

HELPING TO CONSERVE CRITICAL GRASSLANDS



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The recently declared Ingula Nature Reserve is located in South Africa's grassland biome. This is the least protected biome in South Africa, despite hosting more than 20 threatened bird species, and the Ingula Nature Reserve is therefore of great importance for grassland bird conservation. In order to monitor the bird populations in this reserve and, critically, to decide on the best way to protect the threatened bird species, we need data, such as those collected through the Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2).

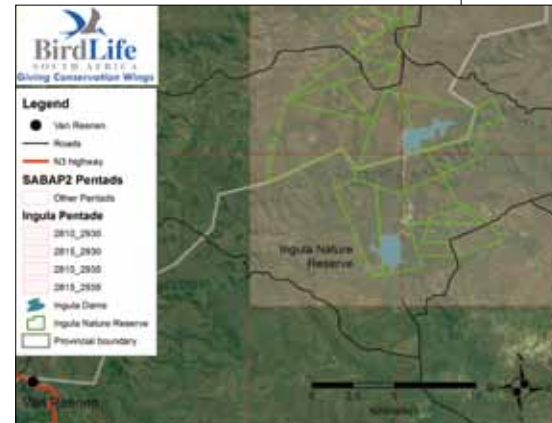
The four pentads covering this important reserve have been monitored consistently by BirdLife South Africa's project managers since 2003, before the construction of Eskom's Ingula Pumped Storage Scheme began. This regular atlasing has yielded vital data on the presence of species at the site for more than 16 years. Over the past seven years, Robin Colyn and Carina Coetzer have atlased the four pentads every month, allowing for an in-depth analysis of temporal trends at the site.

These valuable data are currently being analysed to inform the best management practices for the Ingula Nature Reserve. The presence

and turnover of key bird species in the area is being related to information on climatic conditions and grassland management practices (fire and grazing frequency and intensity) to tease apart how management actions influence bird communities. Not only does this mean better birding in the reserve, but also improved veld management for key grassland bird species, which is likely to promote healthy habitats for other taxa found there, such as mammals, reptiles and insects. Ultimately it should also ensure better ecosystem services, including water provision and quality, and erosion prevention and ecotourism opportunities.

Frequent atlasing of an area such as the Ingula Nature Reserve also assists with the early detection of potential threats to the environment and its birds, so appropriate action can be taken. Such threats (for example, human activities such as ploughing or mining) can either be observed directly by the atlaser or indirectly through a decline in the reporting rate of once common species.

Another way SABAP2 data can be used is for drafting documents in support of ecotourism, such as birding routes and annotated checklists. For example,



above The four pentads surveyed monthly for the past seven years in Ingula Nature Reserve.

left The escarpment on the Ingula Nature Reserve, showing the indigenous forests and grasslands surrounding it.

the SABAP2 Free State–KwaZulu-Natal Escarpment Challenge, initiated in early 2019, aims not only to get each of the 89 pentads along the eastern escarpment atlased more frequently, but also to contribute to the development of a birding route with information about where to find the most sought-after species, such as Yellow-breasted Pipit, the three crane species, Secretarybird and other threatened grassland endemics like Rudd's and Botha's larks. One such document has already been published for the Memel district and a second is being developed for the area between Harrismith and the Ingula Nature Reserve.

There is no doubt that the SABAP2 data are of immense value for the conservation of grasslands and their birds. As the pressures on grassland birds mount, it is imperative that we continue to collect SABAP data to help counter their decline.

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