:
 - Not enough training has followed since the project. The initial purpose of the project was to develop a training program for staff of AGNP and Nuwejaarsrivier SMA.
 - No development of Bird hides as anticipated.

All of the above lead to the:

5 YEAR STRATEGY BEGINNING JAN 2016

1. Cover pentads that include area South of the Soetmuisberg Mountains i.e South of 3430 latitude East of 1935 longitude and West of the 2010 longitude. (For this purpose an additional 4 pentads has been added.)
2. Using Birdlasser. This app allows for recording and direct SABAP submission. It also allows for travelling the roads used by tourists and changing pentad by itself. This means more smaller lists more often. It allows for adding numbers. Each ID has an exact GPS co-ordinate. This makes it ideal for simultaneous Mybirdpatch and SABAP2 lists.
3. Bird hide development by working with AGNP staff in particular, counting the species at identified possible bird hide sights. Sitting down with management and decide to prioritize the available venues and then focus on each site according to importance.
4. Have a AGULHAS PLAINS BIRDING website erected by Dec 2016. This would highlight the endemics of the area which should be the draw card to the area. This could also be a bird guide and birding accomodation site. Agulhas Plains Birding could become an instrument toward a yearly Buttonquail Bash in close association with AGNP and suitable farms in the area.

5. Bird guide training of AGNP staff as organized by Masindi Raselabe. This includes improving on the current "Birds of the Agulhas Plains" powerpoint to make it more user friendly.
6. The new species target for 2016 is 5 new species. The possible additions will be:
 - Cape Siskin
 - Ground Woodpecker
 - Knysna Woodpecker
 - Olive Woodpecker
 - Willow Warbler
 - African Marsh-owl
 - Grass owl
 - Caspian Plover
 - Phalarope
 - Striped Flufftail
 - Baillon's Crake
 - Fulvous Duck
 - White-backed Mousebird
 - Alpine Swift
 - White-chinned Petrel
 - African Quailfinch
 - European Bee-eater
 - Grey-backed Sparrow-lark
 - Karoo Korhaan
 - Osprey
 - Parasitic Jaeger
 - Squacco Heron
 - Spike-heeled Lark
 - Great Egret
 - Goliath Heron
 - European Roller
 - Black Cuckoo
 - Blue-mantled Flycatcher

HIGHLIGHTS/ACHIEVEMENTS OF 2015

- The year began with the confirmation of three more species(rarities) for the Agulhas Plains Birding list:
 - o Montagu's Harrier
 - o African Goshawk
 - o Amur Falcon

These were entered by Mick D'alton and all occurred just South of the Soetmuisberg mountains.

- In the 2014 report I had a long discussion about Neddicky. This year I identified it positively for the first time. What was interesting, was that the habitat was perfect. For visitors to the Agulhas plains, it should be explained that our 5 Cisticolas are very habitat specific and that one can almost 100% positively identify a species by simply looking at the habitat:
 - o Neddicky - Mountainous fynbos, edges of plantations, dead trees and degraded areas.
 - o Levillant's - Always near water with reeds or tall restios.
 - o Grey-backed - Renosterveld, ,5 to 1m high
 - o Cloud - grassland or low fynbos, ,2 to ,4m high, open spaces, few trees.

- o Zitting - Almost always in fynbos with restios ,5-1m.

The Karoo Prinia in the Agulhas Plains has a variation of calls, one of which can confuse birders. Also interesting is that there is a frog which occurs here and has an almost identical call to Neddicky! This frog calls during and after rain and on foggy overcast days in Summer. This could explain the over reporting of Neddicky in the area.

- The Martial Eagle at last revealed itself in 2015 after regular reports. The increase in reports seems to indicate that there might be a breeding pair in the region of Heuningberg.
- 8 new species were recorded during 2015 which was not yet reflected in the Agulhas Birding Project: Lark-like Bunting, Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk, Tambourine Dove, Lemon Dove, African Black Swift, Amethyst Sunbird, **Spotted Flycatcher**, and Peregrine Falcon. The Lark-Like Bunting was probably forced into the territory due to the drought. Most of these species were reported previously but not yet confirmed. The **Spotted Flycatcher**, a migrant from Western Europe flies almost 13000km to reach the most southern point of Africa. Birds released in Wales and Finland has been identified in South Africa. They moult while in South Africa and are unusual in that they replace outermost primaries before the innermost. There is no logical explanation for this as yet!
- The Familiar Chat was another species which is often reported but not recorded in the 5 years of the project - until this year when it was clearly seen almost on the most Southern tip of Africa and 20m from the beach! To date still the only positive identification with a picture.
- Wattled Starling, Yellow-billed Egret, Common House-Martin, were recorded in the early years and I started to doubt these, thinking that perhaps, due to inexperience in the early years, I was confusing Pied with Wattled Starling, Cattle Egret with Yellow-billed and Common House-Martin with Pearl-breasted Swallow. This was cleared when all three presented themselves in 2015. What was interesting is that data revealed that the Common House-Martin was always recorded in a very specific area. This is a migrant which appears to migrate day and night on the wing rarely roosting in unoccupied nests on their way.
- Southern Black Korhaan has been recorded only twice during the project and during the first 2 years. A male showed itself in the Rietfontein area and the hope is that the clearing of aliens will open up enough renosterveld in the Agulhas National Park for this species to recover.
- White Stork was recorded in large numbers and they seem to be doing well at the moment. What was interesting, is that a new breeding nest was discovered next to the famous nest on the farm Nachtwacht. Could this be a second breeding pair?
- The Hottentot Buttonquail Survey proved to be highly successful and 11 Buttonquail were identified in 3 days.
- Finding 15 Common Greenshank feeding on sandflies at Quoin Point on the beach among Sanderling, Curlew Sandpipers and Hartlaub Gull was a surprise but it once again proves that birds are opportunists that do not read birdguides!
- Bank Cormorant numbers seemed stable but the increase in Crowned Cormorant and Hartlaubs Gull numbers East of Quoin Point was a positive finding. Whether this was due to the warm sea water and a change in feeding ground or a genuine increase in numbers only time will tell.
- African Marsh-harrier is a common species in the Agulhas Plains but never before have we noticed so many immature and Juveniles and such large numbers. This is most likely due to the increase in habitat due to the alien clearing program.
- Only the second ID of Greater Honeyguide was recorded this year. Once again in the remaining alien forest this time near Raterivier. This species could disappear eventually as it favours alien forests.

- The Damara Tern roosts have been avoided thus far due to their vulnerability. This year I accidentally bumped into a nesting site, clearly breeding. It seemed to be 2-3 pairs. Of great concern was that there was Kelp Gull clearly watching the nests and being attacked by them. Even more disturbing was that a new parking area was established on the beach following a court order and this area is now used by Struisbaai inhabitants to walk their dogs exactly where the nests are. This area should somehow be protected during the breeding season (Oct to March) by asking users to walk dogs to the right of the area or stay within 50m of the waters edge (and thus staying away from the dunes.)
- It appears as if the Caspian Tern has returned to roost on the Springfield Saltpans! This is good news as they all disappeared after the aliens have been removed which exposed their nests to the gravel road. The natural flora has now replaced the aliens and forms a natural protective fence. Future bird hides should be built far enough from this roost.
- Two data sheets of 119 and 120 species / pentad was the highest ever recorded for SABAP in this area.
- The first powerpoint lecture on birding in the Agulhas Plains was completed at AGNP headquarters organized by Masindi Raselabe. About 30 rangers and monitors attended and it was agreed to follow up with more intense training of rangers in the new year.
- **The Agulhas Plains bird list now stands at a whopping 235 species.** It is difficult to believe that the list keeps growing!
- Often real estate developers are allowed to develop land because "the land has already been irreparably damaged" and overgrown with aliens. The alien clearing program in the AGNP and SMA is proof that any land can be rehabilitated! Well done!

MYBIRDPATCH

The target for 2015 included elaborating on the MYBIRDPATCH patches in the area. The following patches have been registered and recorded thus far:

1. Langerzandt Wetland - This is the wetland next to Langerzandt, Struisbaai. This small wetland was partly destroyed by the development and then the developers promised an even better wetland. This is a highly recommended birding spot as it hosts some very rare species such as Greater Painted Snipe, Little Bittern, Black-Crowned Night-Heron and many more. Sadly the removal of alien vegetation as promised by developer never happened. Furthermore the developer is now dumping building rubble in the wetland in order to develop the land. This should be stopped!
2. Struisbaai Boardwalk - This is an easy to reach point to look for terns including Damara Tern.
3. Agulhas Patch - This patch includes the tern roost next to the campsite as well as the Lookout road and the rest of the town.
4. Agulhas Rest Camp patch - Birds of the AGNP main rest Camp
5. Blomfontein Patch - Farm managed by Conrad Vlok including the Strandveld winery
6. Grashoek Patch - Grashoek Farm of Pieter du Toit which has very interesting mountain species and many raptors. Includes the beautiful Bergen Dam Cottage and surrounding area.
7. Klipfontein Patch - Klipfontein farm including the private nature reserve and Klipfontein Keep guest house.
8. Vissersdrift patch - Vissersdrift Farm of Johannes Uys which includes the Langerug Lodge. It borders on the Zoetendalsvlei as well as Heuningnes river.
9. Kosierskraal patch - Kosierskraal farm of Mick D'Alton. Mountainous area with many raptors.
10. Moddervlei patch - Moddervlei Farm Dirk Human which includes the Black Oystercatcher Wineries and the WASCHKRAALPAN

11. Raterivier patch - Raterivier Homestead, AGNP and surrounding area.
12. Rietfontein patch - Rietfontein Cottage, AGNP and surrounding area including Melkbospan and Vispan.
13. Saltpans patch - Springfield Saltpans, AGNP. This is a haven for waders including the Chestnut-banded Plover
14. Vogelgevang patch - Vogelgevang Farm of Paul Moxley. This is a wetland adjacent to De Mond.
15. Wiesdrift Patch - Wiesdrift Farm of Dirkie Swart. Includes wetland along Nuwejaarsriver and various pans including Langpan.
16. Zeekoeivlei patch - Zeekoeivlei Farm of Pieter Albertyn. Borders on the Heuningnes and has many canals with water as well as Varkvlei.

Other patches have been registered but not yet activated. The workload is quite high which means those requesting that their farms etc be counted has to ask for it!

MEASURING SUCCESS

Having concluded this project, the question is: Did it have any impact? In the long term one can count species and record their numbers. If this is done on a regular basis one will pick up differences like the Caspian Tern disappearing and African Marsh-harrier increasing. This can lead us to ask questions about changes and warn us about imminent dangers.

In the rest of South Africa, the increase of Pied Crow numbers seems to be a cause for concern and is being investigated. No-one knows why this has happened. In the Agulhas Plains Pied Crows barely occur. We see large numbers of Cape Crow and even White-necked raven, but not Pied Crow. Why?

Measuring success in terms of tourism is easier though. Birders submit records to SABAP2 when they visit the area and these statistics are available. During the first 3 years of the project, about 3 data sheets on average were entered per month. The last 3 years it increased to 6/month on average. This would suggest a 100% growth in birding tourism. All birders do not submit datasheets of course and when groups travel, only one card is submitted, but still it gives us a measurable entity.

If one organizes birding days such as a "Buttonquail Bash" or similar, entries can also be measured .

CONCERNS

- The disappearance of renosterveld in the Agulhas Plains. A pledge to farmers to save as much renosterveld as possible.
- The habitat of the Hottentot Buttonquail should be managed by alien clearing and occasional burning of thickening vegetation. The Buttonquail survey will shed some light on their needs.
- There are areas which seems to be in need of a burn program.
- No Forest Buzzards were recorded this year. Could it be due to alien forest clearing?
- No Lesser Flamingo recorded this year. This could be purely circumstantial.
- Tracks in the AGNP are slowly disappearing because they are not used. This could be costly if one later would like to use it for tourism. It might be necessary to plan birding routes with the area manager of each area in the AGNP so that the best routes can be developed. Historical tracks are not necessarily the best for future tourism in the park.
- The Damara Tern predicament as explained.

THANKS

I would like to thank AGNP staff , Nuwejaars SMA members and others for the opportunity to record the birds of their wonderful area. If you have any complaints or strange sightings or need me to record your specific area in the Agulhas Plains, please feel free to contact me at:

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Yours

Wim de Klerk