

# ***“Because we are having fun” - A study on the motivations to participate in the Nylsvley Woodland Bird Census (NWBC)***

*Abstract report submitted to the Friends of Nylsvley*

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This report gives feedback on a research project, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an MPhil degree (Science and Technology Studies) in the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University.

Having been involved in the NWBC for eight years, it has impressed me that a group of birders are tirelessly and enthusiastically participating in this project without much apparent reward or acknowledgment. I asked myself what motivated and drove these individuals to be up at the crack of dawn to participate in this project year after year? The study was born out of this question.

The NWBC is a good example of a citizen science project. What is citizen science? It is where non-scientists (amateurs) engage in scientific research and monitoring by collecting, categorising, transcribing and/or analysing scientific data in collaboration with, or under the direction of, professional scientists. Few participants of the NWBC will possibly consider themselves citizen scientists, and the NWBC has to my knowledge never been labelled as such. Yet, citizen science is a topic that is relatively understudied in South Africa, and this study contributes to our understanding of this field.

The observation and recording of birds lend itself well to citizen science, and ornithology is a discipline with a long history of involving volunteers globally. South Africa has a very active birding community, making SABAP (the Southern African Bird Atlas project) the flagship southern African citizen science project, with more than 5 000 volunteers.

In this study I wanted to determine why individuals take part in the NWBC, and what they derive from it. Additionally, I was interested if these individuals also contribute to other citizen science projects in South Africa. I sent a web-based, self-completion questionnaire to participants of previous counts through the coordinator of the FON. Of the 114 invitations sent out, only 33 usable responses were received. This low response rate (29%) unfortunately limited the analysis and interpretations of the results. However, the findings can be summarised in five main points:

- The participants take part in the NWBC to venture out into nature and thereby enjoy themselves. They are thus mostly driven by their hobby (birding) and being in nature.
- Active participants are involved in other citizen science projects as well, which fall within their field of interest (mostly outdoor-based). These findings are important, because the assumption can be made that the same individuals are involved in several projects.
- Learning is a valuable component for the NWBC participants, since not all participants are expert birders. Learning is seen as a benefit that they derive from participation.
- The NWBC project is kept going by older, retired and more educated participants. This is not unusual, and has been found for other citizen projects as well.
- Contributing to science is important, but under-realised. NWBC participants do not see the project having any scientific output.

The study has highlighted some important implications to better plan and sustain a project of this kind:

- Allow individuals to enjoy themselves. The level of fulfilment of participants is important, because it determines their level of repeated participation.
- Retain the loyal, regular participants. An awareness of the motivations of participants will help managers to make evidence-based decisions when designing activities and events.

- Similar citizen science projects compete for the same participants because they are involved in multiple events. The timing of these events should be co-ordinated to avoid clashed on the calendar.
- The NWBC will benefit greatly from more publicity, in the form of popular articles, news snippets and blogs to boost the scientific value of the study.

I gratefully acknowledge the participants of the Nylsvley Woodland Bird Census that participated in my survey and thereby made this study possible. I also thank Marion Mengell, the coordinator of the FON, for functioning as a 'post office' and sending out the invitations for the survey. Lastly, all the volunteer birders that have been part of the Nylsvley Woodland Bird Census for 20 years, and especially Warwick Tarboton and Marion Mengell who have untiringly organised the event and managed the logistics, are warmly thanked.

