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ROOSTING BEHAVIOUR OF WATTLED STARLINGS IN THE AGULHAS PLAIN

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BIRD OBSERVATION

ROOSTING BEHAVIOUR OF WATTLED STARLINGS IN THE AGULHAS PLAIN

Wim de Klerk

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Wattled Starling *Creatophora cinerea* behaviour is similar to many other starling species and they prefer communal roosting (Sontag 1990). For the past 6 years I have been recording the birds of the Agulhas Plain and rarely observed Wattled Starlings. On these occasions they were often in the company of either Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* or Pied Starlings *Spreo bicolor* and rarely numbered more than 10. A particular area in the Agulhas National Park near Soutbos is especially productive for ticking this species.

During the first week of April 2016, I was returning home at dusk and near Soutbos I observed birds resembling Red-billed Queleas *Quelea quelea* because of the flight patterns of a massive swarm of birds. I stopped about 50 meters from the single tree (about 3m height) and bushes (about 1.5-2m) and watched the swirling mass of birds. Some of the birds sat in the tree for short moments while the rest were chasing and swirling with sudden directional changes (as queleas do). I estimated about 800 although this would be highly inaccurate due to the short time and the darkness. I grabbed my binoculars and realized from those sitting for short periods that they were all Wattled Starlings, even though I particularly looked for Pied and Common Starlings. It seemed to be a homogenous swarm of Wattled Starlings. Apart from the impressive diving and swirling activities of the birds, they were extremely noisy, calling with their chittering "shweee-shweee".

I realized that this was something special for the area and went back to my car to grab my camera. The noisy swirling mass continued. It was now very dark and I realized that I would have to set my camera ISO to 1000 plus. I looked down for a few seconds to set my ISO and then **within a second the noise disappeared and everything went dead quiet**. I looked up and there was nothing! Not one of the hundreds I observed seconds ago. My wife was watching the spectacle from the car, eyes fixed on it. It happened so quickly that she did not have a clue where they went! And she was watching them! It was eerie! I walked towards the bush (about 2m x 10m in size) under the single tree, but not a sound. Nothing. I threw a stone into the bush hoping to scare them, but nothing. I now began to question my eyesight. It was open around the bush and tree, they could not have flown off, as I would have seen them!

I got into the car, puzzled by what just happened, but then it dawned on me. This could very well be normal Wattled Starling behaviour:

There is safety in numbers. By day they feed in small groups and form a small target for predators. At dusk (when diurnal predators cannot see that well) they gather near their roosting site in large numbers. Then they dive into a bush, going dead quiet in an instant. The predator will think the birds have left the area. Even when the predator makes a noise and tries to flush them, they stay dead quiet. The predator then comes to the conclusion that it must have made a mistake, the prey must have left! The predator leaves mystified!

This is the only conclusion I could come to and hope that this interesting record will be investigated and confirmed by others.

References

Sontag WA 1990. Species, class and individual characteristics of African Wattled Starling *Creatophora cinerea*, Bonner Zoologische Beiträge 41(3-4):163-169.

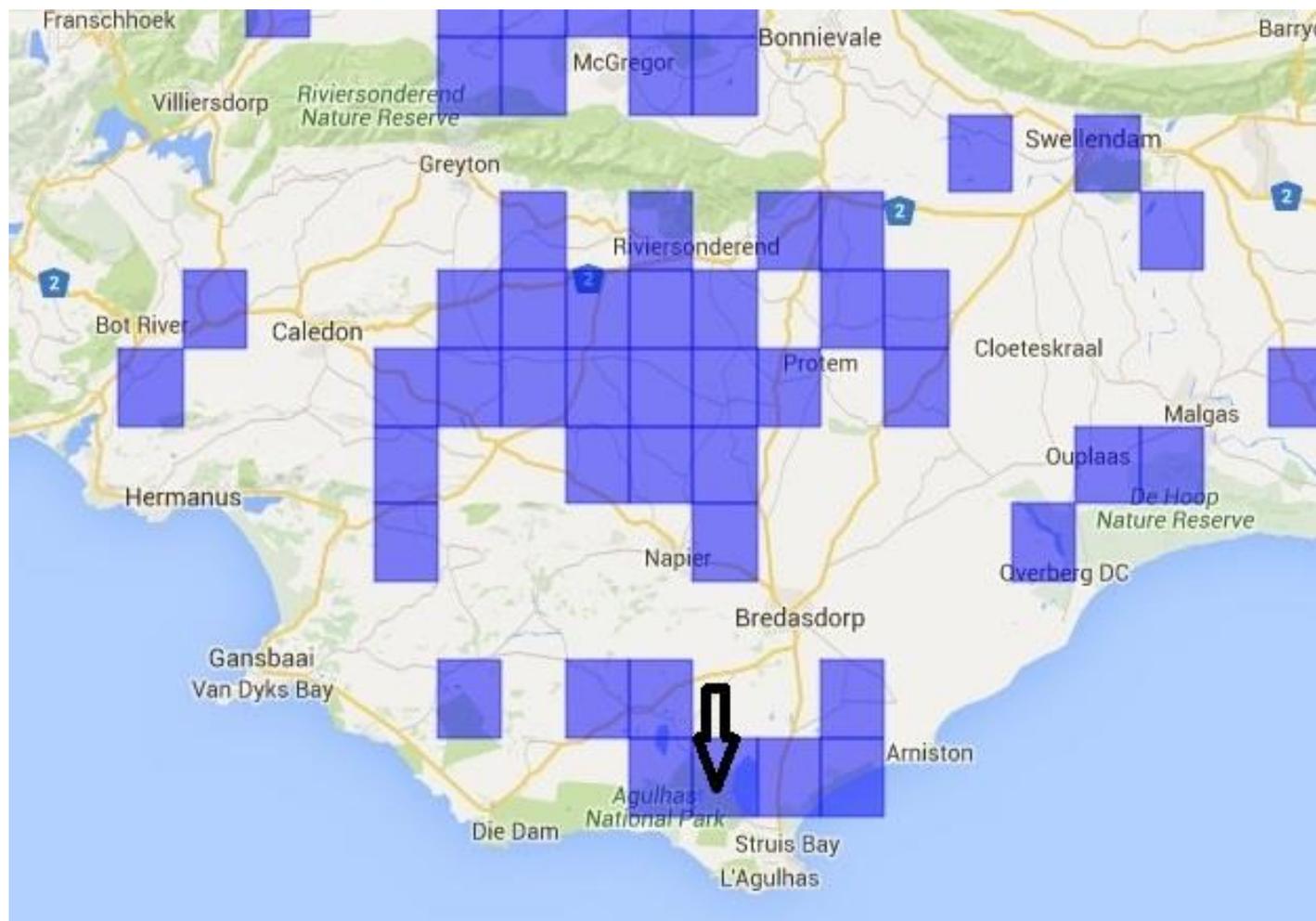


Fig. 1. SABAP2 records (blue squares) of the Wattled Starling in the greater Agulhas area; the tip of the arrow indicates Soutbos, near where the roosting Wattled Starlings were observed.