

It is my guess that most non-professional birdringers are at least partially motivated by a desire to make a positive contribution to ornithology while indulging their interest in birds. Many other bird enthusiasts feel the same way but find ringing too technical for their taste. It is therefore fortunate that the opportunity to do atlasing will shortly be presented to all southern African birdwatchers.

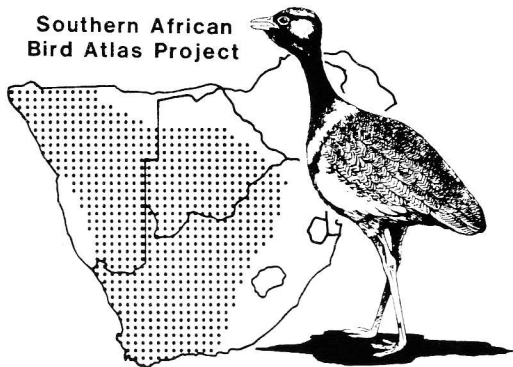
Bird atlasing is a research activity in which even the most casual birder can participate. For ringers it will be extra grist to their mill or something constructive to do when the weather, or other circumstances, sabotage a ringing expedition.

Atlasing simply involves recording one's sightings of species (and any breeding activity) on an atlas card. Each atlas card filled in is limited to a particular month and a particular quarter-degree square (15' x 15'). If such cards are submitted regularly for all parts of the sub-continent, one can, with the help of a computer, build up a clear and accurate picture of distributions *per se*, breeding distributions and the seasonality of distributions and breeding. But that is a very big 'IF'. The success of the Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP) is going to hinge on the degree of participation and what we are aiming for is nothing less than mass involvement.

The idea of thousands of field-workers with all degrees of experience and every shade of seriousness, is enough to make any professional ornithologist's hair stand on end. Seen from another angle, however, the prospect of broad-based public involvement becomes a golden opportunity. This is the perspective of the environmental educator. Through the publicity which the SABAP will receive, and through the personal involvement of the public, much educational mileage can be made. Every ringer knows that it is through first-hand involvement with wildlife that a real love and understanding of the natural environment grows. Every hour spent ringing or atlasing in the veld is probably worth ten watching wildlife films on the box.

The astounding thing about environmental education is that it does not require that people be shown anything new, only that

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they be taught to perceive and understand the things which they 'see' every day. Take bird calls for example. For most people bird calls are part of the background noise and are, at most, 'pleasant'. To make them emerge with individual meaning requires that one be encouraged to actually listen and to hear the differences. If the novice has a spark of interest, that cognitive switch will be easily flipped. It is hoped that the SABAP will provide the initial introduction and impetus for those who have the spark of interest and that their environmental awareness will begin to snowball from there. It is my conviction that with our environmental crisis deepening every day, the importance of the educational potential of the SABAP probably surpasses its importance as an ornithological research project.

Of course the project does have ornithological importance and every effort will be made to ensure that the data and analysis are of a high scientific standard. Records will be vetted on a regional basis by panels of field ornithologists in co-operation with Regional Atlassing Committees. It is hoped that the Atlas, scheduled for publication in 1996, will be of value not only to amateur and professional ornithologists but also to conservationists and planners. Such professions will be given a 'handle' on habitat type and quality and thus on conservation priorities via bird distributions.

There is another facet to the SABAP which has exciting implications for the future of ornithology in the sub-continent, and that is the creation of a Southern African Bird Populations Data Unit (SABPDU). Such a Unit would function as a computer-based repository for the region's data on six topics related to bird populations, namely: movement patterns, mortality, distribution, seasonality, productivity and abundance. It has been decided that such a BPDU should develop under the maternal wing of SAFRING which is a *de facto* BPDU of more limited scope. The SABAP is the first step and hopefully not the last, in expanding that scope.

The SABAP is being launched in January 1987. Your local bird club should be organizing an 'Atlas Day' in January to mark the beginning of a 5-year data-gathering period. If you would like to participate, please drop a line to: The Co-ordinator, Bird Atlas Project, SAFRING, University of Cape Town, RONDEBOSCH, 7700. Full instructions will be sent to you during December, 1986. Serious birders, which all ringers presumably are, will be a great asset to the SABAP and are therefore cordially invited (begged, entreated) to participate.

James Harrison, Bird Atlas Co-ordinator, SAFRING, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, 7700.