

Birdfinders/Birding Africa – Eastern South Africa Tour

13 – 26 January 2015

Participants: Mark Mc Manus, Franz Klein, Christine Sanderson & Nicholas Aebisher

Trip report – Joe Grosel, Tour Leader

A total of 432 birds and 47 mammals were recorded on this 14-day Eastern South Africa Endemic Tour. Comprehensive lists of the mammal and bird species seen on the tour are available separately.

Day1 – Tuesday 13 Jan

Met up with Mark and Nicholas at OR Tambo, Franz on the plane and with Christine at Durban's King Shaka International. After collecting the VW Minibus rental car we proceeded to Underberg. En route, there was a stop off at Howick Falls where the serious birding started with African Crowned Eagle, Jackal Buzzard, Peregrine Falcon, African Black and Alpine Swifts, all seen from the lookout points above the falls. We checked into Cedar Gardens Guesthouse (Underberg) at about 17h00. After a quick walk through the gardens we took a short drive to Himeville to view the Amur Falcons coming in to roost after sunset. As always this was a spectacular display of an estimated 5000 birds wheeling above the giant Eucalyptus roosting trees.

Day 2 – Wednesday 14 Jan

We looked forward to a day trip up Sani Pass and into Lesotho. On the way to the South African border post at the foot of the pass some good birds were seen including Bokmakierie, Cape Grassbird, Horus Swift, Rufous-necked Wryneck, Cape Canary, Bush Blackcap, Cape Rock Thrush and Drakensberg Prinia. At the border control post we were informed that the pass had been closed due to rock slides as a result of local flooding during the night. After some persuasion we were allowed to travel up the pass for about 4km but couldn't go all the way through into Lesotho. Travelling up through the lower slopes there were nice views of Cape Vulture, Broad-tailed Warbler (Fan-tailed Grassbird), Dark-capped Yellow Warbler, Wailing Cisticola, Gurney's Sugarbird, Buff-streaked Bush-Chat, Ground Woodpecker, Malachite Sunbird and Barratt's Warbler. At about 4km up the pass the road was completely washed away so it was decided to hike up to about 2600m in order to find some of the high altitude specialties. Although the going was slow and difficult birds were regularly spotted such as Fairy Flycatcher, Karoo Prinia, Sentinel Rock Thrush, Cape Bunting and Lammergeier. At about 2500m we enjoyed great close-up views of Drakensberg Siskin and Drakensberg Rockjumper. When the rain started to fall again it was decided to move back down to safer ground. Back along the farm roads near Himeville, Grey Crowned Cranes, Parasitic Weaver (Cuckoo Finch), Pale-crowned Cisticola, Southern Bald Ibis and an 'out of range' Red-footed Falcon were seen before heading back to Underberg. Chacma Baboon, Grey Rhebuck and Eland were some of the interesting mammals seen on the day.

Day 3 – Thursday 16 Jan

A very early visit to Marutswa Forest outside Bulwer was first on the agenda for the day. A walk in the forest produced some good sightings in the form of Knysna Turaco, Olive Woodpecker, Cape Batis, African Olive (Rameron) Pigeon, White-starred Robin, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Terrestrial Brownbul, Chorister Robin-Chat and Forest Canary. Then it was back to our guesthouse for breakfast before departing for the Highover Wildlife Sanctuary situated along the Hela Hela Pass. On the way to the town of Richmond. After checking into our chalets on the banks of the Mkomazi River the early afternoon was spent birding around the lodge grounds. Black Cuckooshrike, Ashy Flycatcher, Black Saw-wing, Orange-breasted Bush Shrike, Crowned Hornbill and Violet-backed Starling were some of the prominent birds seen. Later on we were taken up the Hela Hela pass and into some pristine montane grasslands to look for the critically endangered Blue Swallow. After some searching the group was rewarded with sightings of at least two adult and two juvenile birds.

Day 4 – Friday 17 Jan

A pre-breakfast walk along some of the trails near our accommodation produced excellent views of African Emerald Cuckoo, Narina Trogon, Olive Sunbird, Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher, Black-bellied Starling and Black-headed Oriole. Then it was on to Eshowe and our guesthouse which was reached by mid-afternoon. After checking in we headed for Ongoye Forest north of Eshowe. On the way there a Half-collared Kingfisher showed well at a small stream, while Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird was another new addition to the list. Unfortunately time ran out and the main forest could not be reached.

Day 5 – Saturday 18 Jan

After heavy rain overnight we woke up to a clear but breezy day and headed straight for the Dlinza Forest aerial boardwalk in the hope of picking up Bronze-naped Pigeon. After spending some time on the viewing tower a single bird did give everyone good scope views. Other specials seen in the forest were Spotted Ground-Thrush, Olive Thrush, Square-tailed Drongo, Lemon Dove and Chorister Robin-Chat. Following a good breakfast we continued up the coast to St Lucia where lunch was taken at the Ski Boat Club overlooking the St Lucia estuary. From here a good variety of shorebirds were seen. A walk to the mouth of the estuary produced Rufous-winged Cisticola, Golden Weaver, Woolly-necked Stork, Pink-backed Pelican and a hunting Osprey. The late afternoon was spent walking along some of the trails in the iGwalagwala coastal forest where the likes of Brown Scrub-Robin, Rudd's Apalis, White-eared Barbet, Red-capped Robin-Chat and Livingstone's Turaco were enjoyed. Mammals seen around St Lucia included Hippo, Red Duiker and the striking Tonga Red Squirrel.

Day 6 – Sunday 19 Jan

A return to the iGwalagwala forest trails gave us Crested Guineafowl, Green Malkoha (Yellowbill), Dark-backed Weaver, Woodward's Batis and Trumpeter Hornbill. On leaving St Lucia a quick stop at the bridge crossing the estuary delivered good sightings of displaying Southern Brown-throated and Thick-billed Weavers. Then it was on to Bonamanzi via the N2 and Hluhluwe. After checking in we opted for a late afternoon walk around the lodge gardens. African Jacana, Lemon-breasted Canary, African Cuckoo Hawk, Purple-banded Sunbird and White-throated Robin-Chat were all well received. Several large Nile Crocodile lay about the dams near the lodge while a number of mammals were seen in the grounds and on the trails, predominantly Red Duiker, Nyala and Warthog.

Day 7 – Monday 19 Jan

A pre-dawn departure for a day visit to the Mkuze Game Reserve allowed us to spot a Large-spotted Genet with two pups and a Thick-tailed Bushbaby as we were leaving the Bonamanzi Reserve. The morning's birding in Mkuze was very productive in the bushveld and sandveld habitats and along the fringes of the large Nsumo Pan. Some of the noteworthy birds seen were Tawny Eagle, Broad-billed Roller, Pink-throated Twinspot, Great White Pelican, Bateleur, African Openbill, Bearded Scrub-Robin, Black Heron, Comb Duck and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. During the heat of the day several hours were spent at the kuMasinga waterhole and hide. Apart from the throngs of mammals which came down to drink including White Rhino, Impala, Burchell's Zebra, Nyala and Blue Wildebeest, many top birds were also seen namely African Pygmy Kingfisher, Greater Honeyguide, Grey Waxbill and Eastern Nicator. Back at Bonamanzi an after-dinner walk gave the group great views of a pair of African Wood-Owl.

Day 8 – Tuesday 20 Jan

Another pre-dawn excursion to a sand forest in Bonamanzi gave us wonderful views of our target bird, African Broadbill. A male performed his peculiar display only 15 metres from the onlookers. After this excitement part of the group opted to take a guided drive to the Hluhluwe floodplains and were rewarded with sightings of Rosy-throated Longclaw. After breakfast one last birding walk in the eastern section of Bonamanzi delivered Red-chested Cuckoo, Scarlet-breasted Sunbird, Red-fronted Tinkerbird and Purple-crested Turaco. Then it was on the road again as we made our way to the high country around the town of Wakkerstroom travelling via Pongola and Piet Retief. A short stop near the settlement of Dirkiesdorp produced the first grassland birds in the form of Wing-snapping Cisticola, Spike-heeled and Red-capped Larks, African Pied Starling, Banded Martin, South African Cliff-Swallow and hundreds of Long-tailed Widowbirds. After checking into our B&B, a quick visit to the local wetland was very

productive with African Swamphen, Whiskered Tern, Hottentot Teal, African Snipe, Little Rush Warbler, South African Shelduck, Little Bittern and African Marsh-Harrier.

Day 9 – Wednesday 21 Jan

Today we enjoyed a full day birding in and around the grasslands of Wakkerstroom with the specific aim of locating the specialty birds of the region. The following noteworthy species were recorded: White-bellied Bustard and Black-winged Lapwing, Botha's Lark, Blue Bustard, Blue Crane, Montagu's Harrier and Denham's Bustard. Rudd's Lark, Common Quail, Maccoa Duck, White-backed Duck and Cape Shoveler were seen near Fickland Pan, while Yellow-breasted Pipit, Eastern Long-billed Lark and Mountain Wheatear were viewed along the Utrecht Road, south of Wakkerstroom. Mammals spotted in the grasslands around Wakkerstroom included Meerkat, Yellow Mongoose, Blesbok and Grey Duiker.

Day 10 – Thursday 22 Jan

An early morning drive to a dam south-east of Wakkerstroom gave us fabulous looks at a covey of Red-winged Francolin in the road. At the bridge below the dam wall our patience was rewarded with sightings of African Rock (Yellow-tufted Pipit) and African Black Duck. After breakfast back at the B&B we had one last look at the wetland before taking the long drive to the Kruger National Park. The route via the towns of Volksrust, Ermelo, Machadodorp and Nelspruit took about five hours but once we reached the Malelane entrance gate to Kruger Park there was much excitement as we were welcomed by a Goliath Heron and a breeding herd of Elephant literally at the gate. The drive to Skukuza produced several fine sightings of White Rhino, Lion, Cape Buffalo, Klipspringer, Kudu and many other mammals. In a small pool in the Matjula River Hamerkop and three stork species namely Marabou, Black and Saddle-billed were feasting on stranded catfish. A large variety of bushveld birds including several shrike, hornbill, starling and kingfisher were seen. Skukuza was reached just before gate closing time (18h30). Walking back to our huts after dinner a short stop at a pond produced no less than eight frog species and good close-up views of Peter's Epauletted Fruit-bat.

Day 11 – Friday 23 Jan

Another early departure as we made our way to Satara stopping off at Lower Sabie for breakfast. Apart from more excellent game viewing many great birds were seen including Martial and Wahlberg's Eagle, African Hawk-Eagle, Red-crested Korhaan, Bearded Woodpecker, White-crowned Shrike, Greater Blue-eared and Burchell's Glossy-Starling, Southern Ground Hornbill, Pied, Black and African Cuckoo, Brown-headed Parrot and White-crowned Lapwing. After checking into Satara and a walk around the grounds where the likes of Red-billed Buffalo-Weaver, African Mourning Dove and Greater Scimitarbill were seen a short drive to a nearby waterhole produced Senegal Lapwing, Bennett's Woodpecker and a host of mammals. A guided night drive in one of the park's safari vehicles delivered a number of nocturnal mammals such as Small-spotted Genet, African Civet, Spotted Hyeana and the 6th lion sighting of the visit. Square-tailed and Fiery-necked Nightjar and Verreaux's Eagle-Owl added to the excitement of the evening.

Day 12 – Saturday 24 Jan

During a dawn drive into Kruger's basalt plains large concentrations of Red-billed Quelea and Wattled Starling were encountered along with Kori Bustard, Common Ostrich, Black-chested and Brown Snake-Eagle, Secretarybird, Black-bellied Bustard, Hooded, White-headed and Lappet-faced Vulture and Southern Carmine Bee-eater. After breakfast we took a steady drive to the Orpen Gate and enjoyed excellent views of African Wild Dog en-route. After leaving the park we had lunch at the aptly-named Garden of Eden tea garden with Collared Sunbird and Red-capped Robin-Chats in close attendance. Then it was on the road again as we made our way up the eastern escarpment via the Able Erasmus Pass where some time was spent waiting for a Taita Falcon to appear. Unfortunately no falcons showed themselves but as a small consolation the group was taken to a nearby stream where a small party of Mountain Wagtails was seen. Other birds sighted above the sandstone cliffs included Cape Vulture, African Harrier-Hawk and White-necked Raven. After this interlude our next stop was at the New Agatha Plantation near the town of Tzaneen where fantastic views of a roosting Bat Hawk were enjoyed. The final leg of the day's journey took us up the Magoebaskloof Pass to our overnight destination.

Day 13 – Sunday 25 Jan

After the traditional early morning tea and rusks we took a drive to the top of the Woodbush Forest where Cape Parrots often gather at dawn before heading off to forage in the forests. After a short wait two birds did arrive but didn't spend too much time hanging around. The forest itself was very quiet and the birding was challenging. Fortunately though a few species including Orange Ground-Thrush, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Square-tailed Drongo and Greater Double-collared Sunbird were eventually seen. Back at Bramasole Sweet Waxbill, Olive Bush-Shrike and Grey Cuckooshrike were picked up before we headed off to the tropical region of Tzaneen and the surrounding broad-leaved Woodlands. Magpie Mannikin, Dusky Indigobird, Holub's Weaver, White-browed Robin-Chat, Pale Flycatcher, Green-capped Eremomela and Croaking Cisticola were some of the significant birds seen in these habitats. The late afternoon was spent back up in the high country of Magoebaskloof to mop up on birds missed earlier in the day. The localised Samango Monkey was one of the 'new' mammals recorded on the day.

Day 14 – Monday 26 Jan

The final day on tour started with an early departure for the Polokwane Game Reserve, about 60km to the west of Magoebaskloof. The Umbrella-thorn dominated open savannah's of the Polokwane Plateau hosts many bird species typical of the arid western parts of southern Africa. Several of these were seen during a morning of frantic but highly enjoyable birding. Crimson-breasted Shrike, Ashy Tit, Barred Wren-Warbler, Greater Kestrel, Violet-eared and Black-cheeked Waxbill, Shaft-tailed Whydah, Kalahari Scrub-Robin, Buffy Pipit, Gabar Goshawk, Black-chested Prinia and Yellow Canary were just a few of the species seen. The regional endemic Short-clawed Lark gave the touring group a perfect send off with several impressive display flights. After a great morning in the Polokwane Game Reserve we headed south to Pretoria and Johannesburg and finally OR Tambo International Airport.