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An electronic journal published by the Animal Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town

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Lead Editor: Arnold van der Westhuizen – **Paper Editor:** Arnold van der Westhuizen

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Recommended citation format:

De Swardt DH 2016. White-crested Helmet-Shrike in the Vredefort area, Northern Free State. Biodiversity Observations, Vol 7.4: 1-2

URL: <http://bo.adu.org.za/content.php?id=198>

Published online: 17 February 2016

– ISSN 2219-0341 –

WHITE-CRESTED HELMET-SHRIKE IN THE VREDEFORT AREA, NORTHERN FREE STATE

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The White-crested Helmet-shrike *Prionops plumatus* (Fig 1) is locally common in deciduous, broad-leaved woodland, *Vachellia* savanna and sub-urban areas mostly confined to the northern parts of southern Africa (Vernon and Dean 2005). They are also resident, but not sedentary and are known for irruptive movements (mostly during drought conditions) especially in the Gauteng area (Tarboton *et. al* 1987). Such irruptions were recorded in the years 1953, 1970 and 1979 in the historical Transvaal province (currently overlapping most of the Gauteng area). They predominantly occur in groups of between 2-10 birds and for the most part vocalize in flight when their presence is more easily observed.

During fieldwork at Deelfontein (S26°55.830' E27°16.720'), Vredefort district in the northern Free State in the week of 27-31 October 2014, the following observations of this species were made. Field work activities included bird ringing in *Vachellia* dominated drainage lines and woodland areas with *Vachellia caffra* and other broadleaved tree species. On the afternoon of 29 October 2014 while relocating mist nets to a new capturing site, I heard the characteristic vocalization of White-crested Helmet shrikes (the birds calling in flight) and saw 3 individuals flying a few meters from me in the direction of the wooded hills at the Deelfontein farm.



Fig 1 – Three White-crested Helmet-Shrikes in Mpumalanga © D Solomon
<http://vmus.adu.org.za/?vm=BirdPix-12652>

Knowing this species well from Lydenburg, Mpumalanga where I did long hours of fieldwork I realized that this sighting represents a quite far out of range record for this species. Taking in account the drought conditions in large parts of the country in 2014, possible vagrant birds moving over large distances were quite feasible.

This observation represents the first sighting of this species in the Free State since the start of SABAP2 in mid 2007. The previous Free State sightings were from Christiana (2725CC) and Harrismith (2729CC) in June 1992 (De Swardt and Nuttall 1992). The Christiana record is shown in SABAP1 map – approximately 236 km south

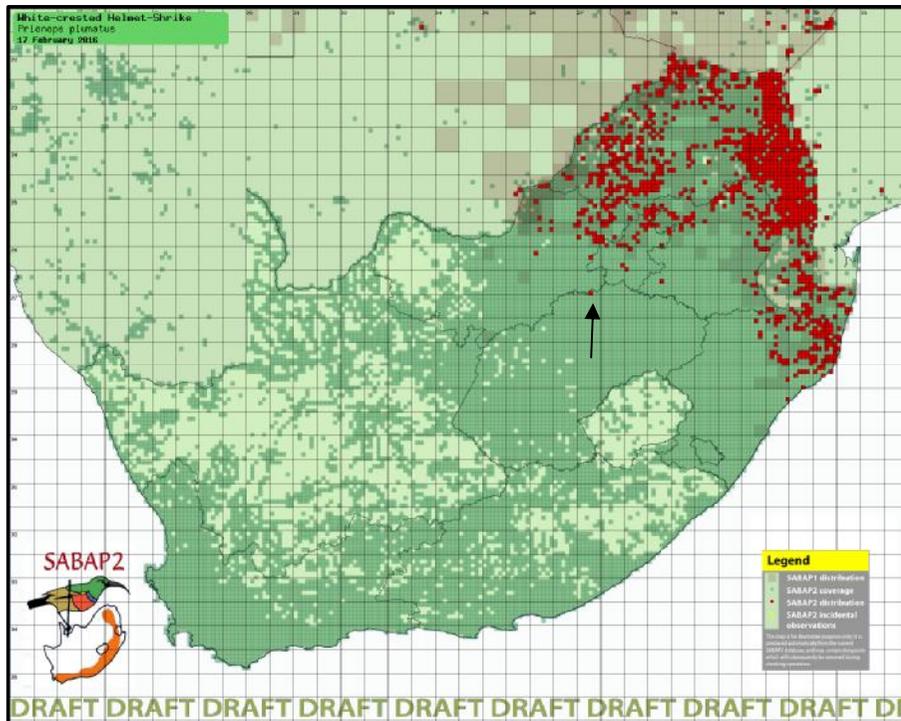


Fig 2 – The SABAP2 distribution map of the White-crested Helmet-Shrike (red dots) overlaid on SABAP1 distribution (grey squares) as on 17.02.2016. The record discussed in this paper is indicated by a black arrow.

west from the current sighting along the Vaal River (Vernon and Parker 1997). The species have also been observed in the Sasolburg area on 31 October 1998 when 8 birds have been recorded there (Coetzee 1999). The current SABAP2 distribution map shows this species most southern limit in areas north of Cartonville (2610_2715) and areas west of Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve (2625_2800 and 2620_2755) in Gauteng (Fig 2).

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