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Newsletter 37 Winter 2024

Photo: Cassie Carstens

Getting the CAR back on the road!

- Cassie Carstens

I offer provisional apologies for the comparison, knowing fully well that several of you will roll your eyes dramatically at my poor use of the pun.

Being involved with the newly established CAR working group was like finding an old, dusty relic motor vehicle in distant relatives backyard shed. Imagine an old Chev, maybe a Plymouth or an Oldsmobile. This car had been neglected for a number of years, if not decades. Partly rusted with flat tyres, rodents had nested in the upholstery, and what fire there had been in it's powerful engine had sadly cooled a long time ago.

But similar to an uplifting movie plot, this car is slowly and lovingly being restored and brought back to shiny life! And this newsletter is hopefully but the first result of that engine roaring back to life!

For this 37th edition, I choose to keep the academic side of things slightly muted. I know those things are important, but this one will be about the stories and the birders who put in the time and effort to take part in these amazing citizen science projects.



Yellow canola flowers in the Overberg. Photo by Wicus Leeuwner.

The Overberg in the Western Cape features heavily, with a few story flowing in from other parts of the country. Numbers of birds seen, challenges overcome, poor weather endured, and friendships formed are the meat of these tales. And for those of you who can't live a single day without some hard science, a description of how conditions and the number of observers correlate with the number of birds recorded is included just for you.

Future edition will focus more on the science of CAR. The numbers, the lists, and what they tell us about the South African birds we so love.

If you are reading this newsletter, you fall into one of two groups: you are either a member of the group consisting of old hands who have done the hard driving during these counts for many years. Or you are about to join the first group by taking part in the next count at the end of January 2025!



Richard Fry and Pamela Kleiman in KZN. Photo by Cassie Carstens.

In advance, thank you for helping us to get this CAR back on the road. We'll pick up speed in the coming months with the website being updated and outreach efforts to the bird clubs scattered across the country aimed at recruiting new participants. We'll also launch a serious effort to find coordinators for all the regions to facilitate the journey ahead.

Our destination might still be unknown, but we are heading in the right direction and I'm sure the birding will be excellent!

All the best,
CC

Winter 2024 Count Report for the Overberg

- Donella Young

There were severe weather warnings for the Overberg before this winter count, and I had to suggest that if participants could not count over the weekend, they should count the following Saturday. I was most surprised that 12 routes could be counted on Saturday the 27th! There was a strong wind, and it was cold on the routes around Caledon, but the count conditions were satisfactory, and thankfully, most of the rain forecast did not materialise. But it was just too risky to drive routes in low-lying areas. Even a week later, Wessel Steyn couldn't count his whole route (OV11), as a big mud bath at the Grashoek bridge made it impossible to cross. He reported: "There was still an enormous amount of open water in every vlei area and abundant waterbirds."

OV12 was also impassable; even part of the Bredadorp/Arniston tar road was underwater, and a farmer nearly got stuck in a colossal bakkie where a dam had formed near Prinskraal farm! Unfortunately, the route leader, Marie Verster, can no longer count this route; thank you for your contributions, Marie. Wessel, thankfully, thinks he has found someone willing to do OV12. Routes counted on the 3rd of August had a clear day with a light breeze, but it was still cold.

Daryl de Beer and his team, who count OV01 near Caledon, remarked on the tall cereal and canola crops obscuring target species, but they saw 13 Black-headed Herons! Wicus Leeuwner noted that the Blue Cranes sheltered from the strong wind by standing in natural hollows on his route, OV18. He photographed a Blue Crane with colour rings, which, in his own words: "seems to be one of a breeding pair guarding their nest site. When I stopped next to the fence, they became noisy while jumping and throwing grass and sticks into the air. Typical aggressive acts to keep intruders out. I know the farmer well and shall follow up during the breeding season."

A reminder to all birders to record the details of ringed birds at any time of year and send the information to SAFRING, safring@birdmap.africa. The position of the ring on the right and left legs is recorded as if you were the bird.



The ringed Blue Crane. Photo by Wicus Leeuwner.

A highlight for Stuart and Catharine McLennan on OV06 was a Southern Black Korhaan pair walking along the edge of a pasture, under a fence and into the veld. The male puffed himself and called repeatedly while the female just strolled along slightly ahead of him. They hadn't seen this species along this route for several years!

Sarel Snyman, a keen birder from the Somerset West Bird Club, offered to be the new route leader on OV09. Ann White and her team, Anne McLeod, Petra Rigg, Gillian Barnes, Priscilla Beeton and Marilyn Metcalf, had counted this route for many years, driving out all the way from Fish Hoek! Johan and Lorraine van Heerden stepped in to cover for Vanessa Pfothenauer along OV19, who was tending to an ill family member.

Keith and Michele Moodie and Andrew and Anneke Fraser-Jones recorded the highest totals of Blue Cranes (1,195), as well as Denham's Bustards (47) and Karoo Korhaan (5) along route OV08!

Winter 2024 Count Report for the Overberg

- Donella Young

Hedda Hammerbeck and Zeza O’Kennedy won the Blue Crane silver medal with 427 birds counted. Charles Britz saw the second-highest total of Denham’s Bustard (19) on OV05.

Willemina v/d Harst-de Wet and her team, who count OV13, could not count on the CAR weekend as an annual bicycle race disrupts their route. They surveyed it the following weekend with better weather but faced bitterly cold winds, rain and a slippery road surface. They reported that the countryside looked like a vast wetland - even grain fields were inundated. “Virtually one-third of our route was ‘wetland’!! Crops, roads, and pastures turned into pans,” Willemina said. They saw more than 150 Flamingoes on a new ‘vlei’ and three pairs of Bat-eared foxes that must have been flooded from their burrows. Highlights of their count were a Southern Black Korhaan trio, two females and one male, a bushbuck pair, and four Black Harriers, of which one was a juvenile.

It is encouraging to see that four routes, OV08, OV13, OV14 and OV16, had recorded 10 Black-headed Herons (BHH). Bruce and Liz Napier saw 11 more along OV20 and Daryl de Beer and team, as well as Sally Adam and Pam Elof, who recorded the highest totals of 13 on OV01 and OV22, respectively.

Myra Jones, along with Martin and Dawn van der Walt, saw a Secretarybird flying on OV 15. Nine more of these iconic birds were counted this winter. Myra is absolutely amazing; in her early 90s, she still counts and captures their count data online!

It is great to welcome Frans de Graaff and his family back to counting OV33, accompanied by his colleague, Anthony Creighton. “Our route goes through Gondwana Game Reserve, and we saw a lion kill shortly after it happened,” Frans reported. They also saw a White rhino walking past while a White-necked Raven harassed the lions for some scraps. Not to mention the hippos encountered along the way to the kill, too! This team recorded the highest number of Black Harriers (5).



A Secretarybird strutting across the grasslands. Photo by Cassie Carstens.

Paul Bramhall reported a change on their route OV36, with an electronic gate erected by a farmer. This had cut almost 2 km off their route, but the lost section had passed through a dairy farm, so none or very few Blue Cranes were in this area in any case. Paul supplied an updated picture of the route start to the precinct organiser, which is a wise move that all CAR surveyors can follow. Additionally, please remember to record any changes along your route in the notes section of the data sheet. This includes changes in agriculture, recording side of road and distances. Jenny Walker noted that she was able to complete her route, OV36, for the first time in a year, as there have been roadworks for the last two counts.

The totals for the following species (without routes OV11, OV12) were: Blue Crane (3500), Denham’s Bustard (109), Black Harrier (21), Karoo Korhaan (21), Southern Black Korhaan (8), Secretarybird (9).

I will send out an email once the new data capture system is up and running. I will also share a final table of the results once everything is captured.

I would like to thank Ann White, Sally Adam and Pam Elof for all their help in phoning route leaders before counts, gathering in road count forms, capturing on behalf of some and checking data capture.

CAR Counts, Humansdorp Precinct

- Colleen Smith (Photos by Colleen Smith and Andrew Sieborger)

Over the years, counts in the Humansdorp region of the Easter Cape have been done by members of the St Francis Bay Bird Club. They focused on four routes – EH03, EH04, EH05 and EH06.

Increased farming, urban spreading, windfarms and vegetation growth along roadsides have all impacted on the counts. This winter, we were short of birders for the 27th July and so the EH 04 route was not done as it has been most impacted by the changes mentioned. Another factor that impacted this year's winter count was an outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease in the area and some parts of routes EH 05 and EH 06 were inaccessible.

One highlight of this year's count was the White-bellied Korhaan pair and 23 Denham's Bustards seen along route EH05.

The following pictures were taken on the EH 06 route but is typical of the whole area.



Agricultural lands surrounding Humansdorp.



Oyster Bay windfarm.



Blue Crane feeding.

CAR Counts, Humansdorp Precinct

- Colleen Smith (Photos by Colleen Smith and Andrew Sieborger)



Part of a 34 bird flock of Blue Cranes.



Two Denham's Bustards.



The White-bellied Korhaan pair.

2025 CAR DATES

SUMMER COUNT 25-26 January 2025

WINTER COUNT 26-27 July 2025

Contact your local bird club for more information or reach out to Tania Anderson at sabap2@birdlife.org.za for advice.

31-years of CAR counts: An Overberg Crane Group Origin Story

- Heather D'alton

It's not possible to separate the history of the Overberg Crane Group and Coordinated Avifaunal Roadcounts, more commonly known as CAR counts. These CAR counts, which have birders turning into citizen scientists twice a year for a day, have become well known across South Africa. What's more, the data collected during the counts have played a vital role in driving conservation measures.

Just 30 years ago, citizen science was not as popular as it is today in South Africa. And at the time, the Blue Crane faced huge threats – especially in the Overberg; home to more than half the population of our national bird.

Given these threats, the Animal Demography Unit (ADU) of the University of Cape Town teamed up with OCG members, as well as the Cape Bird Club and the Somerset West and Hermanus Bird Clubs in 1993 to specifically monitor populations of Blue Cranes and Denham's Bustards in the Overberg. This became the first of the CAR counts in South Africa, with 15 routes initially undertaken to monitor bird numbers. The Fitzpatrick Institute of African Ornithology now runs the project.

Today CAR counts still take place across the country. Nationally there are 340 fixed routes, covering more than 19,000 km, that citizen scientists drive twice a year.

How does it work?

The goal is to look for 26 species of large terrestrial birds (cranes, bustards, korhaans, storks, Secretarybird and Southern Bald Ibis), 10 species of game birds, 6 raptor species and 3 corvid species and count their numbers during the drive. Birders stop at regular two km intervals, scan the landscape, and jot down the numbers of these birds they see.

In the Overberg, species such as Blue Crane, Denham's Bustard, Black Harrier, Secretarybirds, and Southern Black Korhaan are included on the list.

Given that the counts take place at the same time every year, and on the same routes, we now have 31 years of data collected by citizen scientists, many of them farmers, and all of them bird lovers. These data can highlight concerns in terms of population numbers and trends. Researchers also use these data to highlight the need for conservation action.

How can you get involved?

The FitzPatrick institute of African Ornithology does like consistency during the CAR counts, and ideally would like to encourage the same group of birders to join the counts regularly. So, if you are keen to help collect data, while enjoying a lovely day out, it's good to try to commit for the long term.

The first step is to register as a participant in order to get an observer number. The registration takes place via the CAR count sister project, SABAP2. Click on this link and fill in the short form to get your observer number: <https://sabap2.birdmap.africa/register>

Once you're registered, get in touch with Tania Anderson at sabap2@birdlife.org.za who can then connect you with participants in your area.

Ideally you should join experienced participants first to get a feel for the outing. With some practice you could then be allocated your own route in time, should the need arise.



Photo: Cassie Carstens

The View of the Left-field

- Dr Alan Lee

The wind and rain through the night had me shivering, perhaps in anticipation, before my alarm clock even woke up. Just past seven o'clock, Charlie, Eli and I bundled bleary-eyed Grandpa, whose alarm had remained in hibernation, into the bakkie and set off into the grey winter dawn. The temperature gauge read 2 degrees. It takes an hour to get to the start of our route, fittingly signposted 'Winterhoek' – notably, this is not the description of any destination along this road so that it might be describing the journey. We were pleased to see it had warmed up as we set the route odometer to zero – to 3 degrees. The maximum for the day would be 10.

At the start of the route, Grandpa, now awake, kindly took over at the steering wheel, allowing me to scan my preferred left fields.

A Southern Black Korhaan screamed out that it would not be getting out of its downy bed, and as much as we scanned, we could not even see his head.

At kilometre four, we all got out of the car, and I noticed feathers flittering nearby.

"Ah, Black-headed Canaries", I said.

"Are they on the list?" asked Elena.

"No, they are on the fence over there", I responded.

"Anymore Dad jokes, and there will be no more data entry."

With a steadily increasing breeze and the wind chill factor, by km 10, only Charlie and I were getting out to scan for birds. By km 30, I was the only one getting out to scan for birds. Scan is a relative word; with the wind buffeting binoculars, it was like looking at one of those old televisions where someone had fiddled with the vertical control setting.

White-necked Ravens signalled a deceased Vervet Monkey in a riverbed.

"What killed it?" asked Charlie. We stared at a huddle of mournful, shivering monkeys in the nearby Acacia trees. A verbal response was not required.

At one point, a pair of Blue Cranes took off in the distance. Looking as if they were trying to fly away from us, we had the impression they were flying backwards as they passed overhead with startled expressions.

"Activity?" asked Elena, chief data scribe.

"Is 'Being blown away by the wind' an option?" I asked.

By the end of the drive and the dismal number of records compared to our previous summer count, Elena mused why this could be. The usual scapegoat, Eskom, seems to be functioning recently, so we pondered on climate change but decided we'd need a few more winter counts before we settled on that one. Perhaps it was just the winter 'yang' to the summer 'ying'.

At the end of the count, we considered the count conditions.

"Is there a 'Very windy' option?" I asked Elena.

"I'd say count conditions were 'Very poor'", said Charlie.

"No", I said wisely: "Very poor would be if it was snowing."

On our return drive, we saw the white peaks of the Kammanassie and just managed to make it back into the warmth of home dry before sleet began to patter at the windowpane.

"Ah well", I mused. "At least there won't be a lot of data entry."

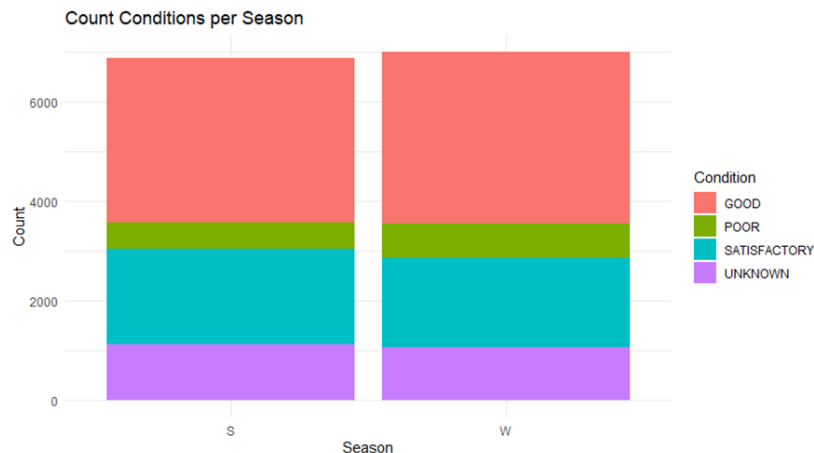
Correlates of Count Conditions

- Dr Alan Lee

Okay, so CAR is wonderful because it contains years of data, most of which is entered in a standardized way by stoic supporters. Building on my Winter 2024 count experience recounted from the Left Field perspective earlier, I thought it would be interesting to see what explanatory variables we are contributing to the CAR data set actually impact what we are observing.

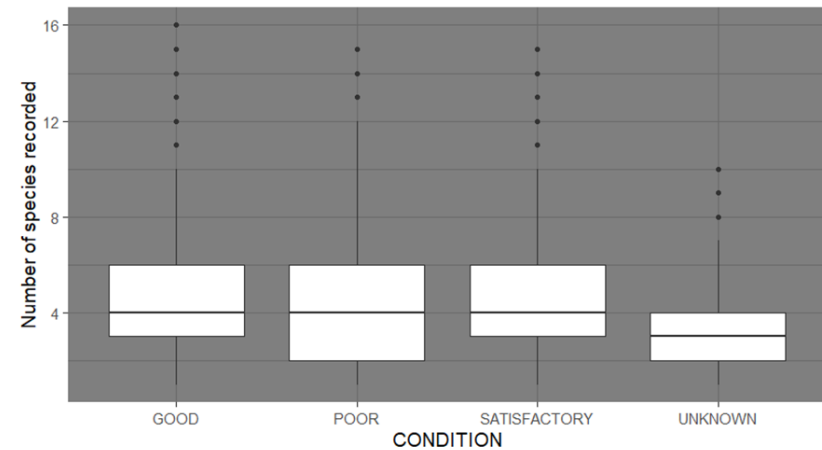
For this exercise, I will use species richness i.e. the number of different species observed, rather than focus on total counts for a single species. However, that would be a valuable avenue to follow for anyone interested in a specific species.

So, my guess was that for 'count condition' we'd be seeing a lot more 'poor' conditions in Winter Counts. I was rather surprised to see that the difference in condition categories between summer and winter was remarkably similar, with GOOD dominating the scores!



So, it turns out the average CAR route will see about 4 of the 36 or so target CAR species. Actually, 4.6 is the number that comes out statistically for 'good' conditions, although that is a bit hard for the average person to conceptualise. Especially since under 'poor' conditions it is predicted that

you will see half a species less than in the 'good' conditions. Nonetheless, overall, there is not a huge difference, even if it is statistically significant. One is also more likely to miss a species during the winter counts. Perhaps, overall, no surprise.

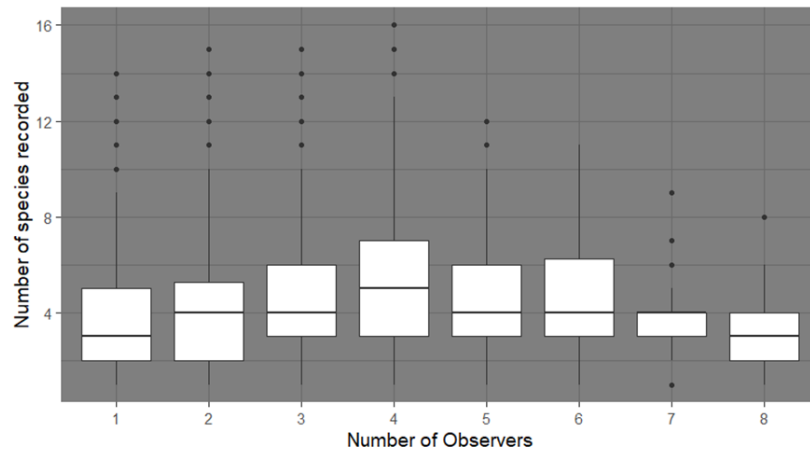


We're not sure what the 'unknown' category is all about: we suspect it is where perhaps data entry was interrupted for some reason, as this set of data has remarkably lower numbers of species. Blame it on the website...

Okay, so we did our winter count with 4 people in the car. Was that perhaps too many? We're normally just 3. Turns out, that is the optimal number of observers for detecting the maximum number of species! In fact, the record number of target species achieved so far is 16! Any additional observers actually turn out to be a handicap: I can only imagine the person in the middle of the back seat being somewhat bored and engaging in distracting random conversation rather than participating in the count, but I do not talk from experience. And 8? Clearly way too many. On the other hand, being alone also seriously jeopardizes chances of seeing everything: eyes on the road at least half the time of course.

Correlates of Count Conditions

- Dr Alan Lee



Alrighty: hopefully enough for now to prep you for your next CAR adventure and what you might experience along the way. And next time it looks to be POOR weather conditions, we'll be good with you doing the count on the following weekend instead. It will be good for the data, and probably good for you too (and even better if you have 3 friends along for the ride).



A Karoo Korhaan pair.
Photo by Steve Peck.



Dr Alan Lee (R) and his optimally numbered, but wind-blown group.
Photo by Charlie Lee.



Data capture in the CAR. Photo by Cassie Carstens.

Little Karoo Winter Count 2024

- Donella Young

There are three routes in the Little Karoo that have been regularly counted: WK04, WK06 and WK07, and it is mainly thanks to Laurel Bloch who has organised the counts for a long time.

Along WK04, Laurel and Margaret Powell had a great time, encountering a Black Harrier, three Blue Cranes, four Pale Chanting Goshawks, and a number of Corvids. Laurel reports that Margaret is indomitable! Last year (2023) when the counters for WK07 were unable to do the count due to bad weather, she proceeded to go all by herself and completed it a few days later, despite very muddy roads and numerous detours.



Two Southern Black Korhaan. Photo by Willelmina van der Harst-de Wet

On a personal note, I have a wonderful team of Villiersdorp friends who assist me on my WK06 route on backroads between Villiersdorp and McGregor.

We were delighted to hear seven Southern Black Korhaan (SBK) during this count. This was a vast improvement from the Winter 2019 count, when much to our dismay and disappointment, we found virgin Renosterveld (where we regularly saw them) ploughed up and subsequently only planted with a single crop of wheat. We didn't hear any SBK in that stretch for a while after that, but the Renosterveld has been slowly returning and we have started recording them again during our last few counts.

SUBMISSIONS

Should you like to submit a story, some pictures, or in depth data analysis to the CAR newsletter, please do so by emailing Tania Anderson at sabap2@birdlife.org.za, and she will forward it to the editor.

Limit your article to 1,000 words, and send you images at the highest quality in .jpg-format. Credit will be provided to the photographer.

Submission deadlines are 30-days after each count.

For more information about CAR visit:

<https://car.birdmap.africa/>

This newsletter was published in September 2024 by the CAR Working Group consisting of members from SANBI, The FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, BirdLife South Africa, and the Endangered Wildlife Trust.