

South Africa – Kruger

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Leaders Vincent Ward and Andrew Wagner

Participants

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Drakensberg Prinia

Day 1 The tour started at King Shaka International Airport, just outside of the coastal metropolis of Durban. After loading up the van, we started the climb up from the humid KwaZulu-Natal coast and on to the town of Underberg in the Drakensberg foothills. En route we ticked off both Long-crested Eagle and Forest Buzzard. The nectar feeders at our guesthouse were busy with Cape White-eyes and Amethyst, Malachite and Greater Double-collared Sunbirds. A few Olive Thrushes were also spotted foraging in the shadier parts of the extensive gardens. The remainder of the afternoon was spent birding along the gravel roads to the north of the town. The area's grassland and farm fields provided some fantastic local introductory birding. The star birds were a pair of endangered Wattled Cranes. The same area also held good numbers of elegant Grey Crowned Cranes. Our endemic highlights included South African Shelduck, Southern Bald Ibis, Orange-breasted (Cape) Longclaw and Cape Sparrow.

Day 2 Stuart and Peter, our expert local birding guides, met us at our guesthouse with the 4x4s that would get us up the rugged Sani Pass and into the mountain kingdom of Lesotho. We were treated to some spectacular Drakensberg birding between the start of the pass and our breakfast stop at Mkhomazana. Our first major additions to the list included specialities like Red-throated Wryneck, Cape Batis, Pied Starling, Bokmakerie, Sweet Waxbill, Bush Blackcap, Cape Grassbird and Cape Rock Thrush. The increasingly mountainous terrain up to the South African border post brought with it a suite of Drakensberg endemics including Buff-streaked Chat, Drakensberg Prinia, Barratt's Warbler and Gurney's Sugarbird. The very rugged section up the final stretch of the pass and into Lesotho saw us get excellent views of Ground Woodpecker, Cape Bunting, Sentinel Rock Thrush, Drakensberg Siskin and Drakensberg Rockjumper. The landscape in Lesotho was a contrasting mix of relatively flat valley floors flanked by sheer basalt cliffs. Within the areas of low Karoo scrub, we added specialities like African Rock Pipit, Mountain Wheatear, Sickie-winged Chat, Grey-winged Francolin, Karoo Prinia, Karoo Scrub-robin, Grey Tit, Yellow Canary, Layard's Warbler, Black-headed Canary and Fairy Flycatcher. The top passerine of the day was a pair of highly range-restricted

Mountain Pipits. The raptors were also especially good, with Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier), Cape Griffon/Vulture, Jackal Buzzard and Verreaux's Eagle all showing well. We finished the day by ticking off the final species of locally breeding crane – a pair of Blue Cranes at the foot of the Pass.

Day 3 We made an early start from Underberg in order to meet up with a local birder at Roselands Farm. Together we set out on foot to see one of several pairs of locally endangered Blue Swallows. The birds showed very well, along with good numbers of the potentially confusing Black Saw-wing. As we birded our way back to the farmhouse (and breakfast), we were treated to a small flock of Forest Canaries feeding along the muddy track. Then it was time to put Drakensberg and Natal Midlands behind us and head back towards the coast and north to Eshowe in the heart of Zululand. After checking into our guesthouse, we headed to a local dam where, amongst the more common waterbirds, we enjoyed specialities like White-backed Ducks and Pygmy Geese. We rounded off the day with some late-afternoon birding in the extensive garden at the guesthouse.

Day 4 We started a fantastic day of Zululand birding at the nearby Dlinza forest reserve. Sakhamuzi, a legendary local guide, expertly led us through the forest and on to many of our target species for the morning. The standouts included an especially good variety of doves/pigeons, including Eastern Bronze-naped and African Olive Pigeons and Lemon and Tambourine Doves. Other top sightings included Green Malkoha, Purple-crested Turaco, Black Sparrowhawk, Trumpeter Hornbill, Woolly-necked Stork, Grey Cuckooshrike and both Grey and Olive Sunbirds. In the late morning, we drove to the nearby eNgoye forest, where, after some patient searching, we managed excellent views of the *woodwardi* subspecies of Green Barbet. At eMoyeni we swiftly ticked off Palmnut Vulture, Black Coucal and Red-headed Quelea, all fantastic local birds! We continued further up the coast to our next overnight stop in the coastal town of St Lucia. Our afternoon birding yielded a respectable list of forest species including good sightings of Southern Crested Guineafowl, White-eared Barbet, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, Spectacled Weaver, Collared Sunbird and Black-bellied Starling. We wrapped the day by birding from the bridge that links the town to the mainland. The flanking reedbeds were especially good for nesting weavers; Thick-billed, Lesser Masked, Southern Brown-throated and African Yellow Weavers were all in attendance. At dusk, hundreds of Little Swifts buzzed above our heads before heading into their nests under the bridge.

Day 5 Our morning started off well with great views of our three primary targets: Rudd's Apalis, Woodward's Batis and Livingstone's Turaco; Black-throated Wattle-eye was another standout. After breakfast, we took a walk along the beach to the mouth of the St Lucia estuary. White-fronted Plovers were a source of great excitement, as were a trio of Kelp Gulls (rare along this coastline). The nearby seabird roost held Great Crested (Swift), Lesser Crested, Common and Little Terns. A patch of Lala Palms near the entrance of Bonamanzi Game Reserve delivered a flock of highly sought-after Lemon-breasted Canaries, while the drive towards the reserve reception saw us enjoy excellent views of a perched Broad-billed Roller. We were also treated to close views of the resident herds of Impala and Nyala, along with a few, less common Natal Red Duiker.

The afternoon birding was not hugely productive given the very warm conditions. Despite this challenge, we had a good session at the wetlands near our cottages, and in the nearby patches of Sand Forest. The most notable trip list addition was a somewhat distant view of Southern Banded Snake-eagle.

Day 6 We spent most of the day birding the sprawling Mkhuze Game Reserve. Our first major stop was at the Kumasinga bird hide and waterhole. Here, we enjoyed views of a vast array of species coming down to drink. These included Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, Violet-backed Starling, Blue and Common Waxbills, Green-winged Pytilia, Yellow-fronted Canary and Southern Grey-headed Sparrow. Most notably, we had brief views of Pink-throated Twinspot and an as-yet-unidentified species of indigobird. We then hopped back into our safari vehicle and headed towards Nsumo Pan. Along the way we picked up a noisy flock of White-crested Helmetshrikes as well as several displaying White-winged Widowbirds. The raptors included Tawny Eagles, Bateleurs and Yellow-billed Kites. At the pan, we enjoyed a variety of waterbirds, notably African Swamphen, Jacanas, Pink-backed Pelicans, both Reed and Great (White-breasted) Cormorants, Goliath and Squacco Herons and Little and Yellow-billed Egrets. A pair of very vocal Red-chested Cuckoos were a treat for all. The mammals were especially good, with numerous sightings of Hippo, Elephant, Giraffe, Common Zebra, Greater Kudu, Impala and Blue Wildebeest. In the afternoon, we returned to Bonamanzi and our birding turned up another Pink-throated Twinspot, Bearded Scrub-robin and Crowned Hornbill amongst many others.

Day 7 Our final morning in Bonamanzi saw us enjoy some spectacular birding. The wetlands and surroundings were alive with birds, including multiple Black Crakes, Burchell's Coucal, Hamerkop and Pied, Giant, Malachite and Brown-hooded Kingfishers. Notable sightings included more great views of Red-chested Cuckoos, Lesser Honeyguide, Southern Boubou, Rudd's Apalis, Grey Waxbill, Pink-throated Twinspot, White-throated Robin-chat, Orange-breasted Bush-shrike, Red-fronted Tinkerbird, African Emerald Cuckoo, African Yellow White-eye, African Harrier-hawk and Southern Banded Snake-eagle. From here we hit the highway, leaving Kwazulu-Natal province and entering Mpumalanga, with brief views of the neighbouring country of Eswatini along our route. In the afternoon we made a quick stop for White-bellied/Barrow's Korhaans and South African Cliff Swallow near the town of Dirkie'sdorp. A brief birding session from the bridge over at the Wakkerstroom Wetland saw us add Cape Shoveler and Little Bittern to the trip list.

Day 8 Our full day of montane grassland birding started with our guide, the legendary Lucky Ngwenya, quickly getting us good views of a number of top local specialities including Blue Crane, Denham's Bustard, Mountain Wheatear, African Rock Pipit, Sentinel Rock Thrush, Cape Longclaw and Southern Ant-eating Chat. Top honours had to go to Yellow-breasted Pipit, Eastern Long-billed Lark and the scarce Rudd's Lark. Other standouts included Wing-snapping and Pale-crowned Cisticolas and both Amur and Red-footed Falcons. After a fantastic farmhouse breakfast, we headed off to continue our good run. The large list of species seen included multiple Blue Korhaans and Denham's Bustards as well as Southern Bald Ibises. The area is famed for its wealth of

larks, and our sightings included Eastern Clapper, Eastern Long-billed, Pink-billed, Red-capped and Spike-heeled Larks. We also managed to see a variety of the sometimes-cryptic cisticolas, like Cloud, Zitting, Wing-snapping and Pale-crowned. Other highlights included Marsh Owl, Lesser Kestrel, Common Quail, Banded Martin, Quailfinch, African Pipit, South African Cliff Swallow and Drakensberg Prinia. Our final stop was at Fickland Pan, where we picked up a nice variety of waterfowl including Southern Pochard, Cape Shoveler and South African Shelduck.

Day 9 We started the day with a welcome cup of coffee served by our gracious hosts. We then made a short stop at the Wakkerstroom Wetland before starting the drive to Malelane Gate in the world-famous Kruger National Park. Here, the guiding was handed over to Andrew, who travelled with the group in a safari vehicle. The combination of expert guide and near-unrestricted visibility allowed the group to experience the staggering avian and mammalian diversity that makes Kruger famous. By the time we arrived in Skukuza, the list included over 93 species, most being new for the trip list. These ranged in size from the majestic Bateleur to the small, yet brightly coloured seedeaters like Blue Waxbill and Red-billed Firefinch, and also included highly photogenic species like Lilac-breasted Roller and Violet-backed Starling. Kruger is especially famous for its herds of game, and we were treated to large herds of Elephants, Giraffe, Blue Wildebeest, Warthog and Common Zebra as well as innumerable Impala. The smaller mammals were also on show, with glimpses of Dwarf Mongoose, the smallest predator in Kruger.

Day 10 The day started with a hot drink served from the back of Andrew's safari vehicle. Once suitably refreshed, we birded our way downstream along the Sabie River. Our route took us through a nice stretch of riparian and riverine habitats, which delivered great views of a good variety of species, including Saddle-billed Stork, Brown-headed Parrot, Southern Carmine Bee-eater, White-fronted Bee-eater, African Green Pigeon, Mosque Swallow, Grey-headed Bush-shrike, White-winged Widowbird and Mocking Cliff-chat. We had a quick "bush breakfast" at the Nkhulu Picnic Site whilst enjoying views of White-crowned Lapwings along the river. The birding continued through the morning, and we arrived at the Lower Sabie Rest Camp by midday. The river in front of the restaurant delivered views of Yellow-billed Stork, African Openbill and the majestic Goliath Heron. After lunch, we retraced our route to Skukuza. In the afternoon, we headed to the ever-popular Lake Panic bird hide, where we spent an enjoyable few hours birding the lake and watching the local pod of Hippos and the occasional Nile Crocodile.

Day 11 Our first full day in Kruger saw us tot up a huge list of bird species, with too many highlights to mention fully. Top favourites amongst the group included the multitude of hornbills, Lesser Spotted and Martial Eagles, vultures (Hooded, White-backed, Lappet-faced and Cape), the ever-popular Bateleur, Stierling's/Miombo Wren-warbler, Grey Penduline-tit and many, many more. A top bird for us all was Gorgeous Bushshrike, usually a notorious skulker, which showed beautifully. This diversity of birds (and mammals) was in part due to our route from Skukuza Camp to Satara Camp crossing through a wide diversity of vegetation types and habitats, including thicket, wetland and savanna grassland. We continued after dark today with a park-organised

night drive. Our avian prizes included two owl species – Verreaux’s Eagle-owl and Marsh Owl – together with a few Spotted Thick-knees on the road. The mammalian sightings included three Lions and several Spotted Hyaenas.

Day 12 The final morning in Kruger continued with plenty of excellent bird and mammal sightings. We started the day with a walk around Satara Camp to get views of the plethora of local “bush birds”. Our top sighting was a nesting Southern Red-billed Hornbill safely sealed up in her breeding cavity apart from a small feeding slit. Other highlights included good looks at African Mourning Dove, Pearl Spotted Owlet, Brown-headed Parrot, Cardinal Woodpecker, Brubru, both Orange-breasted and Grey-headed Bushshrikes and Common Scimitarbill, to name just a few. After breakfast, we headed towards Orpen Gate, getting our last glimpses of the diversity of birdlife we had come to know over the past few days. Once out of Kruger, we stopped for lunch before completing our journey to Magoebaskloof. Once safely checked in at Bramasole guesthouse, we drove to a nearby hotel pub to enjoy sundowners. Just before sunset, a pair of endangered Cape Parrots were spotted making a very fast, distant flight before diving into the canopy.

Day 13 We set off from Bramasole before daybreak in the hopes of getting better views of the parrots. Although unsuccessful in this regard, we did pick up a fantastic selection of other forest specialities including Knysna Turaco, Cape Batis, Cape White-eye, Greater Double-collared Sunbird, Long-crested Eagle, African Goshawk, Olive Woodpecker, Grey Cuckooshrike, Black-fronted Bushshrike, Square-tailed Drongo and Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler. Just before breakfast, we birded the patch of forest behind Bramasole, adding Brown Scrub Robin, Orange Ground-thrush (heard only), Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher, Olive Bushshrike and Yellow-streaked Greenbul to the list. After breakfast we birded our way towards the highly scenic Debegeni Waterfalls to tick the resident pair of Mountain Wagtails. From here, we headed directly to Polokwane, the final overnight stop of the tour. In the late afternoon, we headed to an area of Acacia thornveld north of the city. Some highly productive birding yielded an impressive list of local specialities: Crimson-breasted Shrike, Chestnut-vented Warbler, Marico Flycatcher, Kalahari Scrub-robin, Scaly-feathered Finch, White-browed Sparrow-weaver, Black-faced Waxbill, Black-throated and Yellow Canaries and swarms of Red-billed Queleas.

Day 14 We started our final morning near the small rural settlement of Chebeng. The local grassland and scattered thorn trees delivered stunning views of the highly sought-after Short-clawed Lark. These birds shared the area with Spike-heeled, Rufous-naped, Red-capped and Pink-billed Larks. While trying to approach the above species, we flushed up a few Northern Black Korhaans. This final session was rounded off with good views of Scaly-feathered Finch, Kalahari Scrub-robin, White-browed Sparrow-weaver, Black-chested Prinia, Greater Kestrel, African Pipit and both Tinkling and Desert Cisticolas. We then made a brief trip to the Polokwane Game Reserve before returning to our accommodation for breakfast. After one last session doing the species list, we packed the van for a final time and headed to our end point in Johannesburg.

Bird species total: 414 (including 10 heard only)