

SYSTEMATIC ATLASING

SABAP2 has been enormously successful – it has already generated more than twice as many records for South Africa alone than the entire first Southern African Bird Atlas Project did. Yet despite the many challenges and atlas bashes, coverage remains concentrated around the major urban centres. Unsurprisingly, proximity to home dominates our decision as to where to atlas routinely.

This gives those relatively few birders not based in the major urban centres a great opportunity – you might even say responsibility – to atlas their home areas. And they can make the greatest contribution in this regard by systematically completing full protocol cards for all the pentads in their vicinity.

Spurred on by the Middelburg 50-kilometre challenge set up by Henk Nel of BirdLasser in mid-2018, Pieter Vrey decided to atlas the 121 pentads

(an 11 x 11 block) centred on his home town of Middelburg in western Mpumalanga. His top row of target pentads straddled the border with Limpopo and also included a tiny piece of eastern Gauteng. It took more than two years, delayed in part by the Covid-19 lockdown, but in August 2020 Pieter finally completed full protocol cards for the last few outstanding pentads.

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One of the major benefits of atlasing is discovering new birding sites and for Pieter the best find was the Kruis River Valley, west of Stoffberg, which delivered many good birds, including Great Spotted Cuckoo, Icterine Warbler, Common Whitethroat and Marabou Stork. Species that reach the edge of their range in this area include Ashy Tit, Red-faced Cisticola, Kalahari Scrub Robin, Black-faced Waxbill and Shaft-tailed Whydah. Loskop Dam also falls in his area, with choice species including African Finfoot and a vagrant Narina Trogon. Another surprise was a well out-of-range Saddle-billed Stork near Komati Power Station.

Some of the western parts of his area are heavily impacted by coal mining, offering little incentive to Pieter to visit. Yet by doing so, he was able to document how this destructive activity affects local bird diversity.

Pieter also recently passed the 900 milestone – not species for his southern African list, but full protocol SABAP2 cards. This puts him in an exclusive club of only 80 birders and at the rate he's going, he'll soon join the 60 birders in the 1000+ club. His



above Pieter Vrey is a committed atlayer who has submitted almost 1000 full protocol atlas cards from more than 500 pentads.

left Among the many good finds was a Swallow-tailed Bee-eater near Bankplaas, 30 kilometres north of Middelburg.

SABAP contribution covers more than 500 pentads, which is an impressive achievement for a new father (and testament to his wife's tolerance as much as his own passion for birding!).

In a time of increasing carbon guilt, we need to focus our birding to deliver the most good for the least cost to the environment. Regularly birding your local patch and documenting the changes in the birds found there can, thanks to citizen science projects such as SABAP2, make a real contribution to our understanding of how our planet is changing.



PIETER VREY

