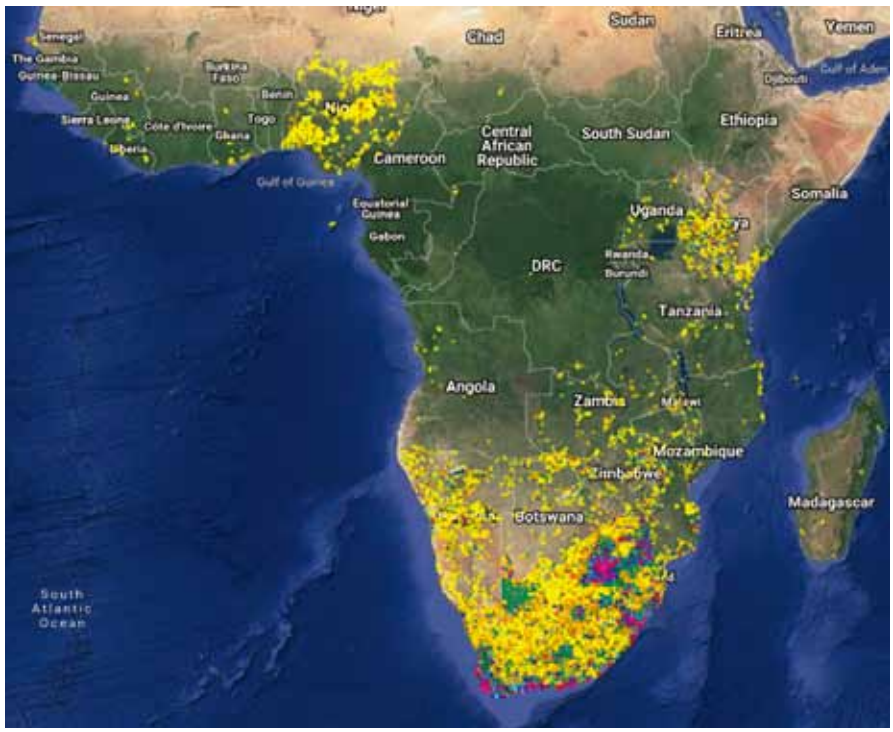
SABAP spreads its wings

The African Bird Atlas Project

The first Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP1) was widely regarded as one of the greatest advances in southern African ornithology. Accurate distributional data is the basic foundation for biodiversity conservation and management – it is hard to conserve something if you don't know where it occurs. And SABAP2 is taking this to the next level, allowing us to assess how species' ranges are changing over time. For most species, such changes provide the best proxy for population trends and thus for a species' conservation status. SABAP data are crucial for both species- and community-level conservation work, underpinning revisions of regional and global threat assessments as well as the identification of BirdLife's Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs).

Sadly, for much of Africa even basic atlas data are lacking. This makes an African Bird Atlas Project arguably the greatest need in African ornithology. SABAP and BirdLasser are helping this dream become a reality by providing the data-capture framework for atlasing throughout Africa. Country-level atlases are already up and running in Kenya and Nigeria, with their own websites fronting the SABAP software. However, BirdLasser provides a means for birders to submit atlas records from anywhere in the continent. The need for expert panels that can vet out-of-range records and the lack of prior accounts to identify such records are being addressed.



A map of bird atlas coverage across Africa using the SABAP2 protocol. The rapid growth in coverage achieved in both Kenya and Nigeria has been remarkable. The use of a single protocol across the continent offers many advantages for understanding bird distributions and abundances.

The scale of the task is daunting. There are approximately 400 000 pentads in Africa, but we already have 'full-protocol' data for more than six per cent of the continent and about 10 per cent of Africa south of the Sahara. Coverage in both Nigeria and Kenya is at 15 per cent, thanks to the development of new models for doing citizen science. For example, in Nigeria the atlas has been the catalyst for the establishment of 20 bird clubs whose purpose is primarily to atlas. And the successes in Kenya and Nigeria are creating enthusiasm throughout East and West Africa.

Fortunately, there is growing realisation that an African Bird Atlas is also European ornithology's greatest need. A key concern for European bird conservation is knowing where European migrants spend the northern winter. At the last European Ornithologists' Union conference, held in 2017, four of 20 sessions were devoted to migration and some of the most important papers were presented by students who conducted their field work in Africa. Human population growth and associated development, coupled with climate change, are having major impacts on the distributions of migrants in Africa and on the timing of their migration.

The African Bird Atlas Project will make an amazing contribution to ornithology in both Africa and Europe. But if the Nigerian and Kenyan experiences can be replicated elsewhere, the largest impact of the project will be in developing a grassroots enthusiasm for birds and a passion for biodiversity on a scale never previously seen in Africa.

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