

# SAVING SABAP

The Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP) uses the combined effort of thousands of birders to collect bird distribution data. Since the start of the second phase of the project in 2007, more than 18 million records have been submitted and we currently add more than two million records each year. The value of these data is enormous. They provide by far the most comprehensive country-wide assessment of animal distribution, which is crucial for monitoring the status of South Africa's biodiversity in this time of unprecedented global change.

The SABAP dataset is central to many aspects of conservation management and planning. Atlas data were used extensively to identify the most important areas in the country for birds through BirdLife South Africa's Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas and Key Biodiversity Areas programmes, and are central to red listing birds in the region. In addition, SABAP data are extensively used by environmental impact assessment specialists when gauging and mitigating the risk posed by new developments. Species distribution models based on SABAP2 data will soon feed into the site screening tool developed by the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries and thus directly contribute to the legal tools guiding the management of land in South Africa.

The cost of this amazing endeavour is borne largely by the dedicated atlasers who collectively spend millions of rands on fuel, food and accommodation to collect the data. It is their selfless enthusiasm for the project that makes it feasible to tackle a real-time monitoring project on a national and regional scale. And SABAP is growing beyond southern Africa; similar atlas projects have been initiated under the umbrella of the African Bird Atlas Project (ABAP), using the same protocols as SABAP2.

Country-level atlases have been implemented with great success in Kenya and Nigeria, with fledgling projects in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana and Zambia. The development of the BirdLasser phone app has contributed greatly to the positive outcome of these projects. Birders using BirdLasser can now log their sightings anywhere in Africa and they will automatically be captured by ABAP.

The broader African atlas projects have already generated 1.3 million bird distribution records. Just as importantly, they have initiated a birding revolution in their host countries. For example, in Nigeria alone, the atlas initiative has spawned more than 30 bird clubs focused on atlas and over 1000 people regularly contribute atlas data – roughly the same number of active atlasers as in South Africa. This increased awareness of birds and their role as environmental sentinels has far-reaching social as well as conservation benefits.

All of these initiatives rely on the SABAP information technology backbone, which captures the data and makes them available in real time on the project web page: <http://sabap2.birdmap.africa/>. To date, the bulk of the costs of the dedicated data manager who keeps the system running has been carried by the South African government, through the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI). However, the Covid-19 crisis has resulted in SANBI's budget for 2020 being severely reduced, leaving the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology to carry the core running costs of not only SABAP, but also the CWAC and CAR citizen science projects, which have tracked waterbird and large terrestrial bird populations respectively in southern Africa since the 1990s.

These projects are too important to be allowed to fail, but the Fitz cannot



Changes in the distribution of BirdLife South Africa's Bird of the Year, the Southern Ground-Hornbill, from 1987–1992 (SABAP1) (top) to 2007–2020 (SABAP2) (above) clearly show a bird in trouble, even in large protected areas like Kruger Park.

afford to continue carrying the core running costs through 2021. We also cannot rely on the government to resume funding the project – all indications are that the financial impact of Covid-19 will be deeper and last longer than initially feared. The SABAP management team from BirdLife South Africa, SANBI, BirdLasser and the Fitz is working with ABAP partners in other African countries to secure alternative funding sources for the next three to five years to ensure that ABAP can continue to grow.

If any *African Birdlife* readers can suggest possible funding sources or assist with donations, please contact Hilary Buchanan ([fitz@uct.ac.za](mailto:fitz@uct.ac.za)) or Ernst Retief ([ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za](mailto:ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za)). The University of Cape Town issues tax certificates for all donations.

