OVERVIEW: This two-week tour explored a multitude of habitats and landscapes to target South Africa’s unique birdlife and incredible mammal diversity. Starting in the Western Cape, we toured the endemic-rich fynbos heathland, birded a large saltwater lagoon, visited the world-famous Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens and went on an exciting deep-sea pelagic off Cape Point. A short flight to Johannesburg brought us to high-altitude Grasslands and Afromontane forests of the northern Drakensberg escarpment, later ending in the game-rich Kruger National Park.

Total number of bird species seen: 351
Total number of mammal species: seen 41

MAMMAL HIGHLIGHTS: Leopard, Lion, Oribi, African Elephant, White Rhinoceros, Southern Right Whales

FULL REPORT:

Day 1 Cape Peninsula: After breakfast we kicked off the tour by visiting Cape Town’s iconic Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens, which offered an introduction to several of birds of the region in a scenic setting. Cape Spurfowl and Olive Thrush fed on the open lawns; Sombre Greenbul called from nearby trees, while Orange-breasted and Southern Double-collared Sunbirds stole the show. The secretive Lemon Dove in some dense underbrush was a nice addition.

Following a few more stops, we had an excellent lunch and headed off to another top birding spot in Cape Town – Strandfontein Wastewater Treatment Plant. We were instantly greeted by vast numbers of Cape Shovelers and Cape Teal along with smaller numbers of Yellow-billed Ducks, Maccoa Ducks, Southern Pochards, Red-billed Teal, and two of the uncommon Hottentot Teal. Several thousand Greater Flamingos were joined by a few hundred of their smaller cousins, the Lesser Flamingo. Other highlights included Whiskered Terns in breeding plumage, Great White Pelican, three species of ibis: Sacred, Glossy and Hadeda Ibis, Black-winged Kite, and African Marsh Harrier. Passerines didn’t disappoint either. Lesser Swamp and Little Rush Warbler skulked in the reeds while Levaillant’s Cisticola behaved more conspicuously.

Day 2 Tanqua Karoo: Unfortunately, the weather was not cooperating off Cape Point and our pelagic trip was cancelled for the next two days. With an extra day in hand, we headed inland into the Tanqua Karoo to target a whole host of species that weren’t in the original game plan. Trading deep-sea for desert, we kicked off the morning by ticking off a good number of species that were not encountered again including Pale Chanting-Goshawk, Pririt Batis, Karoo Lark, Fairy Flycatcher, Namaqua Warbler, Rufous-eared Warbler, Southern Anteater-Chat, Sickle-winged and Karoo Chats, and our top sighting of the day – a Cinnamon-breasted Warbler! Other highlights include Namaqua Sandgrouse, Acacia Pied Barbet, White-backed Mousebird, Mountain Wheatear, and Malachite Sunbird to name a few.
Day 3 West Coast National Park: The next morning we headed north from Cape Town along the West Coast. Our first stop was along a sandy road, which provided a Southern Black Korhaan right off the bat. This localized endemic was followed by African Hoopoe, Capped Wheatear, and many colourful European Bee-eaters, which also breed here.

We spent the rest of the day birding around the West Coast National Park mainly focusing on several conveniently located hides. The first two were positioned on the tidal lagoon, which hosted thousands upon thousands of shorebirds (waders) resulting in a tally of 17 species including African Oystercatcher, Kittlitz’s Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, and a handful of Red Knot. Other highlights included a half dozen species of terns from the largest (Caspian) to smallest (Little), a distant African Fish-Eagle, and a handful of herons and egrets.

The surrounding Strandveld habitat did not let us down, providing great looks at Cardinal Woodpecker, Cape Penduline-Tit, Cape Grassbird, Karoo Scrub-Robin, Cape Longclaw, and our highlight for the day – several Black Harriers! The latter was key given that it is Birding Africa’s logo.

Our final stop in the park was a hide situated on a small freshwater lake the provided excellent photography opportunities. Here we had African Spoonbill, African Swamphen, and a host of bathing passerines right up close.

Day 4 Hottentots Holland to De Hoop Reserve: Another endemic-packed day, our first stop was to search for the iconic Cape Rockjumper, which is restricted to the fynbos-covered mountains surrounding Cape Town. With very little effort, we found a couple of pairs hopping from rock to rock providing excellent views. We also had great looks at Cape Sugarbird and Cape Siskin along with one of our first mammals of the trip – Cape Fur Seal.

Next stop was a visit to an African Penguin colony at Stony Point near Bettys Bay. Up close views were had of these engaging seabirds, along with all four species of coastal cormorants and the comical Rock Hyraxes that breed nearby.
Lunch and a brief walk at the nearby Harold Porter National Botanical Gardens yielded Cape Batis, Black Saw-wing, Victorin’s Warbler, and Streaky-headed Seedeater.

The rest of the day was spent traversing the fertile Agulhas Plains towards De Hoop Nature Reserve, where we stayed for the next two nights. Just before arriving we were rewarded with two Secretarybirds not far from the entrance. A great find in the Cape!

**Day 5 De Hoop Nature Reserve:** With a whole day in the nature reserve, we had plenty of time birding the fig trees around our accommodation, as well as through the reserve and adjacent coastal areas. We tallied nearly 100 species on this day with the highlights being Denham’s Bustard, Klaas’s Cuckoo, African Snipe, White Stork (flock of 65), Lesser Honeyguide, several Southern Tchagras, Agulhas Long-billed and Cape (Agulhas) Clapper Larks, Cloud Cisticola, Pin-tailed Whydah, and a bonus Boomslang! De Hoop also gave us our first taste of the mammal diversity in South Africa, providing Cape Hare, Cape Mountain Zebra, Eland, Grey Rhebok, Chacma Baboon, and Bontebok. Along the coast we observed several Southern Right Whales, which migrate every winter from Antarctic waters to this part of the coast to breed.

**Day 6 De Hoop to Cape Town:** Today was mostly a travel day back toward Cape Town. However, this did not stop us from finding new birds along the way. Some of the highlights included four more Denham’s Bustards, Red-billed Quelea, Brown-hooded Kingfisher, and a calling Red-chested Cuckoo. Back in Cape Town with extra time before dinner, we did another loop around Strandfontein.

**Day 7 Travel Day to Dullstroom:** After breakfast we headed to the airport and boarded our flight to Johannesburg to begin the second half of our tour. Upon arriving, we worked our way eastwards towards Dullstroom, picking up lunch and a few new birds along the way. Our arrival was met with thick fog and rain, which prevented any further birding. We opted to relax that evening and for an early start the following morning.

**Day 8 Dullstroom to the Drakensberg Escarpment:** We woke up to perfect weather and headed to some nearby vleis for an hour of birding before breakfast. Here we picked up African Darter, Pied Kingfisher, Dark-capped Yellow Warbler, Drakensberg Prinia, African Rail, and a heard-only Red-chested Flufftail.

Following an excellent breakfast, we worked our way north of Dullstroom, birding a winding gravel road to target a good number of species we wouldn’t be able to see again, including Black-winged Lapwing, Eastern Long-billed Lark, Wing-snapping Cisticola, Gurney’s Sugarbird, and Buff-streaked Chat along with our first Cape Vultures and Long-tailed Widowbirds of the trip.
Following lunch, we arrived at Mount Sheba Nature Reserve located in the middle of prime Afromontane forest where we would spend the next two nights. Before dinner we managed a brief walk around the grounds, which resulted in Olive Woodpecker, Olive Bushshrike, Grey Cuckooshrike, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Amethyst Sunbird, and Greater Double-collared Sunbird along with Samango Monkey.

Day 9 Mount Sheba Nature Reserve: Before breakfast we did an hour-long walk through the dense forest to pick up species we had not yet seen. Knysna Turaco, Narina Trogon, Chorister Robin-Chat, and White-starred Robin were some of the highlights. Following breakfast, we drove into Pilgrim’s Rest for a change of scenery. This proved to be an excellent choice as the area was very active with birds. Species not seen again during our trip included Half-collared Kingfisher, Southern Bald Ibis, Groundscraper Thrush, Thick-billed Weaver, Black Cuckoo, Common House Martin, and African Golden Weaver along with our first looks of African Black-headed Oriole, African Palm-Swift, and African Stonechat to name but a few.

That evening we headed to bed to the sounds of a pair of calling African Wood-Owls.

Day 10 Mount Sheba to Kruger Park: We departed Mount Sheba to head towards South Africa’s famous Kruger National Park. Along the way we added a few more birds including Plain-backed Pipit, Wahlberg’s Honeyguide, and Black-chested Snake-Eagle. Upon our arrival at Kruger Park, the number of new birds was almost overwhelming. Between the gate and our camp, we picked up about 40 new trip birds including Grey Go-away-bird, Bateleur, Wahlberg’s Eagle, Green Wood-Hoopoe, four species of hornbills, including the hefty Southern Ground Hornbill, Lilac-breasted and Purple Rollers, Brown-headed Parrot, Retz’s Helmetshrike, Magpie Shrike, Southern Black-Tit, Red-billed Oxpecker, Red-headed Weaver and Green-winged Pytilia to name just a few!
Of course, Kruger is probably best known for its mammals and along this drive we also picked up Smith’s Bush Squirrel, Savanna Elephant, Plains Zebra, Giraffe, Bushbuck, Greater Kudu, Common Waterbuck, Impala, and Blue Wildebeest. Our first Nile Crocodiles were also seen.

Before dinner we walked around camp and continued to see new species such as **African Mourning-Dove**, **Hamerkop**, **Grey-headed Bushshrike**, and **Spectacled Weaver**.

**Day 11 Central Kruger Park:** In an open top safari vehicle, we headed north into an area of vast open savanna, where we would target some open habitat species. Taking a road less travelled, we had good luck stumbling upon two **Kori Bustards** and two **Temminck’s Courser**s. Other additions include **Black Crake**, **Sabota Lark**, **Tawny Eagle**, **Violet-backed Starling**, **Red-billed Firefinch** and a mixed flock of **Red-headed** and **Cut-throat Finches**, which are quite uncommon in the park.

During the afternoon we explored the meandering Olifants River, which slices through central Kruger. Here we picked up **Yellow-billed and Saddle-billed Storks**, **Striated and Goliath Herons**, **Common Sandpiper**, **Giant Kingfisher**, **Little and White-fronted Bee-eaters**, **Wire-tailed Swallow**, and **Yellow-billed Oxpecker** along with Hippos and a Water Monitor all taking advantage of this prominent river.

Elsewhere in the park we continued to get excellent views of new trip birds such as the endangered **Lappet-faced Vulture**, **Brown Snake-Eagle**, **Red-crested Korhaan**, **Black-bellied Bustard**, **Pearl-spotted Owlet**, **Chestnut-backed Sparrowlark**, **Mocking Cliff-Chat**, and **Scarlet-chested Sunbird** to name a few. We also picked up several new mammals today including Lion, Black-backed Jackal, Spotted Hyena, and Common Warthog.

Before dinner we watched 150 **Double-banded Sandgrouse** come in to drink at a waterhole on the edge of the camp and a **Square-tailed Nightjar** after dark.
Day 12 Southern Kruger Park: Today we travelled from the open savannas of central Kruger to the southern region of the park. Distances in Kruger are long and slow, especially when you’re having excellent bird and mammal sightings. This morning we departed camp at dawn and headed south towards our breakfast stop. One of our first birds of the day was the diminutive Little Sparrowhawk, which was sitting nicely in a tree along the road. After breakfast we continued to pick up new species including Black-collared Barbet, White-crested Helmetshrike, Marabou Stork, African Jacana, Purple-crested Turaco, African Pygmy-Kingfisher, Terrestrial Brownbul and two attractive robin-chats – White-browed and Red-capped.

Following lunch overlooking the scenic Lower Sabie River, we walked around camp to see what we could add at mid-day, which turned out quite productive! Highlights included African Green-Pigeon, Crowned Hornbill, Bearded Woodpecker, Red-faced Cisticola, Bearded Scrub-Robin and Collared Sunbird.

Of course, on the mammal front we also added Slender Mongoose, White Rhinoceros, African Buffalo, Nyala, and the adept Klipspringer.

Day 13 Southern Kruger and a Night Safari: After spending several days in the park, new species start to dwindle but regardless we continued to pick up new ones along the way. White-faced Whistling-Duck, Gabar Goshawk, African Wattled Lapwing, Trumpeter Hornbill, and Red-breasted Swallows were some of the new ones, but the highlight bird of the day goes to an impressive Martial Eagle, which had prey in its talons.

After dark on a night safari, we targeted some nocturnal species with the star of the night being a Leopard and its kitten up in a tree with a recent kill…finishing off our Big Five of the trip! Other highlights were Southern Lesser Galago, also known as a bushbaby for its cry, and Bush Duiker.
Day 14 Kruger Park to Johannesburg: On our last day, we were still able to squeeze out a few more birds. One of the first species we woke to was a calling Thick-billed Cuckoo, a rare summer migrant to South Africa. After some patience and a little luck, we had excellent views of it as it flew over, almost with an accipiter appearance, and land in a distant tree.

We left Kruger behind and made one last stop just outside its borders where we picked up our final four birds of the trip – African Black Duck, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, Olive Sunbird, and Great Egret, ending a successful and enjoyable Cape to Kruger tour!