

AGULHAS PLAIN BIRDING PROJECT

Birds of the Agulhas Plain Biosphere

YEARLY REPORT 2019

This report is a requirement of an agreement with Agulhas National Park and Nuwejaars Wetland SMA at the start of the project 9 years ago.

INTRODUCTION

The Agulhas Plain Birding Project started in Jan 2010 and at the beginning was an effort to record, accurately, the birds of the Agulhas National Park. The project evolved over the next 10 years to include Cape Nature reserves and Nuwejaars Wetland, increasing in area monitored, improving in methodology and tools used. At the end of 2014, the project was extended because we realized that there were too many gaps in our knowledge. Our tools became much more sophisticated and our experience of the species and habitat improved so much that another 5 years was required to improve data.

During the project, many interesting people were met that enriched our lives. Almost monthly we would discover new birding spots and this continued until the tenth year. In fact, in the last year some discoveries were made that would require further research and could very well deliver on some more species.

Networking with other entities such as Sanparks, Cape Nature and the Nuwejaars Wetland SMA has led to some great experiences of which many birding days was perhaps a highlight. Ultimately, though, it was about collecting data for the past ten years and listing the species that occur in the Agulhas Plain. The end goal should at least be accurate birdlists for:

- The Agulhas National Park,
- De Mond Nature Reserve
- Quoin Point Nature reserve
- Nuwejaars Wetland SMA
- Individual farms on the Plain
- The greater Agulhas Plain(or Biosphere. After consultation with some conservationists, the term biosphere could be applicable to the area chosen for research which is why it is for the first time now used in the title)

Although these bird lists would be the end result of the current project, it remains a work in progress as new species have been added every year since 2010 and even in the last year another 4 new species were added to the Agulhas Plain list. One of the shortcomings of the protocol used in this project, is that one has to stay on the move and record as many species as possible in 2 hrs. This means that one tends to miss out on secretive species such as Baillon's Crake , Knysna Warbler, Cape Siskin and Victorin's Warbler. All of these reported before but not seen during the project. Many questions remain with regard to these species and also others that prefer difficult habitats. This will

have to be investigated in the next few years, using a much slower protocol, spending hours at one site, perhaps in a makeshift hide.

The project certainly has some serious weaknesses as some species were simply not recorded with sufficient confidence. To give an example: According to SABAP2, 3 Pipits should be found in the area. When you go out to cover a pentad, you are aware of this and could be biased in your choice of Pipit. After 10 years of spending many hours looking at the 3 species, there is still some uncertainty. The same could be said of the Terns recorded at De Mond and other coastal roosts. The obvious ones such as Greater Crested, Sandwich and Damara Tern is simple, but more time could be spent to improve differentiation between Common, Roseate, Arctic and Antarctic Terns. It is likely that much confusion is added by subspecies of Common Tern or even hybrids.

Ultimately one would like to end up with a record of birds occurring in this biosphere that will be of some value to researchers in years to come.

Hereby a short summary of the most interesting observations, developments and birding achievements for 2019:

1. All 27 pentads were covered successfully by the 23th of December. 29 Full protocol and 9 ad-hoc checklists were submitted to SABAP2 for the year which brings the total checklists submitted for the project to 247 and 177 respectively.
2. The last year of the project was utilized to even out winter and summer counts where possible as we came to the conclusion that a more even spread would be scientifically more accurate. The aim in the beginning of the year was to get at least 33% in winter counts. This was achieved in all but 9 of the 28 pentads. There simply was not enough time to better the equation further.
3. We also spent quality time in the field looking for species not found before and in the process found some interesting new birding spots, especially against the Soetanyenberg where we were looking for warblers and Rock-thrush.
4. Especially exciting was the networking between local birders such as those at ANP, Cape Nature and Nuwejaars SMA which announced interesting species when seen. Thank you! Always better together!
5. Statistics seem to show that the drought slowly is having an effect on species numbers. Species numbers has dropped from 212 per year in 2017 to 193 per year in 2019, a 9% drop. The drought has been with us for about 5 years which seems to show that there is a lag period before numbers drop, as if birds learn from experience!
6. The Langerzandt estate and wetland has gone from strength to strength and a lot of effort has gone into cleaning up the wetland. Arisa Voges is the trustee in charge of the ECOZONE. Much more still needs to be done, as alien trees are still everywhere to be seen.
7. As was the case in 2018, a further 4 species were added to the official Agulhas Plain Birding List in 2019. The official list now stands at 273 species! The new species recorded in 2019 are:
African Quailfinch - Eugene en Co - Nuwejaars River

African Wood-Owl - Erica Brink on the farm Blomkloof

Red-backed Shrike - Wim de Klerk on the farm Koksrivier

Lesser Sand Plover - Wim de Klerk at De Mond

8. Other significant observations in 2019 was:

European Honey-Buzzard – Sandberg Fynbos Reserve

Greater Sand Plover – De Mond

Curlew Sandpiper in full breeding plumage! – De Mond.

Lesser Kestrel – various pentads

9. The Damara Tern has returned this year to “Die Plaat” and one chick was observed, but the surprise was De Mond where on one day 17 adults were observed! This is rather promising. Of great concern is the 4x4 vehicles that leave the designated parking area to play in the dunes, often very close to breeding Damara.

10. Sadly Adrian Fortuin has left De Mond, but his legacy already has an impact. He (Cape Nature) has purchased quality binoculars and cameras for the rangers at De Mond who now regularly scan the estuary and are becoming accomplished birders. Well done Adrian! The new manager at De Mond is Mark Johns and he seems to be another accomplished manager. Looking forward to working together!

GOALS FOR 2020

1. “clean” data collected. By this I mean checking that all data is reliable.
2. Analyse data collected. Comparison with historical data
3. See Prof Ryan at Fitzpatrick Institute for advice on way forward with data collected.
4. Focussed birding, addressing weaknesses in data
5. Publish findings of the Agulhas Plain Birding Project

CONCLUSION

This report has been kept short deliberately. Analysis of the data will look at various aspects of the data and hopefully published within the next few months. Once this is done, the outcomes will be shared with the relevant parties.

Thank you once again to all those who participated in one way or another. Sam and Louise Beeslaar who accompanied me on many trips and also expertly looked after the website. Andrew de Blocq who is just always there to help. Adrian Fortuin, Mark Johns, Mortimer, Andre and Jack who has made De Mond such a pleasure to visit. Emmerentia at ANP, Arissa Voges at Langerzandt and Gerhard van Deventer at Sandberg. Eugene, Liohan, Erica and Mick at Nuwejaars and the many new faces who enthusiastically embraced the project. I am so thankful to have met you and share our passion for protecting the birds of the Agulhas Plain.

WIM DE KLERK