

Vanuatu Birds Database Observer's Guide

Wantok Environment Centre

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<http://www.positiveearth.org/vanbirds/>

About Bird Atlassing

This project applies much of the survey methodology from Birds Australia's *The new atlas of Australian birds* (Barrett et al, 2003). Our primary objective is to encourage people to make bird lists and contribute them. A simple and undemanding survey procedure is needed.

Our database is point based. There's no grid and each survey is ultimately located by latitude and longitude.

The preferred survey (a point survey) is a short duration (20 to 30 minutes) search of a small, accurately located area (around 2 hectares). It's a quick and easy presence/absence survey that can be performed by any birdwatcher. These surveys should be fairly consistent and comparable because observer behaviour is restricted by the time and area limits.

Area surveys, with longer durations and larger areas are more flexible and more thorough. They can be useful for shorebird and waterfowl counts, sea-based surveys and surveys in new areas where you may be unfamiliar with the species and sites. Their main drawback in a point based atlas is they are less controlled. If the search area is very large then spatial resolution is lost and birds from different habitats may be recorded together. We recommend search areas be no bigger than about 8 km x 8 km (5 second squares). For example, we already have a reasonable idea of what birds are found on Efate so another 'Efate list' doesn't really add any value to the database.

A handheld GPS receiver (set to WGS-84 datum) is recommended for locating point surveys. Note that Vanuatu's 1979 vintage 1:50,000 scale black and white topographic maps (soon to be replaced) are not consistent with the modern WGS-84 datum.

Atlassing tips

Bird Atlassing is not a competition. **Only report birds you are confident have been identified correctly.** It's better to miss a bird (a 'false negative' error) than to record something fictitious (a 'false positive' error).

Choose sites which are representative of the habitat you are surveying and remember we always need to improve coverage and reduce bias so please spread out your effort.

Surveys should be separated in space and time. Adjacent point surveys should be at least 400m apart and there should be a reasonable time gap, at least 20 minutes, between consecutive point surveys. Repeat surveys at the same site should be separated by at least several hours if not a full day. If you want to list birds continuously for hours then record an area survey (one list).

A good strategy in new areas is to start with area searches. Once you are familiar with the local bird species and the habitat types you will be more effective in conducting point surveys.

Bird listing in forests is almost always best in the morning. Forest birds are generally most active and most vocal at dawn and for the following couple of hours. Afternoon birding is not bad but our experience shows morning lists show more species than afternoon lists. Also consider the weather condition when you go birding. Bad weather makes it difficult to hear and see the birds and result in poor survey lists. **It's a bad practise to survey when it is raining and windy.**

Making the most of your handheld GPS: Satellite reception is weak and intermittent under a forest canopy, however your GPS may still be useable. First, turn on your GPS in a clear area and wait for it to find as many satellites as possible. Leave the GPS on when you enter the forest and it will continue to track the satellites through holes and patches in the canopy even though you may occasionally lose all signals under heavy cover. If you turn off the GPS it loses the tracking and you will have to start again.

Submitting records

Our form is based on the Birds Australia form. It's a digital form using Microsoft Excel. Excel is common software and many people know how to use it. However, it's not platform independent and **using the digital form is not mandatory**. If you don't support Excel then simple email messages or posted lists are acceptable. However, the form is still a useful tool for data collecting and a pdf version is available on our website.

The Excel worksheet is locked so, hopefully, nobody can modify the layout, formulae or Visual Basic code. However, you can save the form under a new name and copy it as many times as you like. You can also print it. This form should be satisfactory for maintaining your own digital or hardcopy archives (it's a good practice, especially if we come back to you with a query).

The form uses macros and macros can be a virus threat. We don't recommend you use any copy of this file that does not come directly from WTEC. While our code is locked and the worksheet is as well we can't guarantee that the copy of the form you got from anyone other than us is safe. If you have lost or corrupted the file then obtain a fresh copy directly from us.

There are three self-explanatory macro buttons on the form. One of these macros checks for basic errors and counts the number of species. Comparing the reported species count with your tally is a quick check to make sure you didn't miss any birds when filling out the form.

The basic procedure for using the digital form is:

1. Complete the form.
2. Check the form with the macro.
3. Look at the form again. Is it complete and clear?
4. Save the form (with a unique name for every survey) and email it to Vanuatu Birds Online.

References

Barrett, G., Silcocks, A., Barry, S., Cunningham, R. and Poulter, R. (2003), *The new atlas of Australian birds*, Royal Australian Ornithologists Union, Melbourne.

Bregulla, H. (1992), *Birds of Vanuatu*, Anthony Nelson, Oswestry.

Completing the form

Observer name and code

We need both for crosschecking.

Date

The database aims to collect new and recent data on the distribution and abundance of Vanuatu's birds. Records preceding 1990 generally do not serve this purpose and this earlier knowledge has already been documented by Bregulla (1992).

Island

Our island table is based on Bregulla's (1992) and you should be able to find nearly all the small offshore islands here (eg Iririki is not Efate). Sea-based observations are categorized as 'At Sea'. We don't accept multi-island lists and 'trip' lists (eg a list for the Shepherds Group).

Location

This text field should be concise and descriptive. If someone is to visit your survey site they should be able to recognise it from your location description. If the survey is an island list then you must enter "Island List" in this box.

Search Type

Point Search: This is a short duration survey (20 to 30 minutes) of a small area (2 hectares). All birds recorded **within** the area and those flying overhead are recorded.

Area Search: A longer duration survey of a larger area.

Survey Duration

This field indicates the amount of effort involved in a survey. Generally point surveys are of shorter duration (less than 30 minutes). Area surveys are generally of longer duration (more than 30 minutes).

Latitude and Longitude

If you have a GPS please set it to use the WGS-84 datum. Positions should be recorded in degrees, minutes, seconds format with integer values (ie minutes and seconds from 0 to 59).

If you don't have a GPS then we hope you can get the coordinates from a map. If you don't have a satisfactory map then we'll try and locate the position from a map *using the location description you provide* (a clear and complete description is required).

For larger area searches the reported position should be biased towards the area where you spent the most time surveying.

Positional Data Uncertainty

Uncertainty estimate	Uncertainty	Position reference
± 50 m	Known position.	Good GPS fix or a location that can be found on a detailed topographic map.
± 500 m	Estimated position.	No GPS fix and location estimated from a nearby landmark.
± 5000 m	Uncertain position.	Lost! No GPS, no landmarks, error in position could be more than 500 m.

Landmarks

We use the landmark reference for checking your latitude and longitude. They should both reference the same location on a map. Also, sometimes it's difficult to accurately describe a location by name and references to a landmark are handy.

Comments

Please enter scientific observations (objective and concise) here. Note that if you type more than 255 characters Microsoft Excel will not display the text. Also, we will cut your comments string off at 400 characters. As a rule, don't type more than will fit in the box on the form.

Some useful standard comments are:

- Explain any departure from standard survey procedures (search type and duration).
- Uncertainties in any of the form data (eg position, species identification).
- Breeding details (nest location, contents etc.).
- Count details (percentage of site surveyed, area or length of survey as appropriate, actual counts or estimated numbers).

Note that our database doesn't record the time of the day. If you submit more than one list from exactly the same location with the same date it helps to make a remark as to what time of day it was (eg 'Morning list' or 'Afternoon list'). Then it's clear that you haven't submitted the same list twice.

The Atlas form does not have enough space for describing unusual and unexpected birds; a separate *Unusual Record Report Form* must be submitted.

Observations and counts

A species can be detected as **Present** or **Breeding**. Breeding records must be proven. Acceptable breeding records include a nest with contents, adults making repeated visits to a nest or hollow carrying food or newly fledged young with a parent near the nest site (Barrett et al, 2003).

Counts are optional. This field is most commonly used for shorebirds and waterfowl. It also can be useful reporting numbers of scarce or threatened species.

Our form is limited to the 100 most commonly seen birds. If you've seen a bird that's not in the list then mention it in the comments field. Records of new and unusual species are more likely to be accepted if the bird has been photographed, video taped and/or recorded.

Captive and domestic birds should not be recorded. In particular, take care not to mistake free-ranging domestic fowl for wild fowl.

In summary there are basically three ways to specify a species record:

Present	Breeding	Count	Meaning
Unchecked	Unchecked	Empty	Not detected.
Checked	Unchecked	Optional	Present.
Unchecked	Checked	Optional	Breeding.

Other variations are not strictly valid but we do use some logic when reading the form to account for minor mistakes (eg if someone checks both the boxes we may assume they mean breeding). Errors that are unacceptable include:

- Text or negative numbers in the count boxes (a space is read as a text string so it's best to use the DEL key to clear the count boxes).
- Zero count and no boxes checked (we would read this as Absent).