



mother lode

Atlasing Cape Town's CBD

TEXT **GARRET SKEAD** • PHOTOGRAPHS **DOMINIC ROLLINSON**

I live in Cape Town's City Bowl and my home pentad, 3355_1820, is one of my favourite places to go birding. Comprising the Cape Town CBD, a large swathe of Table Mountain and 40 per cent ocean, this pentad wouldn't strike anyone as being the most bird-rich area in the country. The CBD seems to contain little more than Red-winged Starlings and Rock Doves and the local parks are dominated by dog walkers and tourists. And yet on deeper exploration, it is rich in endemic and scarce species and any birding outing is set against the magnificent backdrop of Table Mountain, urban landscapes and the Atlantic Ocean.

I share the challenges of birding this pentad with Dom Rollinson, who needs little introduction in a South African birding context. But you might not know that he is a fanatical atlaser and is also addicted to birding our home pentad. Beginning in lockdown, we have enjoyed a keen rivalry to discover new birds in the pentad and get high card totals. With just 244 full protocol cards, of which Dom and I have contributed 152, the City Bowl pentad is under-atlased compared to other local pentads, such as Strandfontein (3400_1830) with 1164 cards. This also is reflected in the number

of species recorded: 143 from the City Bowl compared to 260 in Strandfontein. Yet we have had some surprising records in recent times, with both regional and national rarities, which is testimony to the value of home patch birding and demonstrates what can be found with diligent exploration.

Fynbos birds are well represented, particularly in montane habitats. Cape Sugarbirds and Orange-breasted Sunbirds are common and conspicuous along Tafelberg Road or the pipe track hiking trail and are joined by Karoo Prinias and the scarcer Grey-backed Cisticolas. Cape

Siskins can be tricky to find, but are surprisingly common in good habitat and even wander into residential suburbs. Knowledge of their call is extremely helpful. Ground Woodpeckers are present in low numbers, although it usually requires a hike or cable car trip to find them.

In wooded suburbs and leafy glens, Cape Batises and Sweet Waxbills can be seen, along with Olive and Cardinal woodpeckers, the latter being very difficult to find anywhere in Cape Town. These resident species are joined by African Paradise Flycatchers in summer. There are breeding pairs of various



raptors, including Black and Rufous-breasted sparrowhawks and Booted Eagle, and Verreaux's Eagle is sometimes seen soaring near the cable car station. Nocturnal exploration has revealed two pairs of African Wood Owls, and Fiery-necked Nightjars are commonly heard calling from the mountain slopes in the evening.

Coastal birding is best near Clifton and Maiden's Cove, with the highlight being a colony of Bank Cormorants. In fact, it is possible to see all five of the subregion's cormorants in a day. As many as 150 Antarctic Terns have been present in the past two winters, which is exciting given that the species is no longer seen at Kommetjie. Sea watches have delivered a variety of pelagic species, including Shy and Black-browed albatrosses, both giant petrels, Antarctic Prions, Manx and Cory's shearwaters,

Great-winged Petrels and Sabine's Gulls. Small rafts of African Penguins occasionally swim past.

Waterbirds are in short supply as there are only a few reservoirs and sterile dams. Nonetheless, regular visits to the reservoirs have delivered African Black Duck and both Malachite and Giant kingfishers. If you are lucky, an African Sacred Ibis may make an appearance; for some reason, this species is extremely rare in the pentad, yet widespread and abundant in neighbouring ones.

Some of the surprising species found include a vagrant pair of Cinnamon-breasted Buntings along Tafelberg Road, a Red-tailed Tropicbird off the Sea Point promenade, Jacobin and Common cuckoos, European Honey Buzzard and, most recently, a Grey Wagtail. This last individual was seen on only one morning, close to a rocky stream in the middle of

above *The Cape Sugarbird is a highly prized endemic, especially for visiting international birders.*

opposite *The views are dazzling from almost anywhere in the pentad.*

Gardens. While looking for it, we found a pair of Little Rush Warblers in a tiny patch of stream-side vegetation – another new addition for the pentad.

In my ongoing competition with Dom, I'm currently just ahead on 130 species to Dom's 127. But he has the highest total for a single full protocol card: 89, which dwarfs my best effort of 81 (which I thought was unbeatable at the time!). SABAP2 allows for gamification of card total challenges and lists. Together, we're aiming for a combined total list of 150 by the end of 2023 and I can't begin to describe the excitement of finding a new >



above *Ian Rijsdijk, Andrew de Blocq and Garret Skead scan the sea from Clifton.*

top *The Orange-breasted Sunbird is a flashy fynbos special that is commonly seen in the pentad.*

bird for the pentad. Most recently, while doing a sea watch, I noticed a White-throated Canary foraging in the beachside vegetation. This was another new bird and an amazing find here, given the unusual habitat and the fact that this species is only known to occur about 30 kilometres away.

Dom and I have a strict rule of phoning each other immediately whenever a new bird is found, day or night. This has led to some odd twitches, including an early

morning wake-up call for Dom when I found a Red-chested Cuckoo in a grove of oak trees along Tafelberg Road. During lockdown, I received a frantic phone call from Dom. On his instructions, I rushed onto my balcony, scanned Lion's Head and was rewarded with views of his bewildering discovery: a Black Harrier soaring over the mountain! This species is virtually unheard of on the Cape Peninsula, let alone in the CBD.

By submitting our atlas cards to SABAP2, we contribute valuable data to evaluate various aspects of bird distribution, migration and biology. As much as birding is about fun and relaxation, I encourage all birders to register and submit cards to the

database. In our pentad, we meticulously document scarce and endangered species, notably Bank Cormorants. We can also explore the data for trends. For example, Cape Turtle Dove would be considered by most South Africans to be a common and ubiquitous species, yet in our pentad it has a reporting rate of only seven per cent and was last seen in 2018. The reasons for this are unclear, but may relate to progressive loss of open habitats and replacement by wooded gardens. This species has become a holy grail bird in the pentad and I check every dove I see.

The discovery of the Antarctic Tern roost was the first record of this species at the location and submitting atlas cards stores this record safely in the database. Such local discoveries show the value of birding close to home. It's not always necessary to travel far and wide to see exciting birds and we should all foster an interest in birding our local patches, which reduces fuel costs and carbon footprints. Birding with a friend can change a quiet afternoon of local birding into a fun outing. With atlasing, there's never a dull moment and always more to discover. Dom and I have plans to explore the mountain plateau more extensively, as some special and scarce species might be possible there, including Fynbos Buttonquail and Striped Flufftail. And who knows? One day I might even find those mythical Cape Turtle Doves. ♦

Do you live in the Cape Town City Bowl? If you have any exciting birding discoveries, please get in touch on garretjskead@hotmail.com

Would you like to find out more about SABAP2 or get involved? Check it out on <https://sabap2.birdmap.africa>

