

QUALITY CONTROL

Rarities and 'out-of-range' species

One of the key strengths of the Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP) is that unusual records are checked before they are added to the database. If you explore some other popular listing sites, you will find all sorts of odd records, like Cape Rockjumpers on the Cape Peninsula. Such clearly erroneous records are easy to spot, but what about more subtle mistakes? Atlas data are only as good as the systems put in place to weed out incorrect records, whether they result from mis-identifications, deliberate fabrications or just incorrect data entry.

National rarities

The concept of checking unusual bird records is far from new. Rarities committees have been in place for decades to assess whether records of 'rare' species (i.e. species well outside their normal range) are sufficiently well documented to be accepted. In South Africa, the BirdLife South Africa National Rarities Committee assesses all records of species on the national rarities list, as well as new species recorded for the first time.

When an atlaser submits a record of a national rarity to SABAP2, the system sends a national rarity notification to the observer, with links to the webpage where they can submit their sighting. Unfortunately, the deliberations of this committee take some time and we are considering ways to simplify the process for atlas cards containing well-documented rarities that attract lots of birders (for example, lists containing the Sooty Gull from Kei Mouth or Crested Honey Buzzard from Somerset West).

Regional rarities and 'out-of-range' species

But national rarities are only the tip of the proverbial iceberg for SABAP. It is more important that we check unusual records of more common species,

to ensure that range changes are indeed taking place. To aid this process, SABAP2 uses two approaches: regional rarity lists and the 'out-of-range' tool. Both rely on Regional Atlas Committees (RACs) to vet the records.

Regional rarity lists work like the national rarities system, but at a provincial level. Species listed as rare in a given region automatically trigger a request for additional information. The out-of-range tool is more sophisticated – it uses the data already in SABAP to check for existing data. Out-of-range notifications tell us that a particular species has not been reported in that pentad or the surrounding pentads during SABAP1 or SABAP2. This works well in areas with lots of atlas data, but can be a little tedious in poorly atlased areas, where numerous species on a list might be flagged. However, rather than viewing out-of-range forms (ORFs) as an annoyance, you should see them as a sign that you are pioneering. You are the first person to record the species for the area!

Submitting ORFs

The ORFs and regional rarity forms require you to validate your sighting. For easy-to-identify species, the descriptions of the bird and its distinguishing features can be quite brief. This information, together with any images or sound recordings, can be submitted via a link in the ORF notification. Alternatively, atlasers can log onto the SABAP2 website and open their 'My Data' profile to access their ORF list.

The ORFs are checked by the RACs, who assess each record based on their extensive knowledge of the birds in their region. In difficult cases, they can draw on a more extensive network of expert birders. The RACs are the unsung heroes of SABAP2 – without their constant effort, we would have much less confidence in the quality of the data generated. For a full list of the



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The Glossy Ibis is expanding its range across much of southern Africa, generating lots of ORFs. It may seem silly to have to explain how you know you saw such an easily identified species, but it's necessary to ensure the high quality of SABAP data.

RACs, see <http://sabap2.birdmap.africa/content/3>

Hopefully this article explains why it's important to bear with the process. By submitting details of all rarities and out-of-range species, we have much greater confidence in the data in SABAP2. And once you've submitted an ORF for a pentad, you shouldn't have to do so again for that species in that area. So please keep on submitting your ORFs and make your records count!

