

AGULHAS PLAIN BIRDING PROJECT



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The data collected by the Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP) support many conservation initiatives. One of these is the Agulhas Plain Birding Project, a private initiative by Wim de Klerk. At the age of 50, Wim felt that he needed a new beginning and purpose. He birded the Agulhas Plain, located at the southern tip of the Western Cape, and was amazed at the diversity of birds in the area, some of which he could not identify. He was also surprised to discover that there was no comprehensive bird list for this region. Wim made it his mission to compile a bird list using the SABAP2 protocol and this heralded the beginning of the Agulhas Plain Birding Project. He partnered with SANParks and CapeNature to obtain access to reserves and national parks and began to systematically atlas the Agulhas National Park. In the first year he recorded 146 species in 13 pentads.

By 2012 Wim had expanded the project to include the greater Agulhas Plain, enlarging the area from 13 pentads to 20. In 2016 it increased to 27 pentads when he added all those in the drainage

area of the Nuwejaars River. The project now monitors valuable protected areas such as the Agulhas National Park, De Mond Nature Reserve, Nuwejaars Wetland Special Management Area, Quoin Point Nature Reserve and some exceptional birding spots such as the Heuningnes Estuary, Zoetendalsvlei, and the long and winding Nuwejaars River, which feeds into Vöelvlei and Waschkraalvlei. Important pans such as Langpan, Rondepan, Melkbospan, Renosterpan, the Springfield salt pan and many smaller seasonal ones are also monitored. The latest bird count for the Agulhas Plain stands at 270 species.

The SABAP2 protocol is an ideal tool for amateur birders to take ownership of a region and monitor the occurrence of bird species, while also contributing to the broader project goals of SABAP. Systematic monitoring of the same area produces invaluable information about local trends. Wim and his team have, for example, recorded several SABAP 'firsts' for this region, including Hottentot Buttonquail, Spotted Flycatcher, Maccoa Duck, Black-necked Grebe, Great Crested Grebe, Southern



ODETTE CURTIS

above *The Agulhas Long-billed Lark is a flagship species for the Agulhas Plain Birding Project.*

left *Wim de Klerk shares some of his knowledge of the Agulhas Plain with Andrew de Blocq.*

Pochard and African Goshawk. The project also monitors the arrival and departure of migrant raptors and waders and notes unusual visitors, such as Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters.

On another level, the project provides personal satisfaction to participants because they gain access to birding areas from which they would otherwise have been excluded. Wim and his team have developed a special relationship with CapeNature, SANParks and the farming community. The year 2019 marks a decade of the project's existence and growing numbers of atlasers are participating in its activities. The project has its own website (www.agulhasplainbirding.co.za) and works closely with other research initiatives, such as the Hottentot Buttonquail Conservation Project.

