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Birding Africa South Africa Tour: Cape to Kruger Park (BA125)

Arranged on behalf of the **Ohio Ornithological Society**, USA (Julie Davis)

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Tour Report by **Vincent Ward**

Tour Overview

Our fortnight long tour started in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. The first week we birded a wide range of diverse habitats, ranging from the indigenous fynbos of the Cape Floral Kingdom, to the open Atlantic Ocean. Our second week included the grasslands and forests of the country's eastern Escarpment, before ending in the world famous Kruger National Park.

Total number of bird species: 401 (seen and heard)

Total number of mammal species: 41

Birding highlights: Cape Rockjumper, African Finfoot, Yellow-breasted Pipit, Narina Trogon and Knysna Woodpecker, three species of albatross, Temmincks Courser, and rarely seen species Half-collared Kingfisher and Buffy Pipit.

Mammal highlights: Numerous sightings of various African cats (African Lion, Leopard, Cheetah, African Wild Cat), Dusky Dolphins

Day 1: Cape Peninsula

Our tour started with some relaxed garden birding at our guest house over breakfast. This was a good way of easing into the exceptional diversity awaiting us over the next two weeks.

Our first destination was the world renowned Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens. The gardens showcase the plants of the Cape Floral Kingdom, making it an ideal place to see endemics such as **Cape Sugarbird**, **Orange-breasted** and **Southern Double-collared Sunbirds** and **Sweet Waxbill**. The wooded habitats held **Cape Batis**, **Sombre Greenbul** and **African Dusky Flycatcher**. A particular highlight were the **Lemon Doves** feeding in the leaf litter just a few feet from us. Another treat was close views of one of the resident **Spotted Eagle Owls**.

After a hearty lunch, where the more intrepid birders tried Mopane Worms (a local delicacy!!), we turned our attention to the city's wetlands.

Rondevelei Nature Reserve, and the adjacent False Bay Ecology Park (Strandfontein section) offered excellent birding despite the current drought conditions. The larger areas of open water attracted large numbers of **Greater Flamingos, Red-knobbed Coots** and mixed waterfowl. Hiding within these large flocks were specials such as **South African Shelduck, Southern Pochard, Maccoa Duck, Hottentot Teal** and **Black-necked Grebe**. The exposed sandy flats attracted large roosts of gulls, terns, **Sacred Ibises, White Storks** and **Great White Pelicans**. Other highlights included a pair of **African Marsh Harriers** and **African Fish Eagle**.

Day 2: West Coast National Park

The second day saw us heading up towards West Coast National Park. The roadside fences and telephone poles made ideal vantages for hunting raptors (**Yellow-billed Kites, Jackal and Steppe Buzzards**).

We detoured along the Darling Hills road. This unassuming dirt road leads through a mosaic of indigenous *strandveld* and farmland, and provides some of the best birding in the area. Our highlights included the endemic **Southern Black Korhaan** and **Blue Crane** (South Africa's national bird), along with more typical agricultural species like **African Pipit, African Stonechat** and **Capped Wheatear**.

Our time within the West Coast National Park, was centred on birding from the freshwater and shoreline hides/blinds. The Geelbek and Seeberg hides overlook the Langebaan Lagoon which is famed for its shorebirds, attracting thousands of migrant waders during the austral. We had excellent views of the abundant **White-fronted** and **Kittlitz's Plovers, Curlew Sandpipers** and **Little Stints**. Specials included **African Oystercatcher, Chestnut-banded Plover, Eurasian Curlew, Red Knot** and a vagrant **Broad-billed Sandpiper**. The shorebirds were joined by large numbers of coastal seabirds such as **Hartlaub's** and **Kelp Gulls**, and **Caspian, Great Crested, Common, Sandwich** and **Little Terns**. **African Fish-Eagles** and a **Western Osprey** were a welcome break from the masses of sea- and shorebirds.

The freshwater spring at the Abrahamskraal hide attracted **Yellow Canaries, Cape Sparrows** and **Cape Buntings** down to drink. A particular highlight was the resident family of **Black Crakes**.

The terrestrial birding was equally good, with sightings of several endemics/near-endemics (**Bokmakerie, White-backed Mousebird** and **Cape Weaver**). The latter breed in a large colony at the park restaurant and regularly help themselves to sachets of sugar left unguarded on the tables!!

A highlight for many was a rare Peacock sighting, local bird book author Faansie Peacock, who happily signed copies of his superb wader and LBJ books.

Day 3: Tankwa Karoo

With the scheduled pelagic seabirding trip delayed, we headed inland to the arid Tankwa Karoo region. The first birding was at the coffee stop at the edge of Ceres. A mixed flock of **Alpine, Little** and **White-rumped Swifts**, fed high above the rocky mountain ridges, but the highlight was a brief appearance by a **Booted Eagle**.

Despite its seemingly barren appearance, the varied habitats in Tankwa delivered a good variety of birds. The river courses were home to **Acacia Pied Barbet, Namaqua Warbler, Fairy Flycatcher, White-backed Mousebird, Layard's Warbler (Titbabbler)** and **Pirit Batis**. **Cape Buntings** were common on the rocky outcrops and mountain ridges, but the star bird was a frustratingly brief sighting of a **Cinnamon-breasted Warbler**. The sparser open habitats held **Karoo Eremomela, Large-billed Lark, Rufous-eared Warbler, Karoo Chat, Ant-eating Chat** and **Grey Tit**. Raptors seen included **Black-chested Snake Eagle** and **Pale Chanting Goshawk**.

Day 4: Pelagic seabirding trip/De Hoop Nature Reserve

After several days of poor maritime weather, we got the go ahead for the long awaited pelagic out of Simonstown. The seabirding started off with groups of **African Penguins** heading out from the Boulders Beach colony. Further south in False Bay we sighted a juvenile **Parasitic Jaeger** before we hit a wide bank of coastal fog.

Once through the fog, the first **Shy/White-capped Albatrosses** were sighted, along with large numbers of **Cape Gannets, White-chinned Petrels, European and Wilson's Storm Petrels, Cory and Sooty Shearwaters**.

The recent period of poor weather meant that there were no working fishing vessels. Chumming and a slick of fish oil was effective in attracting several additional pelagic species (**Indian Yellow-nosed and Black-browed Albatross, Brown Skua, Arctic and Pomarine Jaeger, Sabine's Gulls and Greater Shearwater**), **Cape Fur Seals** and a small female **Blue Shark!!**

The return trip was equally exciting with a pod of **Dusky Dolphins** approaching and following our boat.

Once back in the calmer waters of False Bay we stopped at the **Bank** and **White-breasted Cormorant** colonies at Partridge Point. **African Oystercatchers** were feeding on the low-lying exposed rocks.

Once back on shore, we headed towards our overnight stop at De Hoop Nature Reserve. The wheat fields of the Overberg held good numbers of **Blue Cranes**, with a highlight being a pair of **Denham's Bustards**. Our late arrival in De Hoop meant we had little opportunity to bird, but the mammals seen included **Bontebok, Cape Mountain Zebra, Grey Rhebok** and **Yellow Mongoose**.

Day 5: De Hoop Nature Reserve and Potberg Section

We birded the milkwood thickets and vlei shoreline before breakfast. Our target species of **Southern Tchagra** was particularly cooperative, as were the more common **Southern Boubou** and **Bokmakerie**. Other highlights were a large mixed flock of swifts and swallows feeding over the vlei.

Cape Vultures were seen circling above their cliff-side breeding colony on the Potberg, home to the only vultures in the province. We birded around the reserve buildings and riparian edges with top sightings of **African Paradise Flycatcher, Bar-throated Apalis, Greater, and Southern Double-collared, and Malachite Sunbirds, Cape Sugarbird, Cape Batis** and **Sombre Greenbul**.

After lunch we headed for a swim in the Indian Ocean at Koppie Alleen. The birding was not forgotten with close views of a singing **Cape Grassbird**, and a large flock of **Cape Gannet** plunge-diving offshore with an equally large school of dolphins (possibly **Indian Bottle-nosed**).

The final birding stop was the southern end of De Hoop vlei. The shallows attracted large numbers of assorted shorebirds, wading birds and waterfowl.

Day 6: De Hoop Nature Reserve and Hottentots-Holland Mountains

We had good sightings of **Knysna Woodpecker**, our second big target, before heading out of De Hoop back towards Cape Town. The drive back through the fallow wheat fields produced another target species: **Agulhas Long-billed Lark**, feeding alongside **Red-capped Larks**. The mammalian highlight was a family of **Bat-eared Foxes** scampering across an open field.

The birding at Harold Porter National Botanical Gardens was productive with the top sightings being **Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher, African Black Duck, Black Saw-wings, and Sweet Waxbills**. We tried hard to locate a singing **Victorin's Warbler**, but had no luck. The last flowering **Red Disas** (*Disa uniflora*) were the botanical highlight of the day.

After lunch, we twitched a **Western Yellow Wagtail**, a provincial rarity on the beach at Betty's Bay, before heading to **African Penguin** colony at Stony Point.

The last stop of the day was Rooi Els: the best site for the sought-after, endemic **Cape Rockjumper**. We located and spent time enjoying a total of five of these magnificent fynbos birds.

Day 7: Travel day from Cape Town to Dullstroom

We said good-bye to the Cape and boarded our 2-hour flight to Johannesburg. The drive to the Escarpment town of Dullstroom was fairly uneventful, but there were good sightings of perching **Long-crested Eagles**. We had a quick visit to the local Dam at sunset, before enjoying a hearty dinner.

Day 8: Northern Drakensberg Escarpment and Kruger Park

We returned to the dam in the early morning. The birding was good, with the top sightings being **Black Crake**, **Dark-capped Yellow Warbler**, **Whiskered Tern** and **Malachite Kingfisher**.

After a good breakfast, we birded our way through the grasslands of the Escarpment. The top grassland/ Escarpment specials included **Wattled Cranes**, **Denham's Bustard**, **Buff-streaked Chat**, **Gurney's Sugarbird** and hundreds of **Amur Falcons**. A large numbers of migrant Cuckoos were moving through the region and we good sightings of **African** and **Diederik Cuckoos**.

We entered Kruger Park through the Phabeni gate and headed towards Skukuza. We stopped to watch the abundance of large mammals that make Kruger world famous. Favourites seen included **Savannah Elephant**, innumerable herds of the ubiquitous **Impala**, **Common Zebra** and **Blue Gnu/Wildebeest**. The birding was equally good, with multiple sightings of several large eagles: **Bateleur**, **Tawny** and **Wahlberg's**.

Day 9: Skukuza and Sabie River Loop

We made an early start out of Skukuza camp with the goal of birding along the Sabie River. The associated riparian thickets held a wide variety of birds, with the highlight being a majestic **Martial Eagle** perching in a tree with its Rock Monitor prey. This area is also renowned for its predator sightings, and we were treated to a small pride of **African Lions** lazing just off of the road.

The riverbanks were busy with herds of **Cape Buffalo** and **Common Waterbuck**. The open deeper river channels held **Nile Crocodile** and pods of **Hippo**. The two top bird sightings were the aptly named **Goliath Heron** and the notoriously elusive **African Finfoot**.

The afternoon was spent birding the woodlands south of Skukuza, with good sightings of **Common Scimitarbill**, **Marico Sunbird**, **Southern Yellow-** and **Red-billed Hornbills**.

Day 10: Skukuza to Satara

We birded the greater Skukuza area before breakfast. The legendary Lake Panic bird hide put us close to **Squacco Heron**, **Black Crake**, **African Jacana** and several pairs of **Water Thick-knees**. Nearby reedbeds held **Red-faced Cisticola**. On one of the sandbanks in the Sabie River was one of the famous Skukuza hybrid **Blacksmith/White-crowned Lapwings**.

The taller trees in the area were good opportunities to find **African Green Pigeons**, **Crowned Hornbills** and **Purple-crested Turacos**. Areas of denser vegetation held **Ashy Flycatcher**, **White-browed Robin**, **Terrestrial Brownbul**, and the sought-after **Bearded Scrub Robin**.

The birding highlight on the drive north was a foraging **Southern Ground Hornbill**, but this avian star had to take a backseat to a **Leopard** in a roadside tree. We watched this beauty for a while before continuing to our lunch stop at Tshokwane. The picnic area was patrolled by cheeky **Vervet Monkeys** hoping for an unattended meal. We did a quick bit of birding, finding **White-throated Robin** before continuing north.

After a brief break to get settled in Satara, we boarded an open safari vehicle for a sunset drive. The high vehicle was a good vantage point and we added good species including **Pallid Harrier** before sunset, and **Verreaux's, Barn,** and **Marsh Owls** after dark.

The standout stars of the drive were the mammals. By the end of the night we'd had excellent views of **Cheetah**, several **African Wildcats**, **Small Spotted Genets** and **Spotted Hyaenas**. We also enjoyed the sounds of **African Lions** roaring in the distance and observed a **Mozambican Spitting Cobra** soaking up the warmth on the main tar road.

Day 11: Satara and vicinity

Birding within Satara Rest Camp was very productive with close up views of typical local species, including **Chinspot Batis**, **Marico Sunbird**, **Green-winged Pytilia**, **Green-backed Camaroptera**, **Southern Grey-headed Sparrow**, **Yellow-breasted Apalis**, **Golden-breasted Bunting**, **Yellow-eyed Canary**, **White-browed Robin-chat**, **Southern Boubou**, **Grey-headed Bushshrike**, **Levaillant's** and **Jacobin Cuckoos**, **Golden-tailed Woodpecker**, **Black-backed Puff-back** and **Brubru**.

We birded the savanna north of the camp towards the Olifants River. Highlights included multiple sightings of **Kori Bustards** and a group of four **Secretarybirds** hunting in long grass. Other larger species seen included **Woolly-necked Stork**, **White-headed Vulture**, **Brown Snake Eagle**, **Red-crested Korhaan** and **Black-bellied Bustard**.

Areas of open sandy plains were home to **Temminck's Courser** and **Grey-backed Sparrowlark**, while the scattered patches of trees provided perches for **Rufous-naped** and **Sabota Larks**, **Mosque** and **Wire-tailed Swallows**.

Heavy overnight rains had filled the usually dry shallow streams. The local frogs responded by becoming very active and calling noisily. The distinctively marked **Green Rubber Frogs** were particularly conspicuous.

Of great interest were the numerous daytime sightings we had of **African Wild Cats**, a usually shy, nocturnal species.

In the early afternoon, we headed out to a recent lion kill. From a patch of shade, three lioness carefully guarded the remains of their wildebeest prey. One of them occasionally got up and chased off **Black-backed Jackals** and **White-backed** and **Hooded Vultures** hoping for a meal.

After a day of great birding and mammal-watching we returned to camp in the late afternoon. Our final birding for the day was of **Square-tailed Nightjar** and **Double-banded Sandgrouse** seen in the lights of the campside waterhole.

Day 12: Satara to Mount Sheba

An early morning walk around the camp gave us great views of the noisy resident **Brown-headed Parrots**, as well as **Cape Sparrow**, **Grey-headed Bush-shrike**, **Southern Boubou**, **African Hoopoe**, **Burnt-necked Eremomela** and **African Firefinch**.

We loaded up the vehicles and birded our way to Orpen Gate. Highlights on our way out included **Purple Roller, Southern Carmine Bee-eater, Red-breasted Swallow** and **Violet-backed Starling**.

Our last Kruger birding was around Orpen Camp, where we had excellent views of **White-bellied Sunbirds**.

A quick stop was made just past Kruger's Orpen Gate to buy local handmade souvenirs before heading from the Lowveld back up the Escarpment.

Heavy cloud and drizzle made for poor birding, but we did manage to add a few species, like **Buffy Pipit, Cape Rock Thrush** and a distant **Tamborine Dove**.

After a stop to refuel and more curio shopping in Graskop, we continued onto Mount Sheba. After dinner, we did some owling and were rewarded with great views of **African Wood Owls**.

Day 13: Mount Sheba and Escarpment

Our first full day at Mount Sheba started with birding the resort grounds. We watched a juvenile **Choristor Robin-chat** struggling to handle a giant stick insect it had caught. Other good sightings were of a gorgeous **Knysna Turaco** and noisy **Drakensberg Prinia**. The local troop of endangered **Samango/Blue Monkey** were seen feeding while we birded.

After breakfast, we turned our attention to birding the local Afromontane forest and high rocky mountain ridges. We encountered several feeding flocks which held species such as **Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Terrestrial Brownbul, Olive Woodpecker, Cape White-eye, Cape Batis** and **Olive Bush-shrike**. A handsome **Narina Trogon** was also seen. We heard calling **Orange Ground Thrush** and **Grey Cuckooshrike** in the forest and a covey of **Red-winged Francolin** on the mountain ridge.

After lunch, the birding focus switched to birding along the Escarpment rivers. Stretches with reeds and sedges were home to several weaver species: **Holub's Golden, Spectacled, Village, Southern Masked** and **Thick-billed Weavers**. The highlights were however the sought-after **Half-collared Kingfisher** and a pair of **Mountain Wagtails**.

Day 14: Mount Sheba to Johannesburg

We made an early start from Mount Sheba, driving in mist and rain back through the Escarpment grassland. The weather seemed to draw out a variety of cisticolas (**Levaillant's, Wing-snapping, Pale-crowned** and **Wailing**). The unrivalled star bird was the endemic **Yellow-breasted Pipit**. Other highlights were another covey of **Red-winged Francolin** and a **Denham's Bustard**.

After a quick stop in Dullstroom for a spot of shopping and coffee, we started the drive back to Johannesburg.

With a bit of extra time in hand, we did one last bit of birding at the Korsman Bird Sanctuary. This urban wetland gave everyone a final chance to see the diversity of shorebirds and waterfowl already encountered before ending the trip at O.R. Tambo International Airport.