

## Winter 2014 Count

This last winter count on 26<sup>th</sup> July was definitely a cold and wet one. In most parts of the country there were very strong winds, with flooded roads here and there. A big thank you to everyone for meeting these challenges and counting most routes regardless!

### Count highlights

Overall the observers in the Eastern Cape reported poor counts due to very windy conditions. Jim Cambray of EG03 writes: "It was very windy for almost the entire survey. Due to wind we could not hold binoculars steady so at many stops had to stay in the vehicle with windows up. This is the first time on this route we did not hear Korhaans calling probably because of the strong wind. To give an idea of the wind strength it blew the tea over of the top of the mug!"

In the Port Elizabeth precinct Corné Erasmus and his team (EPO1) saw a large group of Vervet monkeys foraging in the veld, but at the end of the day recorded only a small number of birds, most of these Cape Crows and White-necked Ravens. However, although there was a strong icy wind, the EPO2 team managed to see an impressive 325 Blue Cranes! EP11 was counted for the first time in a while; it had been discontinued in 2010 due to the bad condition of the road. Sigrid and her team tackled the route in their 4x4 and except for the cold they had a fairly good count.

The Somerset East precinct reported very cold and windy conditions, and there was even snow on the mountains along ES10.

Thank you to Yvonne Bosman for this report on the Humansdorp precinct:

### Humansdorp CAR Report 26 July 2014

The count went smoothly with all four cars having their complement of four people, which does help. The weather played along for two routes but the ones close to the coast were more exposed and got a fair amount of wind that made holding binoculars difficult at times.

Not one route encountered White-bellied Korhaan, which is unusual for the Humansdorp area, but it was pleasing to see that two routes encountered Secretarybird. Only four days after the count a farmer on EH06 phoned me to come and have a look at three Secretarybirds on his farm. Two have been there for about three weeks and now they were accompanied by a juvenile.

On the whole the winter numbers of Denham's Bustards have decreased, particularly on Routes EH03 and EH06. This may be partly attributed to the Kouga Wind Farm which is currently under construction.

Yearly totals of Denham's Bustards for the Humansdorp area:

2010 - 126

2011 - 104

2012 - 186

2013 - 105

2014 - 73

EH03 had far fewer Denham's Bustards than usual, but on the other hand they had a huge number of Spur-winged Geese – 384! They also had the greatest number of Cape Crow (75) and White-necked Raven of all the Humansdorp routes.

On Route EH06, apart from the wind turbines, a new power line is currently being constructed roughly between the 15 and 21 km section to carry power coming from the Kouga Wind Farm to the Eskom sub-station for the grid. There were several bustards feeding in their old feeding area between the turbines but not in as great numbers as in the past. Also on EH06, more monoculture crops are being planted on the left hand side of

the road from the 21 km mark. This is a section where we used to find many Denham's Bustards and where they are now entirely absent. We were fortunate to have a lovely sighting of a handsome Martial Eagle hunting near the Lombardini Game Farm lodge.

Route EH05 enjoyed seeing their usual Black Harrier, always seen on this route, as well as the Secretarybird, but unfortunately the Pale Chanting Goshawk pair that is often seen in this area did not put in an appearance on the day. The main problem on this route was the exceptionally long grass which made it difficult to see the birds. Even with the bustards, only the head showed.

Route EH04 commented once more on the encroaching vegetation which makes part of the route useless for observation. They counted themselves fortunate to see their Denham's Bustards flying as they are not usually observed in this area.

Everyone enjoyed the count.

Yvonne Bosman



**(Photo: Gela van Heerden, FS19)**

Most of the North-eastern Free State precinct was reported as being very windy. Rick Dillon and his team (FN31) nevertheless saw 378 birds on the day, including 156 Blue Cranes and 165 Grey Crowned Cranes. FN43 and FN45 were counted for the first time in quite a few years – it's great to have people back on these routes again. Bradley Gibbons and his team (FN43) also had a windy count, but still managed to count 210 birds, although 182 of these were Cape Crow! Michael Cunningham and his team (FN45) had a less productive count; they only saw 17 birds. Nacelle Collins (FN55) had to make a detour of almost 40 km, but had a satisfactory count apart from that!

It was very cold in most parts of the Southern Free State precinct. Annalie van der Vyfer and her team (FS45) had a few very interesting sightings: a hunting African Harrier Hawk, four Burchell's couriers and a Fish Eagle. Deon van Wyk (FS123) had an icy count with temperatures between 2°C and 6°C!

A large sinkhole had formed on Gauteng route GC02 on the R500 since the last summer count; however, that wasn't enough to stop Craig Wittington-Jones and his team, who ended up counting a total of 396 birds! For Johan de Jager and Bruce Patterson (GC04) the day started windy and cold, but luckily warmed up; they didn't see a large variety of species, but did count an incredible 549 Helmeted Guineafowls.

In KwaZulu-Natal, Paul and Bev Garner (KD02) said there was a noticeable decline in the number of corvids since the local vulture restaurant had been stopped. Unfortunately KD05 and KD08 could not be counted this time. Part of route KD10 was under roadworks, so Roy Gravett was only able to count 29.3 km of the route. Ann Gray and a group of learners from Winterton Primary School tackled KL11; there had been controlled burning of veld in the area a few days before and they only counted 21 birds. Peter Divall and his team (KM02) saw 28 Cape Vultures, 2 Bearded Vultures, 3 Cape Crows and 2 White-necked Ravens feasting on a carcass in the veld.



## OVERBERG CAR SUMMARY JULY 2014

The Overberg Precinct Winter Count 2014 went remarkably well, considering that we had wild winds and biting cold conditions, with rain here and there during the day, and plenty of mud on the roads from the preceding days' heavy rains. The conditions were generally rated as 'poor' by the counters, but despite these setbacks, the count proceeded without too much disruption. There were some forced detours and backtracks, but with the generally poor condition of our roads, that has to be expected. The teams did a great job nevertheless, and our counts were very satisfactory in terms of both numbers and species. One aspect that was universally commented on was the dramatic increase in planted crops, specifically canola,

which seems to have driven our ground birds to other areas, e.g. Blue Cranes to feedlots. Thank you to Wicus for the accompanying picture showing a field of canola in the Overberg.

[Note from Sally Hofmeyr at the ADU: canola is indeed a very unfavourable habitat for most large terrestrial birds, being extremely dense and tall when fully grown. For the sake of our birds, farmers should be discouraged from planting canola as much as possible!]

One interesting observation from several counters was that where the Cranes were clear of the shelter of the crops many were noted to be lying flat on the ground, head pointing into the very strong wind, doubtless to take at least some postural shelter from the lashing wind.

The wind provided other problems for our counters, primarily the impossibility of holding binoculars steady to scan and count, and also it was sometimes very difficult to even open the motorcar doors. One can only surmise that there must have been large numbers of our target birds that were sheltering in the high crops and invisible to us.

Nevertheless, as you will see in the accompanying table of comparisons, the final count numbers were very satisfactory, and perhaps most encouraging was that the Blue Crane numbers were even better than last winter's. It was noted by several counters that separating adult and juvenile Cranes in the very strong wind conditions was often quite impossible, so proposing figures for these categories is pointless and at best would probably be misleading.

The highest numbers of **Blue Cranes** were seen in the Heidelberg and Swellendam areas, where the Moodies logged 727, Pierre van den Berg 343, John Coates 431, but there were also two big counts in the Riviersonderend and Napier areas, where Keith and Ann McAdam counted 517 and Ken Price 395 respectively. In the Mossel Bay area, Sally Adam counted 316. Again, the comment was made that most big groups were seen at feedlots.

The **Denham's Bustard** count was very low but the records were spread throughout the precinct, with the Moodies counting 19, John Tuck 14 and the Mossel bay teams 13. Stuart McLennan saw only 9, compared with 44 in last winter's count.

The **Karoo Korhaan** count was also very low compared with last year's numbers; most were seen in the Swellendam area, with John Coates recording 7 and John Tuck 5. Stuart McLennan, Riviersonderend, like many other counters, noted that with the wheat and canola being so high, it was very hard to see the birds. His count was zero, down from last year's 21.

It was very disturbing to note that the **Southern Black Korhaan** numbers remained very low, with only 6 seen in total. The Moodies saw 2, John Coates 1, Pierre van den Berg 1 and Heyné and Sharon Brink 2.

At least one species seems to be thriving amongst the massive crops of canola: the **Spur-winged Goose**, whose numbers have increased greatly. In the Riviersonderend and Greyton area the McAdams saw 250,

Wicus 210, Tom and Freya Brett 158, while in the Mossel Bay area Andrew Marshall counted 119. Many of the routes saw between 60 and 180, so the distribution is fairly wide-spread.

Our **Black-Headed Heron** count was up, and the birds were well spread throughout the precinct. The highest count was 22, by Stuart McLennan in the Riviersonderend area, while in the Mossel Bay area Wilson Terblanche saw 16 and Sally Adam and Andrew Marshall each counted 15.

For **Secretarybirds**, the count was much as before and most were seen in the area around Caledon, Greyton and Proteem, with one recorded near Mossel Bay.

The numbers of **Black Harriers** were much increased, with Jeffrey Arizon seeing 6 in the Caledon area and Frans de Graaff 4 in the Mossel Bay area; otherwise the birds were well dispersed throughout the region.

The **Cape Crows** were well spread throughout the precinct. Andrew Marshall in the Mossel Bay area counted 56, many were seen in the Swellendam/Heidelberg area, with counts of 72 by the Moodies, 56 by John Coates, 36 by John Carter, and in the Elim area Dave Whitelaw logged 40.

The **Pied Crow** numbers have almost doubled, with 56 counted by Tom and Freya Brett in the Greyton area. The rest were sparsely spread throughout the precinct.

**White-necked Raven** numbers were more or less the same as before; this species was seen throughout the region, although mostly in the Caledon, Swellendam and Heidelberg areas. John Carter saw 16 in the Proteem area.

**Black-shouldered Kites** in the Mossel Bay area were counted by Andrew Marshall (5), Frans de Graaff (4) and Wilson Terblanche (2). Apart from these they were mostly seen in the Bredasdorp/Arniston area, where Heyné and Sharon Brink saw 4 and Erica Essig 3.

**Jackal Buzzards** were well represented throughout the precinct.

Four over-wintering **Steppe Buzzards** were counted, primarily between Caledon and Heidelberg areas.

**Pale Chanting Goshawks** were mainly in the Mossel Bay area.

Other over-wintering birds – **White Storks** – were counted near Caledon (Lee Burman 2) and Proteem (John Carter 1).

One **Black Stork** was seen near Mossel Bay by Sally Adam.

The cherry on the top was a sighting of a **Long-crested Eagle** near Mossel Bay by Andrew Marshall.

A big **THANK YOU** to our counters who sent their forms in so speedily, and where they could, for putting the information onto the ADU database themselves. Thanks too, to John Carter for his help with the data submission to the ADU.

**Comparative Table of Species: Winter Counts 2007 to 2014**

	BC	SG	DB	BHH	KK	SEC	SBK	HAR
2014	4616	2217	85	212	20	5	6	22
2013	4334	1714	142	130	44	4	8	12
2012	5004	1025	202	286	53	3	8	10
2011	5122	957	135	139	52	10	11	3
2010	5646	1270	251	69	47	7	6	7
2009	6129	1107	237	169	62	14	3	5
2008	6208	1716	259	285	66	19	3	9
2007	4695	1356	128	135	49	5	11	10

**Comparative Table of Raptors and Corvids: Winter Counts 2013 to 2014**

	SPBZ	JKBZ	PCG	BSKT	WNR	PICW	CPCW	HAR	LCE
2014	4	92	3	18	117	82	633	22	1
2013	-	-	2	24	125	48	700	12	-

Other interesting bird species seen, but not recorded in the database, were Martial Eagle, African Fish Eagle, African Harrier Hawk (Gymnogene), Cape Vulture, Spotted Eagle Owl, Marsh Harrier and Purple Heron.

**MAMMALS** Not many routes reported buck. The greatest number of Vaal Rhebok (34) was reported by Ann White south of Caledon, and one wonders whether the population of these mammals has shifted to that area.

Again, thank you to everyone who participated in this exercise, and who, despite the inclement (!! ) weather, showed such eager enthusiasm; for us it is both a pleasure and a privilege to co-ordinate a team with such dedication.

Until next January, *au revoir!*

Inès and Duncan Cooke.

Counts in the Swartland precinct were mostly poor due to flooding on most of the routes. Sylvia Ledgard and Pat Waddell (SW03) could not complete their route due to flooding; Sylvia writes: "The route was saturated with flooding in many areas. Extensive road flooding on the gravel stretch of the route from 35 km on. The low lying drift at 43 km was impassable for a standard vehicle and the count had to be abandoned. Heavy rain in afternoon." The smaller Western Cape precincts were mostly cold and windy. Oliver Purcell and his team (WU05) had a good count, counting an amazing 438 birds; the largest portion of this (316) was Blue Cranes. They also noted that White-necked Ravens were plentiful in the areas where sheep were lambing.

A big thank you to the Precinct Organisers for all your hard work and thank you to all the participants for your vital contribution to this project!

Kind regards,  
Amour McCarthy