

# 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.

**Editor: Arnold van der Westhuizen**

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## **POSSIBLE BREEDING RECORD FOR THE GREY-HEADED BUSH-SHRIKE *MALACONOTUS BLANCHOTI* IN BOSKRUIN, RANDBURG (PENTADS 2600\_2755 AND 2605\_2755)**

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**POSSIBLE BREEDING RECORD FOR THE GREY-HEADED BUSH-SHRIKE *MALACONOTUS BLANCHOTI* IN BOSKRUIN, RANDBURG (PENTADS 2600\_2755 AND 2605\_2755)**

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SABAP2 Atlaser no 1858

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The Grey-headed Bush-shrike *Malaconotus blanchoti* is a large and colourful species of bush-shrike. However, it is stealthy in habits and it is easy to overlook when it is not calling in its characteristic mournful way. However, I do not feel that familiarity with its call and better recording is enough to explain the changes in distribution that I have noted in my home pentads since the late 1980's. Like the Grey Go-away Bird *Corythaixoides concolor* the Grey-headed Bush-shrike is a bird typically found in the bushveld of southern Africa. However its familiar ghost-like call is becoming more frequent in urban Randburg and although less visible than the Grey Go-away Bird it has certainly also adapted to the well-wooded urban garden in the last few decades.

In the first Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP1) I recorded this species in the Roodepoort Atlas Square 2627BB very infrequently as it moved through the area as a seasonal migrant. It remained in the area for very brief periods. The SABAP1 distribution map suggests a very low recording rate for the southern part of the Highveld, which represented the southern border of its range in what was known as the Transvaal province. The distribution range is indicated in the map in Figure 2.



**Fig 1** – The skulking, shy Grey-headed Bush-shrike – a beautiful bird with a distinctive call. © Niall Perrins

I have recorded this species during surveys for SABAP2<sup>1</sup> in a total of 36 pentads (5' latitude x 5' longitude square per pentad), with 112 individual records at a reporting rate (RR) of 8.5%.

For pentad 2605\_2755 there are in total 59 records with a 9.6% RR. For pentad 2600\_2755 it is less often recorded with 24 records with a recording rate of 6.5%. It is now resident with records for most months with regular records for neighbouring pentads such as Roodekrans (2605\_2750) with 26 records at 8% (RR) but interestingly none from Delta Park (2600\_2755) which lies directly to the east and has been very well surveyed.

<sup>1</sup> **Editor's note:** SABAP2 is work in progress. Current records in the database may differ from those in this paper, as new records may have been added since the time of writing.

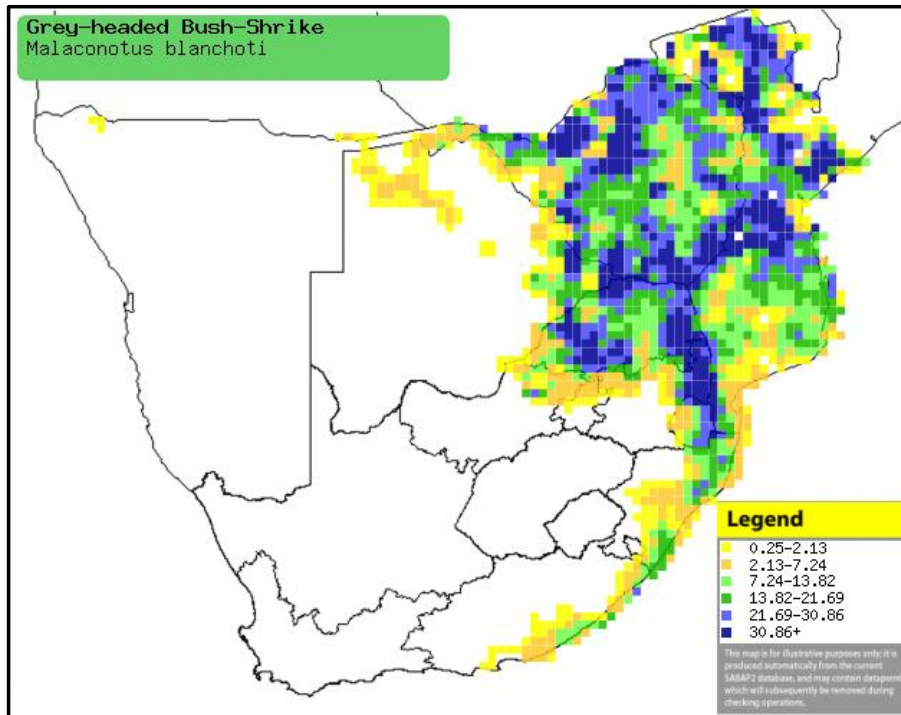


Fig 2 – The distribution map of the Grey-headed Bush-shrike as recorded during SABAP1.

The SABAP2 distribution map suggests that the reported frequency of this species in southern Gauteng is higher than in SABAP1. The map in Fig 3 indicates the new reported sightings during SABAP2 surveys – note the records especially in southern Gauteng.

In Harris and Arnott (1988) it is stated that while its distribution was being reduced in some areas, it was becoming more common in urban gardens. My findings support this statement – particularly in most of the urban pentads that I atlas regularly. I feel this species indicates its presence by calling and it is probably under-reported as

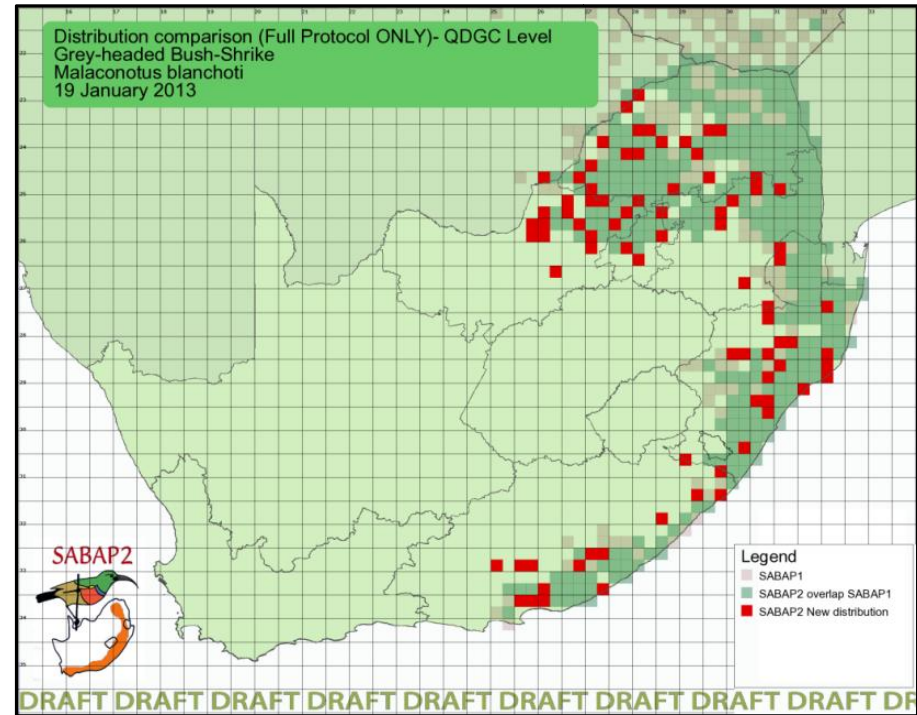


Fig 3 – New distribution of the Grey-headed Bush-shrike as recorded during SABAP2 (red squares) overlaid on SABAP1 data.

it is secretive and skulking in its habits and mostly silent.

An adult pair of Grey-headed Bush-shrikes was recorded dismembering an unidentified avian prey item that was wedged in a tree fork and feeding parts to a single juvenile. Attention was drawn to the birds by an almost metallic regular click at one-second intervals given by the juvenile. The three birds were seen about eight metres away in the branch of a large Wild Olive *Olea europaea* subsp. *africana*. Other trees in the immediate vicinity include a tall Tree Fuchsia *Halleria lucida*, Outeniqua Yellowwood *Podocarpus falcatus*, Pompom Tree *Dais cotonifolia*, various fruit trees and large shrubs.



Separating this small copse from a narrow long bird sanctuary is one house with garden dominated by one large old Wild Apricot *Dovyalis zeyheri*. The bird sanctuary and the complex run down steeply to a stream between Kelly Avenue, Franschoek and Xanada Streets in Bromhof, Randburg (the border between pentad 2605\_2755 and 2600\_2755).

This interaction was witnessed in the grounds of 'Shady Woods' Retirement Village. The Olive tree branch was about one metre above eye level and three metres above a tarmac parking area. One adult was seen feeding the fully-fledged chick. The adult had jammed a small stolen chick – white fluff feathers clearly visible – between two smaller branches and was pulling, and ripping chunks of flesh to feed the youngster. It continued doing this for at least five minutes and was not in the least disturbed by the observer. All three birds then flew away giving their distinctive ghostly call – their large powerful bills and yellow eyes were seen clearly. No nest has yet been located, although there is more than enough suitable habitat available. The fact that adults had been feeding a fledgling chick indicates breeding must have taken place in the close proximity. Birds have previously been recorded as prey for this species (Hockey *et al.* 2005).

This species has not only become resident in the Randburg area in the last few years, it is now also starting to breed. It is fascinating changes like these that make the SABAP2 project, which follows on the baseline data collected during SABAP1, so valuable and interesting. It has certainly been an exciting privilege for me personally to have been a field observer in both projects.

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