

Cranes, Rollers and Raptors

An epic birding and wildlife tour through
Eastern South Africa and Swaziland

12th – 25th November 2011



South Africa is an incredibly diverse country and nowhere is this more poignant than in the north eastern regions comprising Limpopo, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces. Any line starting in Johannesburg and extending to the north-east, east or south-east will take you on a journey of variety, starting at 4900 feet on the flat interior plateau, climbing up to over 7000 feet on the escarpment and dropping to 820 feet on the flat savannah on the other side. With this wide variety of habitats comes a large bird and mammal list (300+ birds and 35 – 40 mammals can be expected) and some incredible scenery, all within a relatively small area. This tour aims to take it all in without being overly rushed and will leave you feeling like you saw so much and yet also had a chance to relax and enjoy it all.

Daily Itinerary:

Day 1 and 2; 12th / 13th November 2011: Dullstroom

After arrivals at O. R. Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg we will head eastwards through the maize, stock and coal mining regions of western Mpumalanga, an area termed the 'highveld', referring to the open nature of the habitat and the high altitude (1500 m.a.s.l / 4920 feet and over). At the small town of Belfast we will turn north off the main highway and head on to Dullstroom, our destination for the night. The high altitudes around Dullstroom – up to 2 200 m.a.s.l / 7200 feet – and rocky terrain mean that it is best suited for extensive stock farming and thus the habitat of open grassland remains relatively pristine, making it a superb birding area. Endemics and near-endemics are especially well represented in the high altitude grasslands and our main target birds will include Southern Bald Ibis, Gurney's Sugarbird, Buff-streaked Chat, Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Yellow-breasted Pipit, Grey-winged Francolin, Cape Sparrow, Mountain Wheatear, Southern Ant-eating Chat, Pied



Starling, Jackal Buzzard and Cape Vulture, among others. The three crane species occur in the area, though these are uncommon birds and are not recorded on every tour. Grey Crowned Crane is the commonest, followed by the endemic Blue Crane and then Wattled Crane, which is very rare in South Africa. Nevertheless we will do our best with the available time and other birds we may see

include Denham's Bustard, Secretarybird, Long-crested Eagle, Red-winged Francolin, African Snipe, Wattled Lapwing and Giant Kingfisher, among others. Our program in Dullstroom will include a birding drive on the afternoon of arrival and a drive up into the Veloren Valei Nature Reserve the following morning before breakfast, a birding walk through the town and a long afternoon drive. An added attraction to Dullstroom will be the food, as it is something of a culinary Mecca and we can look forward to a superb dinner in one of the town's restaurants.

Interesting Facts:

Dullstroom has the highest railroad station in South Africa at 2077 metres (6812 feet) above sea level and is also one of the highest towns in South Africa. The town dates from 1883 and is named after its founder, Wolterus Dull, of Holland. "Stroom" is a stream in the Afrikaans language. The district is renowned for trout fishing and has become a holiday haven for people from Johannesburg.

Day 3; 14th November 2011: The Blyde River Canyon

Leaving Dullstroom early we will have an hour-and-a-half drive to Mount Sheba, an old style hotel over Robber's Pass on the edge of the Transvaal Escarpment. The hotel grounds include high-altitude grasslands and a large patch of mist-belt forest, where much of our birding will take place. This dark

forest habitat is home to a range of special bird species, including Narina Trogon, Knysna Turaco, White-starred Robin, Yellow-



streaked Greenbul, Olive Woodpecker, Grey Cuckoo-Shrike, Cape Batis, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher, Orange Ground-Thrush and others. Forest birding in South Africa, as in other parts of the world, can be a frustrating experience, with the low light levels, high canopy and secretive nature of the birds making it relatively difficult to get good views of the birds, but we should come away with a good few of these forest specials on the list after the morning's efforts. Heading on via the Panorama Route, taking in some of the sights such as Bourke's Luck Potholes and the Three Rondavels, we'll check in at our resort on the edge of the Blyde River Canyon. After settling in there will be an optional birding walk in the resort grounds as a final afternoon activity, perhaps heading up to the private view site of the Three Rondavels to photograph the scene as the setting sun gives the iron-oxide stained cliffs a lovely golden hue. In the morning we will have another birding walk, heading down to the Lower View Site and perhaps the spectacular Tufa waterfall, where calcium carbonate deposits over millennia have extended the waterfall outwards as opposed to it cutting backwards, as is the case in normal waterfalls. Bird species to look out for here include White-throated Robin-Chat, Lazy Cisticola, Striped Pipit, Swee Waxbill, Red-winged Starling, Cape Rock-Thrush, Mocking Cliff-Chat, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Cardinal Woodpecker, Rock Kestrel, Black Swift, Collared Sunbird, Mountain Wagtail and others.

Interesting facts:

The canyon is the world's oldest at 200 million years and it is the third largest in the world. The gorge is 800 metres in depth and dominating the gorge are triplet peaks known as the Three Rondavel's. The highest peak is the flat-topped Mariepskop at 1944 metres (6367 feet).

Days 4 and 15th / 16th November 2011: The Kruger National Park; Satara

Leaving the canyon after breakfast we depart for the Kruger National Park. En-route we will stop for one of the most significant birds of the trip, the Taita Falcon, one of South Africa's rarest breeding birds and indeed a species that is not easy to find anywhere within its limited range. After dropping out of the escarpment we will then level out in the flat savannah and make our way to Orpen Gate, where we enter the Kruger National Park. From here the going gets really slow due to the sheer numbers of birds and animals to be seen. Common savannah birds we should see include Burchell's Starling, Red and Yellow-billed Hornbills, Lilac-breasted and Purple Rollers, Swainson's Spurfowl, Crested and Natal Francolins, Blue Waxbill, Green-winged Pytilia, Burchell's Coucal, Rattling Cisticola, Crested Barbet, Green Wood-Hoopoe, Brown-headed Parrot, Golden-tailed and Bearded Woodpeckers, Arrow-marked Babbler and many others. Raptors are particularly well represented and include Martial and Tawny Eagles, Lappet-faced, White-headed, White-backed and Hooded Vultures, Bateleur, Shikra, Gabar Goshwak, African Harrier-Hawk, Brown Snake-Eagle and many more. Animals we may see in the area include Elephant, Cape Buffalo, Giraffe, Burchell's Zebra, Blue Wildebeest, Impala, Lion and Leopard. The Satara region is fairly open country, with good



grazing in the summer months, which attracts large herds of grazers. Knob-thorn and Marula are two of the dominant tree species, the former a favourite of Giraffe. We have two nights at Satara Rest Camp and our program while in the park will entail early morning and afternoon game drives and birding walks in the camp

in between. There is also an optional sunset drive available on the second night here, and your guide will fill you in on this before hand (this is for your own account).

Day 6 and 7; 17th / 18th November 2011: The Kruger National Park; Skukuza

After a last early morning drive from Satara we will have breakfast and head south to Skukuza Rest Camp, 92 kilometres away. Skukuza is situated on the southern bank of the Sabie River, one of the biggest and most biologically diverse rivers in the park. As we head south there is a subtle but noticeable change in the terrain and vegetation. The terrain becomes more undulating,

with granite koppies (rock outcrops) sticking up here and there, and the bush becomes much thicker with a more prominent tree and shrub layer. This denser habitat suits the browsers better and large herds of animals such as Wildebeest and Zebra are far less common here. Birds we will be on the lookout for include Goliath Heron, Hamerkop, African



Finfoot (rare), Purple-crested Turaco, Sombre Greenbul, White-crowned Lapwing, African Goshawk, Thick-billed Weaver, Orange-breasted and Grey-headed Bush-Shrikes, among others. The permanent water in the Sabie River supports a large population of Impala, which in turn support predators such as Leopard and Lion and we'll hope to have a few sightings of these during our time here. After breakfast we will have a short walk around the camp to look for birds such as Bearded Scrub-Robin, White-browed Robin-Chat, Collared Sunbird, Greater Blue-eared Starling and others and our routine here will include morning and afternoon drives with relaxing lunch breaks in between.

Day 8; 19th November 2011: The Kruger National Park; Pretoriuskop

Moving on after breakfast on day seven we head south-west to Pretoriuskop



Rest Camp. Once again the vegetation changes subtly, with a characteristic layer of thick, tall thatching grass predominating in this area and large granite domes adding to the scenic appeal. This change in vegetation brings a few new birds, and species we'll be looking out for specifically are Bushveld Pipit, Retz's and White-crested Helmet-Shrikes, Dark Chanting Goshawk, African Cuckoo Hawk, Lizard

Buzzard, Bennett's Woodpecker, Yellow-throated Longclaw, Yellow-throated Petronia and Scarlet-chested Sunbird. This region of the park is also particularly good for White Rhino, and occasionally rare antelope such as Sable, Tsessebe and Lichtenstein's Hartebeest turn up in the area while a pride of lions has moved into the area recently.

Interesting facts:

The first national park in the world was Yellowstone proclaimed in 1872. Kruger was the first in Africa and dates back to 1898. The park is around 20 000 square kilometres (12 000 square miles) in size and is bounded by an 18 000 kilometre fence, though this fence has been removed in parts to link up with other reserves and parks such as the Limpopo National Park in Mozambique to the east and the agglomeration of private reserves in the west.

Day 9; 20th November 2011: Swaziland

After a last morning activity we'll head southwards out of the Kruger and into the Kingdom of Swaziland. We stay at Maguga Dam, a large impoundment on the Komati River, where there can be some good birding around our chalets in



the resort grounds. Birds to see here include Bronze Mannikin, Lesser Striped Swallow, Amethyst and Scarlet-chested Sunbirds, Brimstone Canary, Hamerkop, Black-collared Barbet and, with a bit of luck, African Finfoot. Not far from the resort is the Malalotja Nature Reserve, comprising high altitude grasslands in the Swaziland Escarpment. We will plan a

birding excursion to this reserve, either on the afternoon of arrival or the following morning, depending on the weather etc. birds to see here include Red-throated Wryneck, Greater Striped Swallow, Cape Longclaw, Buff-streaked Chat, Wailing Cisticola, Drakensberg Prinia and others, while also offering some spectacular scenery.

Interesting facts:

The small kingdom of Swaziland is 17 000 square kilometres in extent, which makes it smaller than Kruger National Park, though, due to its diversity of habitats, it has a larger bird list. It is an independent land-locked country ruled by King Mswati III and major economic activities include forestry and other agriculture, mining and tourism. The Swazis are handsome people, and their tribal costume is brilliantly coloured. The people are courteous and proud. Permission must always be requested before a photograph is taken.

Day 10 and 11; 21st and 22nd November 2011: Mkhuze Game Reserve

Leaving Maguga Dam, we will head down through Swaziland, taking in some of the cultural attractions such as the famed Swazi Candle factory (right), exiting in the south-eastern corner and entering KwaZulu-Natal Province, home of the Zulu Nation. We have two nights in Mkhuze Game Reserve, a protected area of unique Sand Forest, freshwater



pans and savannah on the coastal plain east of the Ubombo Range. We stay in safari tents in Mantuma Camp, and will have time to explore the reserve by vehicle, looking out for the specials such as Rudd's Apalis, Pink-throated Twinspot, Lemon-breasted Canary, Eastern Nicator, Grey Waxbill and Crested Guineafowl. The reserve also hosts a range of mammals such as Southern

Giraffe, Burchell's Zebra, Impala, Warthog and the tiny Red Duiker and Suni, two forest-dwelling antelope species.

Interesting Facts:

Mkhuze has a bird list of 450 recorded species even though it's under 100 000 acres in size!

Days 12 and 13; 23rd and 24th November 2011: Wakkerstroom:

From Mkuze we'll turn north-west and climb back up into the foothills of the escarpment, heading on to the small agricultural town of Wakkerstroom. This town is situated in the high altitude regions along the Mpumalanga / KwaZulu-Natal border, where British, Boer and Zulu forces skirmished in the Anglo-Boer and Anglo-Zulu wars of the mid-1800's. The habitat here is similar to that of the Dullstroom region, though there are species here, such as Blue Korhaan,



Ground Woodpecker, Marsh Owl, Rudd's and Botha's Larks, that we wouldn't have seen in Dullstroom, and moreover, both Grey Crowned and Blue Cranes are easier to find here. The endearing Meerkat, made famous through a recent BBC television series, is also reasonably common in the Wakkerstroom grasslands. Most

of our birding here will entail car-based birding on the quiet district roads in the area, though there is also a large wetland on the edge of town where we may bird on foot and record species such as Purple Swamphen, Black-crowned Night Heron, South African Shelduck, Cape Shoveler, African Marsh Harrier, African Snipe and other water-associated species.

Day 14; 25th November 2011: Departure.

After a last morning activity and breakfast in Wakkerstroom we will head north-westwards back to Johannesburg. En-route we will have a stop at the Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve (time allowing), a 13 000 hectare (32 000 acre) reserve about 45-minutes' drive from Johannesburg. The reserve includes a high plateau at around 1900 metres / 6200 feet above sea level, Acacia thickets, rocky outcrops and rolling grasslands. Birds that we may see here include Black-chested Prinia, Acacia Pied Barbet, Black-throated Canary, African Red-eyed Bulbul, Eastern Long-billed and Eastern Clapper Larks, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, Cape Grassbird and others. We will then head on to the airport and final departures.



Above: the Sabie River, Kruger National Park.

Note:

- (1) This itinerary is subject to change due to weather conditions at the time and other factors beyond our control.
- (2) Birds and mammals mentioned on this itinerary do not represent all that can be seen. A full list of possibilities appears on your checklist.