

BULLETIN *board*



SABAP 2 HOT SPOTS & COLD SPOTS

SABAP2 reached a major milestone during May 2009.

Twenty-five per cent of the 17 310 pentads had been atlased at least once, and an extra one per cent was being added every three to four weeks. An indication of the geographical spread of the coverage is that 60 per cent of all the 2 028 quarter-degree grid cells had had at least one of their nine pentads visited.

One of the difficult tasks facing the project management team of SABAP2 is to persuade observers to atlas everywhere. It is really hard to want to go birding in places where there is only a handful of bird species, perhaps in habitats that have been largely destroyed through afforestation, mining activities, agricultural monocultures or invasive plant species, or in habitats where species diversity is naturally poor, such as mountain fynbos and semi-desert. There are likely to be many pentads where observers will atlas diligently for the minimum period of two hours' intensive fieldwork and see only a handful of species. While this may not make for scintillating birding, it is critically important to the project.

Why? Because it is only as we document the extent of the 'cold spots' that we can appreciate the value of the 'hot spots'. We may well be alarmed to discover that our birding hot spots are like tiny islands in a cold ocean or, to use a different metaphor, oases in a desert.

So, atlas observers, please don't be reticent about submitting checklists that meet the fieldwork protocol criteria, but have only a handful of species on them. This is not a reflection on your birding skills – it is a statement about your courage to atlas the low-diversity areas. Your contributions are crucial.

LES UNDERHILL

All the details you need are on the project website <http://sabap2.adu.org.za>. You can also contact Doug Harebottle at the Animal Demography Unit (doug.harebottle@uct.ac.za) or Neil Smith at BirdLife South Africa (conservation@birdlife.org.za).



The hide at the vulture restaurant at Grietjie Private Nature Reserve.

MARTIN TAYLOR

more on the menu KRUGER TO CANYONS BIRDING ROUTE

The Kruger to Canyons Birding Route, a BirdLife South Africa project, has recently been involved in a number of infrastructural development projects in the Lowveld. The most exciting initiative has been the establishment of a vulture restaurant on the Grietjie Private Nature Reserve, 20 kilometres south of Phalaborwa. The reserve forms part of the greater Kruger National Park.

The purpose of this viewing hide is threefold. While its primary function is to act as a facility for birders to watch vultures and other scavenging birds, it will also serve as an important educational facility that highlights the dismal conservation plight of vultures in southern Africa. Groups of schoolchildren visiting the hide can be taught about vultures, thus helping to dispel many of the myths about these birds. The hide will also be used to assist the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Birds of Prey Working Group with its vulture-monitoring projects in the Lowveld.

Carcasses are only put out over weekends, ensuring that the vultures

do not become dependent on the additional food source. The vulture restaurant is one of a handful that are located within a Big Five reserve, and spotted hyaenas and other carnivores are also sure to make good use of this as a feeding station.

Mark Anderson, Executive Director of BirdLife South Africa, officiated at the opening of the vulture restaurant and hide on 20 March 2009. Since then, all five locally occurring vulture species have become regular customers. Comments in the visitors' book reveal that it is not uncommon to find yourself surrounded by more than 150 vultures during feeding time.

The vulture restaurant is easily accessible and open to the public. Reservations can be made through Ian Owtram on e-mail ian@antares.co.za or cellphone 083 286 8281; alternatively, contact the reserve warden on cellphone 078 875 8722. A fee of R30 per person is charged; this goes directly back into the maintenance of the facility and into providing carcasses for the vultures.