

SABAP2 gives back

Atlasers in the Southern African Bird Atlas Project's (SABAP2) Facebook group were asked how they benefit from atlasing. The answers were thought-provoking. Atlasing asks a lot from participants in terms of time and money, but from feedback it is clear that the project also gives back to them in various ways.

The majority of atlasers are experienced birders who have visited most of the top birding spots in South Africa and have substantial life lists. For them, the pursuit of new birds can potentially become boring as finding lifers gets progressively more difficult. It is therefore not surprising that for many birders in that category, atlasing brings a new sense of purpose to their pursuit. Tom Vorster mentioned that 'through atlasing you contribute to a greater cause' and Roelof van der Breggen responded, 'Atlasing has given me specific goals. It has added a layer of richness on top of just watching birds. It makes you focus on the full species spread and not just on some target species.'

Atlasing has also helped birders discover new birding areas. As Sandra Brown and Koos Pauw put it, 'Atlasing turns every spot (or pentad) into a birding hotspot.' Atlasing also 'forces' you to travel to areas that you would otherwise not have visited as a birder. A pentad with no cards stands out like a beacon and at some stage an atlaser will make the effort to work the location, sometimes finding interesting species and scenery while doing so.

Someone once mentioned that atlasers need to be a bit adventurous



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and it seems that most of them are! As Anthony Archer commented, 'Every time one goes out, there is a possibility of something extra wonderful being found,' while Wanda Strauss remarked, 'It is the anticipation and excitement of the pentad I am about to start. It is like entering Aladdin's cave with so many treasures to find, whether it is a sparrowhawk catching swallows in the air or just a beautiful metallic-green Diederik Cuckoo being fed by a bishop.' Even Etienne Marais, a professional guide who has birded the most exotic places in Africa, mentions this aspect of atlasing: 'For me it's the excitement of never knowing what to expect next. It is an adventure every time you go out – and especially when you atlas new areas, who knows what you are going to find?'

For some, the exercise has taught them new skills. As atlasers must attempt to identify all birds seen or heard in a pentad, even the most common species and LBJs, they get a better understanding of bird movements, how birds use different habitats and the distinction between male and female or breeding and non-breeding plumages. Because birds can also be documented by their calls, the atlaser's ability to identify vocalisations also improves significantly.

Etienne Marais has found some exciting species while atlasing – most recently the first White Tern record for southern Africa at the Kei Mouth in December 2018. He found this Buff-breasted Sandpiper in the same pentad in 2011.

Atlasing also has a social component. Birders participating have made new friends, some through attending an atlas bash, others through social media or an email asking or offering help or support. The single purpose of atlasing (to obtain bird distribution data) and the struggles associated with obtaining it, pulls birders together to share stories, experiences and lessons learnt – the building blocks on which new friendships are built.

It is clear that atlasing is not all about giving. If you participate, it will reward you in more ways than you might imagine.

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