

GAPS, MAPS AND A NORTHERN CAPE BASH

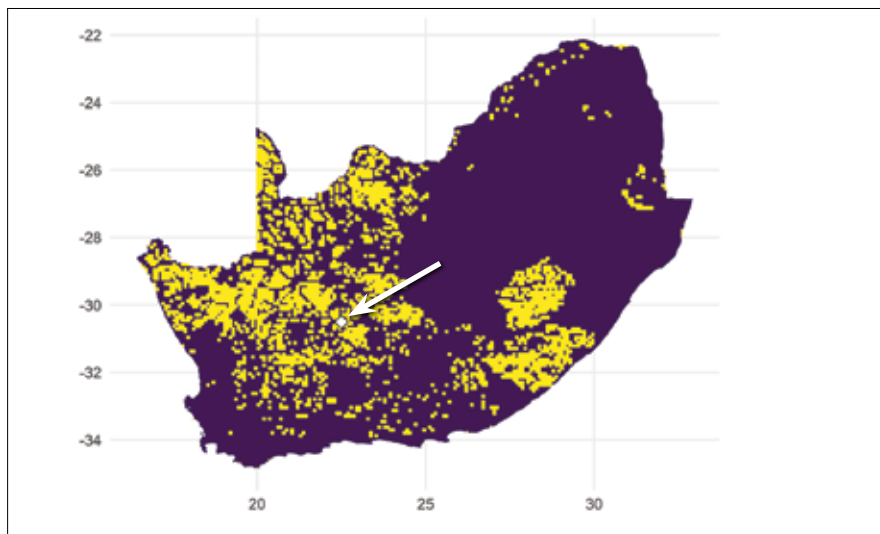


CINNAMON-BREADED WARBLER ALAN LEE

Gaps. They annoy, they endanger, they inspire. The gaps on the maps of old inspired some of the most famous explorers. And the ones on the London Underground must be particularly dangerous given the time dedicated to warning passengers to 'Mind the Gap!' For statisticians, gaps are mostly an annoyance, but not accounting for gaps in data can result in poor predictions. This is particularly important when it comes to mapping bird distributions.

This tale revolves around the 'Vosburg gap'. Vosburg is a village in the *ysterklipkoppies* of the Karoo plains, familiar to those from Gauteng who might have passed it on the way to the flower shows on the West Coast. I first encountered Vosburg during surveys of the Karoo in 2018; Eric Herrmann and I camped at the rustic municipal campsite. After we explained to the clerk at the municipality the reasons for our visit, she kindly waived the camp fee in support of our endeavours.

Towards the end of 2021 a BirdLife South Africa project to assess the impact of the fires around Kimberley saw me return to Vosburg, making a small detour in order to deal with a gap that continued to tease me on the SABAP2 coverage map. When I presented myself



at the municipality, despite the lapse of time, the kindly clerk was still in attendance and greeted me with, 'Were there not two of you last time?' Returning to camp, I wondered if perhaps we had been the last visitors.

But such is the essence of much of the Northern Cape – your presence makes an impact. Farmers are friendly and interested and often proudly report on the birds on their farms. A bit of Afrikaans and a Springbok cap can help in this regard. In short, the Karoo is one of my favourite atlasing destinations. The persistence of large gaps in our coverage maps has thus often puzzled me: why isn't everyone heading that way to escape the madding crowds? Ah, yes ... the birds are scarce and mostly brown.

The Kimberley atlas bash in December 2021 was organised in association with the Gariep Bird Club to resurvey pentads that had been burnt to see if we could use SABAP2 data to detect any differences in bird communities or abundance. Unfortunately, a combination of Omicron and widespread thunderstorms on the Saturday of the bash saw the event washed out. Vosburg was less lucky with rain, but it did receive the full atlasing focus of Eric and myself for two days. We identified a guest farm in a pentad with dolerite koppies, which

Yellow areas on this map of South Africa, Lesotho and Eswatini show pentads with no SABAP records. The white diamond in the central Karoo shows the 'Vosburg gap'.

can have dramatically different birdlife compared to the plains but are often hard to access. By including the rocky hills, we added sought-after species such as Cinnamon-breasted Warbler and African Rock Pipit and pushed the pentad list over 60, double what a roadside survey through the plains will get you in two to three hours. A note of caution though; each virgin pentad generated between five and 10 'out of range' forms, so it's a good idea to have a camera at the ready.

Tackling coverage gaps is highly recommended: it is social distancing at its most enjoyable. Roughly 18 per cent of South Africa's pentads still need to be claimed, with national coverage merely inching forward over the past two years due to global events. We hope that you will join the challenge to 'Map the Gap!'

ALAN LEE

