LOCKDOWN LISTS AND THE PROTOCOL DEBATE

South Africa's nation-wide lockdown dramatically changed the lives of everyone in the country. For atlasers, people who thrive on being mobile and outdoors, it put an end to hopping into a vehicle to atlas new pentads.

Responding to the need to keep the large community of atlasers engaged and also recognising the unique opportunity posed by the lockdown, BirdLasser launched a series of 'Lockdown Challenges'. These followed the classic BirdLasser challenge model, but with the added complexity of participants being constrained to birding 'behind bars' from home.

The aim of the challenge was simple: record the species you identify from your home during the lockdown period. Atlasers submitted their species lists to SABAP every five days, as per the atlas protocol. One of the surprising results that soon emerged was that with many hours of dedicated recording you rapidly build an impressive species list – observers stuck in flats managed to record more than 50 species, while those on plots achieved over 200!

Given these remarkable lists, a discussion soon arose around atlas protocols. SABAP has always encouraged participants to submit 'full protocol' lists that sample throughout a pentad for at least two hours, because such lists hopefully record at least the more common species within a pentad. This makes them more useful for recording bird distributions and assessing how these might be changing.

Several atlasers believed that their lockdown lists should qualify as full protocol cards. If their lockdown list was longer than many full protocol cards submitted for the pentad, surely it should be recognised as such? To get a really impressive lockdown list, birders were spending hours on end waiting for something unusual to fly past or to hear a distant call – way more effort than the minimum required atlasing time of two hours for a full protocol list.

The problem is that a full protocol list should cover all the habitats in a pentad and thus at least have the chance to record the complete range of birds found there. During lockdown, birders were unable to visit most of a pentad, so unless they live in an incredibly uniform pentad or have a really big property that spans all the habitats in the pentad, there are bound to be common species that they would not see. Most lockdown birders probably spent a fair amount of time thinking, 'If only a House Sparrow would fly past – I *know* they're just down the road at the shopping centre.'

The reason why SABAP records the order in which birds are seen and asks you to visit every habitat within a pentad is to try to get an idea of the relative abundance of birds in each pentad. Full protocol cards should represent the species you could reasonably expect to encounter within an entire pentad. Obviously the list will be longer the more time you have to atlas. We set the lower threshold as two hours, but the crucial point is that we know the sampling effort (time spent in a pentad) and can use this to explain relatively short full protocol cards. By putting a massive amount of effort into one tiny part of a pentad, you might get an impressive lockdown list, but it almost certainly represents a very unusual perspective on the birds in the pentad.

The Noordhoek pentad on the Cape Peninsula illustrates why a garden list cannot qualify as a full protocol card. To do so, the garden would have to sample birds along the coast, at wetlands and in the mountain fynbos of Table Mountain National Park as well as in gardens.

Are ad hoc lists useful? Yes, particularly when they form part of the unique global experiment created by the response to Covid-19. These detailed lists will provide fascinating insights into questions such as which species occur in urban centres and perhaps even how bird communities respond to the lockdown of the human community. Ad hoc cards also help to indicate when migrant species arrive and leave.

The Lockdown Challenges provided an unparalleled opportunity for atlasers to contribute to a very specific dataset, irrespective of the protocol. That more than 1100 participants in South Africa alone contributed data speaks to their incredible commitment.

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