

# Ornithological Observations



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Ornithological Observations accepts papers containing faunistic information about birds. This includes descriptions of distribution, behaviour, breeding, foraging, food, movement, measurements, habitat and plumage. It will also consider for publication a variety of other interesting or relevant ornithological material: reports of projects and conferences, annotated checklists for a site or region, specialist bibliographies, and any other interesting or relevant material.

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## **NEW DISTRIBUTION RECORDS: BLACK-BACKED PUFFBACK AND BARRED WREN-WARBLER IN THE FREE STATE**

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## NEW DISTRIBUTION RECORDS: BLACK-BACKED PUFFBACK AND BARRED WREN-WARBLER IN THE FREE STATE

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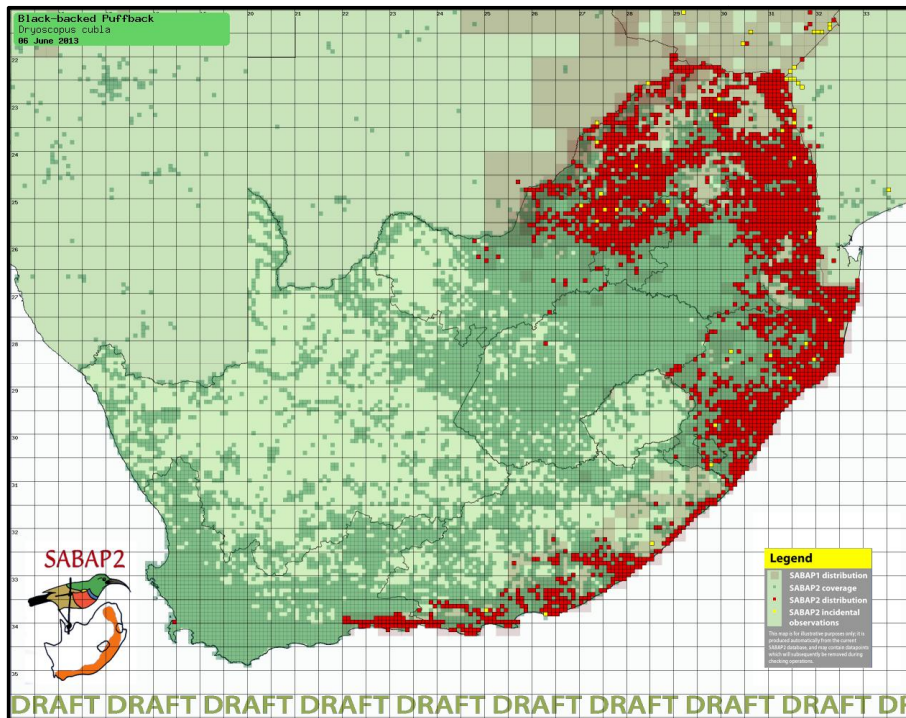
The Black-backed Puffback *Dryoscopus cubla* is mostly absent from the Free State and its distribution is limited to riverine areas and closed and open woodland in most parts of southern and eastern South Africa, possibly moving more south towards the Vaal River (Dean 2005b). The Barred Wren-warbler *Calamonastes fasciolatus* only occurs in the north western Kalahari thornveld areas of the Hoopstad-Bloemhof areas of the Free State where they prefer patches of dense cover (Dean 2005a). This species has not yet been reported previously in other areas of the Free State. The observations reported in this paper represent new distribution records for these species obtained during field work during May 2012.

During a field work visit to the Brakfontein Private Nature Reserve (Armika) in the Wesselsbron district - S28°02'36.0"; E26°17'48.6" - from 7-11 May 2012, the following observations of Black-backed Puffback and Barred Wren-warbler were made. The farm is situated on the banks of the Vet River and vegetation is dominated by *Acacia* spp. with large trees such as *Ziziphus mucronata* along the river and bush clumps with dense understory of mostly *Asparagus* spp. This



**Fig 1** - Black-backed Puffback foraging in Buffalo thorn tree at the lodge at Armika, Wesselsbron along the Vet River on 10 May 2012.

habitat type also supports typical thornveld bird communities such as those at the Sandveld Nature Reserve ( $\pm 50$  km downstream along the Vet River). The vegetation type is described as Highveld Alluvial which occurs on deep sandy to clayey soils which are developed over quaternary alluvial sediments (Mucina & Rutherford 2006). The riparian vegetation is dominated by *Acacia karoo*, *Ziziphus mucronata*, *Searsia lancea* and shrubs such as *Ehretia rigida* and *Asparagus* spp.



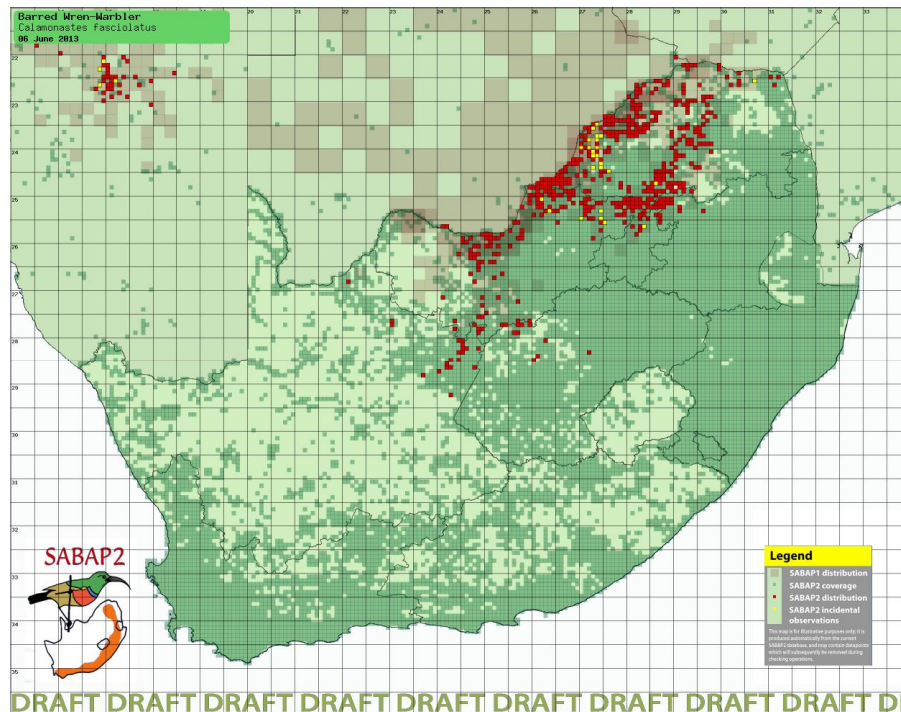
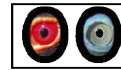
**Fig 2** – Distribution of the Black-backed Puffback on 06.06.2013 (Courtesy of SABAP2 – [www.sabap2.adu.org.za](http://www.sabap2.adu.org.za) )

On the afternoon of 7 May 2012 at the lodge, situated on the banks of the Vet River, a bird which sounded like a Black-backed Puffback was heard calling. The bird was subsequently seen in a large *Ziziphus mucronata* tree by my ringing companion, Janine Goosen. It was not seen in the following days. It was thought at the time that it was possibly a Fiscal Flycatcher *Sigelus silens*. On the Thursday afternoon however, the same bird (possibly a female) was heard and seen again in the same area in the trees around the lodge. A few sound clips of the bird were recorded and a few photos could be taken of the bird sitting high in the tree. The bird was observed

foraging for insects in the *Ziziphus* tree. With the photographic and sound clip evidence the bird could be positively identified as a Black-backed Puffback.

While closing mist nets on the late afternoon of 7 May 2012, the trilling “preep-preep” calls of a Barred Wren-warbler were heard. I immediately recognized the characteristic call of this species. I am familiar with this species from observations when resident at Roodeplaat Dam Nature Reserve, Gauteng in 1987-88. In later I made observations in the Kalahari thornveld areas of the Free State. During the week groups of wren-warblers were heard calling from the *Acacia* clumps at more than five different sites in the vicinity. On 10 and 11 May the birds were observed in an area of tall *Acacia* bush with little grass cover. The area was flooded in 2011 and a pan has formed. The birds were calling and flying (foraging) from tree to tree. Crimson-breasted Shrikes *Laniarius atrococcineus*, Brown-crowned Tchagras *Tchagra australis* and other birds were observed in the same area as well.

As noted earlier this locality is about 50 kilometres upstream from the Sandveld Nature Reserve along the Vet River. The vegetation along the river is mainly *Acacia karoo* shrub and further away from the riverine area, the *A. karoo* shrub changes to the typical *A. erolobia* Kalahari thornveld of the Sandveld Nature Reserve and Hoopstad areas. The first record of the presence of wren-warblers in the Free State was from a farm in the Hoopstad district on 19 November 1985 (Herholdt 1986). Subsequently De Swardt (1991) recorded them in several localities in Kalahari thornveld in the Hoopstad district. Recently – 15 May 2011 – a dead bird was found in the veld near Glen, Bloemfontein in area dominated by the preferred habitat. It was after a period of high rainfall, which begs the question if high rainfall



**Fig 3** – Distribution of the Barred Wren-warbler on 06.06.2013 (Courtesy of SABAP2 – [www.sabap2.adu.org.za](http://www.sabap2.adu.org.za))

improves conditions for this birds. The SABAP2 distribution map also shows an additional records south of Brakfontein (Bultfontein area) and also one more east towards the Welkom area.

The observation of the puffback represents the first SABAP2 record for this species in the Free State. There are also records of this species along the Vaal River and in the Vredefort area on the Gauteng side of the river. The smoothed SABAP1 distribution map shows that this species has possibly started to move into the Free State along the Vaal River southwest wards from Gauteng. The

wren-warbler, on the other hand, possibly moved (it may well be that they just had been unrecorded!) from the Kalahari thornveld areas of the Sandveld Nature Reserve to areas further south. SABAP2 citizen scientists should be on a special look out when they are atlasing in these areas in the future. Possible new distribution records such as these above can be obtained. New distribution records were recently obtained in this area for Jameson's Firefinch *Lagonosticta rhodopareia* and Whitebellied Sunbird *Nectarinia talatala*.

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