

MEET THE AUTHOR



After a gap of almost 10 years, a fourth edition of the popular *SASOL Birds of Southern Africa* field guide has been released. We asked **Peter Ryan**, one of the book's four co-authors, what sets it apart from other bird books on the market.

Why another bird guide?

The first edition of this guide was published in 1993, the first revision in 1997 and the second in 2002, so you could say the fourth edition was overdue. It's not a new guide, but an extensive revision of what is arguably the premier guide to the birds of southern Africa.

Revisions are needed to keep up with changes such as new vagrants and the latest taxonomic decisions.

What distinguishes the SASOL and Roberts guides? Much of the artwork in the Roberts field guide was commissioned for the Roberts "handbook" – the massive reference work to all the birds in the sub-region. The SASOL guide was designed as a guide from the start, so in my opinion, at least, it's easier to navigate and reference quickly.

Why do the names of birds sometimes change? The choice of common names causes endless debate among birders. The common names have been standardised internationally to avoid confusion when travelling. There were

numerous instances of different names for the same bird in different parts of the world.

Has bird distribution changed radically in recent years?

Since the 2002 edition of the SASOL guide only a few species are known to have undergone major range changes. That said, birds are definitely responding to climate change and other factors. The second South African Bird Atlas Project, which has been under way since 2007, seeks to highlight which species have become more rare or even disappeared from their former ranges.

What does it take to put a guide like this together?

The hardest task is getting the authors to agree on the artwork that should be revised. With a limited budget, only a fraction of the artwork can be updated, and there is endless debate about which is the most deserving cause. The artwork must remain consistent within a group of birds, especially if the old and new images are painted by different artists. Then the plates need to be

redesigned to accommodate new species and the old artwork needs to be tweaked to reflect new knowledge about identification.

Revising the text is probably the least arduous task!

What is your favourite bird?

Well, this is my least favourite question. There are so many wonderful birds out there. How can you rank the spectacular plumage of the African pitta against the phlegmatic and bizarre shoebill?

SASOL Birds of Southern Africa (4th ed), published by Struik Nature, is available at bookshops for R260.

