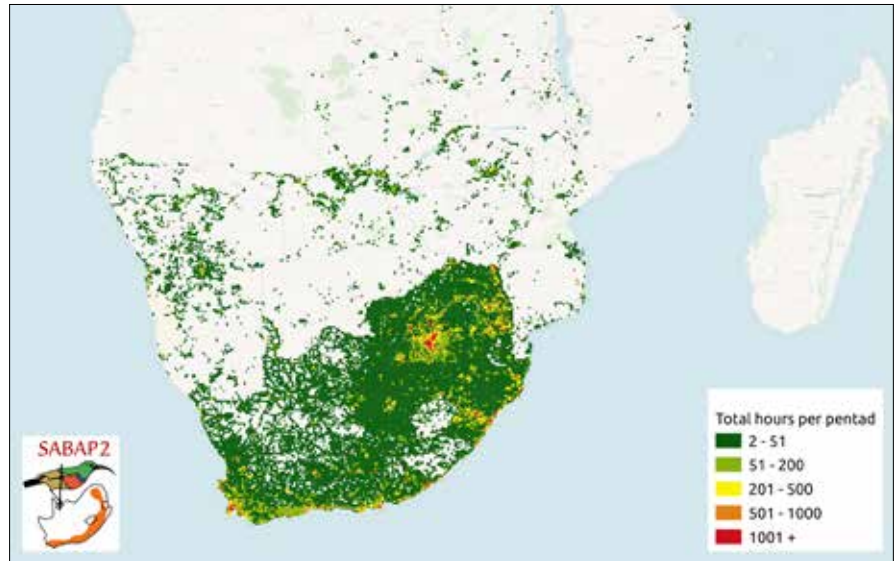


MILLION HOURS MILESTONE



PETER RYAN



Many birds mark time for us: the Cape Robin-chat with its pre-dawn teasing of other birds, a raptor soaring at the start of the warming day, the gentle hoots of the Spotted Eagle-Owl in the evening. Greater Striped Swallows herald the arrival of spring. For those who have contributed since the start of the atlas-ing era, the passage of time is visible in the mirror, while the birds continue to look fresh and ageless.

Atlasing time is a relative thing: in the arid Karoo, two hours can be an eternity spent gazing at endless horizons, with every escaping LBJ a moment of frustration as one crawls towards mini-milestones of 20 or 30 species. On the other hand, two hours of lowland savanna birding is hardly enough to type 80 to 100 species into BirdLasser, while double-checking calls and arguing about warbler traits that cast doubt on whether the singing brown bird is a Marsh or Reed Warbler. Meanwhile, the computer servers at BirdLasser and the University of Cape Town faithfully record each valuable submission, independent of pain or pleasure, recording not just the species on the list, but also the effort in terms of hours and days for every card.

On 19 September 2021 Elmarie Brits submitted her data for pentad 2635_1605, a list from just inland of Lüderitz in Namibia that included Gray's Lark. As well as being a valuable card from a poorly covered region, this card was a milestone for SABAP2, marking one million hours of full protocol atlas-ing since the project's inception in 2007. Those one million hours were submitted on 295 029 full protocol cards by 2636 observers, covering 18 368 pentads of the SABAP2 area. It includes only full protocol cards for the SABAP2 geographic domain; ad hoc records represent an additional 300 000 hours of atlas-ing.

Large numbers are difficult to grasp. How long is a million hours? A shade more than 114 years, well over a human lifetime. And where has it been spent? As the map shows, mostly around urban centres and framing the atlas-ing sub-projects. The honour of the pentad with the most hours is 2550_2815, south-east of Pretoria, with more than 11 000 hours of atlas-ing time, while the atlaser with the most hours contributed is also the person who has the greatest number of atlas cards: Duncan MacKenzie (the number of full protocol cards submitted is a good reflection of time spent atlas-ing). The number of hours per card

above *Atlasing effort since 2007 in hours per pentad.*

above, left *Gray's Lark was one of the species on the card that clocked up one million hours of full protocol observations.*

can be spread over one to five days and the pentad with the greatest number of atlased days (according to start and end date stamps) is 2605_2755, also in Gauteng.

BirdLife South Africa is about to embark on the red listing process for the subregion's birds and will rely heavily on SABAP2 data for our terrestrial and coastal species. We hope the map inspires all atlasers to target some of those gaps and to spend quality time with nature in our wild and remote areas. It translates into time to reflect on the beauty of our long-time monitoring project; time that has flown by, but has also been well spent.

ALAN LEE AND MICHAEL BROOKS

