

...And the Bird Population Monitoring Programme Count Goes on: The February 2011 Count Results

The diverse, charismatic, high mobility, migration phenomenon and our level of knowledge of bird ecology justifies the need to monitor birds on a regular basis and to demonstrate that birds are useful in showing changes in the overall condition of the ecosystems or the environment. The drive for the February 2011 count was ideal for the Bird Population Monitoring (BPM) Programme¹ in Botswana. It has been a pleasure to have many of the volunteer/observer's enthusiastically taking on their transects without much pressure from their coordinators. The BPM programme is currently experiencing a fulfilling growth and a thank you goes to the observers for their passionate support in protecting and conserving Botswana's birdlife. This growth is proved by comparing the February 2011 count result with that done in November 2010.

In February 2011 a team of counters throughout the country counted birds in their allocated transects using Point Count methodology². The results obtained from the February 2011 count showed that a total of 218 observers have undertaken 161 transects in contrast to 159 observers with 122 transects undertaken in the November 2010 count. Of the 105 chosen grids around Botswana 62 transects were undertaken in those grids and the other 99 transects were undertaken outside the designated grid squares. The distribution of the transects and the uncovered designated grid squares after the February 2011 count is shown on figure 1. There were 27 605 birds and 352 bird species recorded as opposed to 14 056 birds and 289 bird species recorded during the previous count.

The average number of birds recorded per transect was 177 and the average number of species recorded was 25 per transect as opposed to 123 average number of birds recorded per transect and 23 average number of species recorded per transect for the November 2010 count. The Society thinks that the increase in number of birds recorded per transect is due to significant breeding during the wet season by some species, such as Red-billed Quelea, and to the improved bird identification skills of some of the observers.

The most common species recorded by participants was *CapeTurtle-Dove* 133, *Laughing Dove* 100, *Cape Glossy Starling* 97, *Fork-tailed Drongo* 93, *Blue Waxbill* 77, *Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill* 77, *White-browed Sparrow-Weaver* 72, *European Barn Swallow* 69, *Grey Go-away Bird* 67 and *Crimson-breasted Boubou* 67. The species with the highest number counted for all transects were *Red-billed Quelea* 3085, *Cape Turtle-Dove* 2169, *European Barn Swallow* 1390, *White-browed Sparrow-Weaver* 880, *Laughing Dove* 786, *Scaly-feathered Finch* 768, *Cape Glossy Starling* 644, *Black-chested Prinia* 491, *Cattle Egret* 472 and *Blue Waxbill* 469.

With respect to the birds of concern species or the globally threatened species, there were 25 *Bateleurs*, 72 *White-backed Vultures*, 9 *Lappet-faced Vultures*, 20 *Cape Vultures*, 24 *Kori bustards* recorded in February 2011 compared to 10 *Bateleurs*, 17 *White-backed Vultures*, 2 *Lappet-faced Vultures*, 5 *Cape Vultures*, 6 *Kori Bustards* recorded in November 2010 count. There was a notable increase of the alien species, the *Common Myna*, with 25 records as opposed to 8 records in November 2010 count. The *Common Myna* was spotted at Gaborone, Mahalapye, Lobatse, Otse and Oodi. Gavin and Marjorie Blair from Kasane remain the outstanding participants with five transects completed.

¹ The Bird Population Monitoring (BPM) Programme is aimed at demonstrating that birds are useful in showing changes in the overall condition of ecosystems or the environment. The BPM programme will develop a Wild Bird Index for Botswana showing bird population trends over time and to use these trends to set conservation priorities, to report on biodiversity changes/state of the environment in Botswana (and to contribute to African/global effort). The scheme runs twice annually in February and November and offers exciting birding opportunities from areas that are hardly visited.

² Point count is the methodology used for Bird Population Monitoring Programme in Botswana. The observers count birds from a 2 km transect stopping every 200 m for five minutes to record birds that they see or hear. Observers are allocated transects by the project coordinator and local representatives in different branches using the 105 designated grid squares chosen throughout Botswana. Transect allocations are done randomly where there is no designated grid square present near the participants to allow flexibility within the programme. The transects are counted by foot or vehicle in early mornings only.

Challenges

Nationally, with the data that the observers collect, we are able to see the distribution, diversity, abundance, composition and population trends of birds of Botswana. The data can also be used, in relation to land use changes and rainfall variation, to determine if there is any change in their habitat in the long run. Nonetheless, BirdLife Botswana acknowledges that, the current data is insufficient to use to analyse the above-mentioned variables and so we depend on the observers to pledge a long term commitment to make all this a reality. Furthermore the existing bias is a result of counts being more skewed to human settlement areas resulting in less coverage in remote areas. The other reason is some of the observers are still learning bird calls and they are unable to identify and record all the birds that they see or hear in their transects. The challenge has been that some of the observers do not have access to Global Positioning System (GPS) and in some areas there appear to be some records of birds outside their known range and distribution.

Recommendations

BirdLife Botswana has produced a CD with 100 calls of common birds of Botswana and encourages participants to attend the Society's monthly bird walks organised at each branch. The bird call CD can be accessed through the coordinators and we request those who can, to donate P50.00 to get the CD, so that we can support reprinting of the CD. There are bird identification courses provided for those who are already taking part and those who show an interest in volunteering to participate. BirdLife Botswana has approached the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) to assist with the procurement of three GPSs which will be availed to the observers. It is also recommended that observers should not record birds of which they are uncertain about their identity unless they have checked their range and distribution in the field guide.

The Society thanks the sponsors of the programme, the Global Environment Facility Small Grant Programme (GEF SGP) and the Royal Society For the Protection of Birds (RSPB). The Society would also like to acknowledge the implementing partners, namely the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) and the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) for their continual support of the programme. Lastly the Society appeals to those who reside near the uncovered designated grid squares, shown below on figure 1, to help by undertaking counts in those squares. This will contribute to a total coverage for the BPM programme country wide.



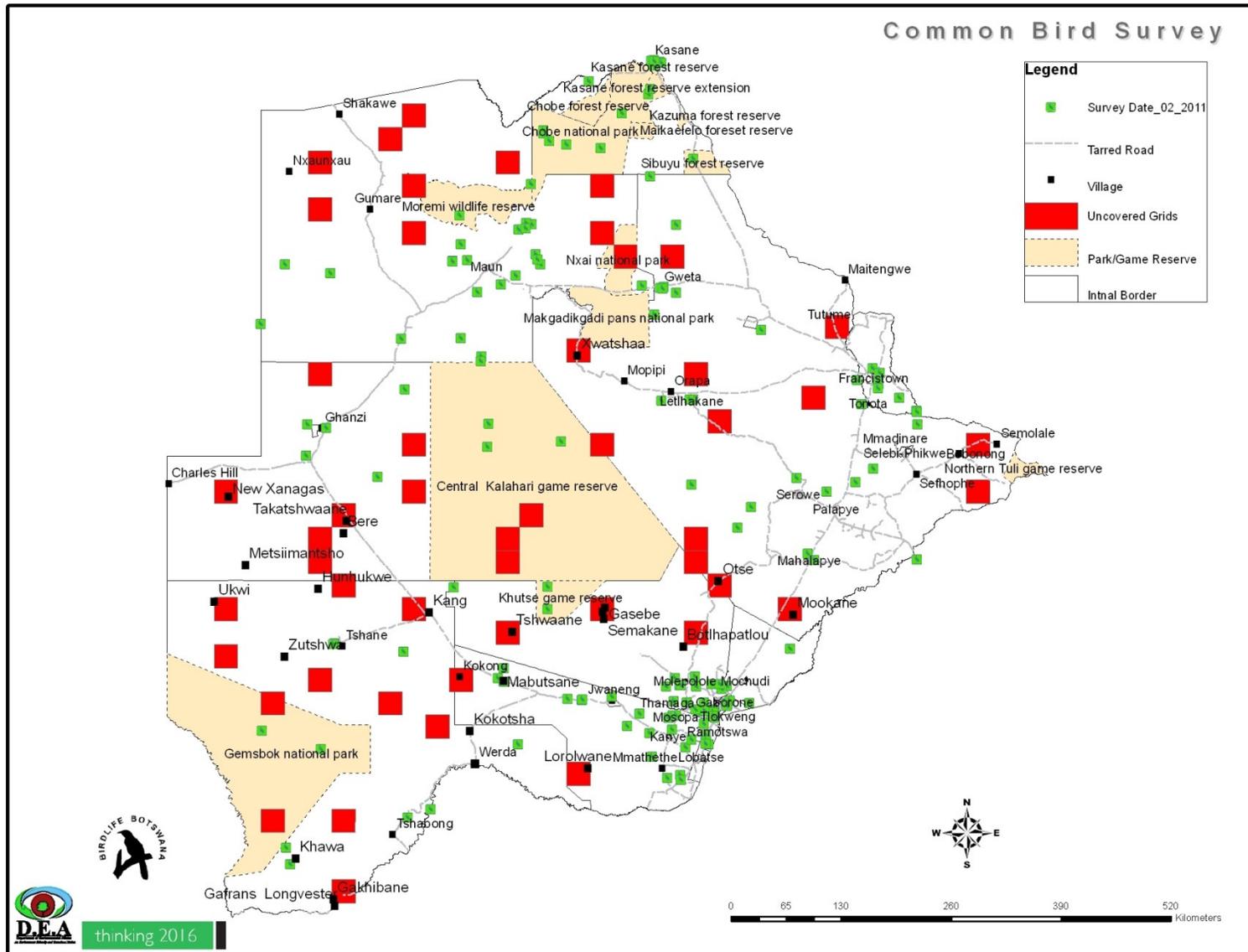


Figure 1: Map showing the distribution of the transects in green and the uncovered designated grid squares in red

