Overview: One of our most successful Cape to Kruger tours to date, we covered just about every habitat imaginable from wetlands to forest, desert to coast. In the Cape we began birding the endemic-rich fynbos, the parched Tanqua Karoo semi-desert, the fertile Agulhas Plains, and an endless number of wetlands and estuaries. We then took a short flight to Johannesburg and spent the second half of the tour birding high montane grasslands and forests before dropping into a world-renowned game reserve – Kruger National Park – home to not only large numbers of birds but also some of the best mammal viewing in the world.

Total number of bird species: 417

Total number of mammal species: 50

Bird Highlights: Grey-winged and Red-winged Francolins, African Penguin, Black-browed and Shy Albatross, Southern Bald Ibis, White-backed Night-Heron, Secretarybird, 38 species of raptors, 5 species of bustards, Blue Crane, 32 species of shorebirds (waders), Knysna Turaco, Thick-billed Cuckoo, 7 species of owls, Narina Trogon, Knysna and Ground Woodpeckers, Taita Falcon, Cape Rockjumper, Agulhas Long-billed, Cape Clapper and Karoo Larks, Cinnamon-breasted Warbler, Cape and Gurney’s Sugarbirds, 9 species of starlings, Buff-streaked, Sickle-winged, Karoo and Tractrac Chats, Yellow-breasted Pipit

Day 1 Cape Peninsula:
We began our tour visiting one of Cape Town’s most iconic attractions – Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens. Here we were able to wet our appetites with our first taste of the endemic-rich fynbos biome, picking up Cape specialties such as Cape Spurfowl, Cape Bulbul, Cape Sugarbird, and Orange-breasted Sunbird. Other highlights included African Harrier-Hawk, Karoo Prinia, Amethyst Sunbird, Forest and Brimstone Canaries, Swee Waxbill and members of locally introduced population of Common Chaffinch.

Next up was a brief stop at another nearby location where we caught up with a localized endemic – a half dozen Cape Siskins.

After lunch we spent the rest of the day birding arguably the best birding location in all of the Cape, the famous Strandfontein Wastewater Treatment Plant… in other words, the sewage ponds! Ten species of ducks were present including Hottentot Teal, Cape Shoveler, Southern Pochard, and Maccoa Duck. Nearly 3,000 Greater Flamingos were joined by over a hundred of their smaller cousins, the Lesser Flamingo. Other highlights included Black Crake, Water Thick-knee, Kittlitz’s Plover, Purple Heron, Lesser Swamp and Little Rush Warblers, Levaillant’s Cisticola, and African Pipit to name a few.

On our way to dinner we picked up the resident Spotted Thick-knees down the road from our guesthouse.

Day 2 Tanqua Karoo:
Today warranted an early departure, but it was well worth it. We spent the day birding the Tanqua Karoo desert, always a favourite and a host of many endemics. Our first stop just after sunrise yielded a good number of targets such as Fairy Flycatcher, African Reed Warbler, Namaqua Warbler, Layard’s Tit-Babbler, Mountain Wheatear, and African Pied Starling.

As we headed north along the longest stretch of road between settlements in South Africa (250kms) we continued picking up targets namely Verreaux’s Eagle, Acacia Pied Barbet, Malachite Sunbird, White-throated Canary, Tractrac Chat, Greater Kestrel, and the main target of the day – Cinnamon-breasted Warbler.

En-route back to our guesthouse in Cape Town we picked up Booted Eagle and Great Crested Grebe among others. In addition to birds, we also had some of our first mammal species namely Chacma Baboon, Egyptian Mongoose, and Springbok.
Day 3 West Coast National Park:
After a hearty breakfast we headed north out of Cape Town to South Africa’s west coast to bird a variety of habitats. First stop was a dirt road through agricultural lands that produced Southern Black Korhaan, Blue Crane, African Hoopoe, European Bee-eater, Bokmakierie, Red-capped Lark, and Capped Wheatear.

For much of the afternoon we birded within the West Coast National Park, tallying over 100 species. This bird-rich park encompasses a large estuary surrounded by healthy strandveld and fynbos habitat. Focusing on the bird hides overlooking the saltwater mudflats, we picked up South African Shelduck, 18 species of shorebirds including African Oystercatcher, White-fronted Plover, Eurasian Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit, Red Knot, and Marsh Sandpiper along with five species of terns, several species of cormorants, egrets, spoonbills, flamingos, African Fish-Eagle and an Osprey.

Leaving the estuary behind, the surrounding shrubland proved to be just as interesting. We found Grey-winged Francolin, Black Harrier, White-backed Mousebird, Karoo and Cape Clapper Larks, Gray Tit, Southern Penduline-Tit, and Karoo Scrub-Robin along with Four-striped Mouse, Angulate Tortoise, and an impressive Puffadder!

After a successful visit, we began our journey back towards Cape Town making a brief stop at a gypsum mine, which played host to a number of Chestnut-banded Plovers.

Day 4 Pelagic Seabirding Trip/: A report by pelagic guide: Cliff Dorse :
After several days of strong south-easterly weather, the group got the go ahead for the long awaited pelagic out of Simonstown. While there was little wind to speak of, there was still a bit of a chop on the water, a legacy of the strong wind that was blowing the previous evening. At the Point, we stopped for a moment to enjoy and photograph the iconic landmarks of Cape Point and the Cape of Good Hope.

We saw our first White-chinned Petrels just beyond the Point, followed 4 miles further on by Sooty Shearwaters, and a Great Shearwater, sitting on the water. We also encountered a couple of Parasitic Jaegers. At about 12 miles, a juvenile Shy Albatross came to investigate.

We continued out towards the trawling grounds adding Wilson's Storm Petrel to our list. With no trawlers or long-line vessels in sight, we proceeded to the Canyon, an area where the continental shelf begins to fall away very quickly. We arrived to find it somewhat devoid of life. Undeterred, we started to chum with fish oil and minced up pilchards. To our surprise the response was slow, but we persisted and eventually had numbers of Great Shearwater, White-chinned Petrel and both European and Wilson's Storm Petrels in our chum slick. A handful of juvenile Shy Albatross did a few flybys and a couple of Sooty Shearwaters also made a quick
appearance. Eventually we were rewarded when a single Pintado Petrel and both Northern and Southern Giant Petrels came to investigate.

We decided to head for the relative calm of False Bay as there was a north-westerly predicted in the afternoon. After an enjoyable lunch, the trip back was uneventful and our final stretch to the harbour was interrupted by a small group of Dusky Dolphins. The mandatory stop at Partridge Point produced good views of Bank, Cape and White-breasted Cormorant.

Once back on shore, we headed towards our overnight stop at De Hoop Nature Reserve some distance away. Here the birding, food, and accommodation are all equally impressive. Along the way we had Giant Kingfisher, Agulhas Long-billed Lark and Southern Black Korhaan.

Upon arrival, one of the first birds we had was normally the hardest bird to find in the reserve and our main target – Knysna Woodpecker! An excellent sign of what was to come. Mammals seen in the late afternoon included Bontebok, Eland, and Grey Rhebok.

Day 5 De Hoop Nature Reserve:
Today we spent most of the day birding within the De Hoop Nature Reserve where we tallied over 100 species. There were countless highlights such as Namaqua Sandgrouse, Denham’s Bustard, African Snipe, Cape Clapper Lark, Black Harrier, and two Knysna Woodpeckers. A few non-bird highlights were also added such as Rock Hyrax, Cape Mountain Zebra, Cape Skink, and breeding Southern Right Whales right off shore.

With such success, after lunch we headed over to another section of the reserve, Potberg Mountain, which hosts the last breeding colony of Cape Vultures in the Western Cape. Soon enough we enjoyed several circling overhead. A nearby exotic plantation produced Red-chested Cuckoo, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow and yet another Knysna Woodpecker.

After dinner we did a night drive which produced a Fiery-necked Nightjar sitting on the road.

Day 6 Overberg to Hottentots Holland Mountains:
We packed our bags this morning and headed back west towards Cape Town picking up a locally rare Jacobin Cuckoo singing right near our accommodation. First stop for the morning was at Stony Point for our only flightless bird of the trip – the African Penguin. Here up-close views of these comical birds were shared with excellent views and comparisons of South Africa’s four coastal-nesting marine cormorants – Cape, Bank, Crowned, and White-breasted.

Next, we visited a small botanical garden for a tasty lunch and had a short walk around the gardens. Here we picked up Victorin’s Warbler, Neddicky, Cape Batis, and Swee Waxbill. Ten minutes away we hiked some excellent fynbos targeting the local specialty, the Cape Rockjumper. After a short while we had good views of a Cape Rockjumper along with a trio of
Ground Woodpeckers nearby. On our return to Cape Town, we picked up one last new addition for the trip – a Rufous-chested Sparrowhawk flying over an intersection.

Day 7 Travel day from Cape Town to Dullstroom:
We packed out bags and headed off to Cape Town airport for our 2 hr flight to Johannesburg to begin the second half of the tour in the eastern part of the country. Upon arrival, we headed east through agriculture lands and grasslands towards Dullstroom, our next destination. Along the way we picked up several new trip birds including many Long-tailed Widowbirds.

After checking into our guesthouse we had enough time to bird at a local nature reserve before dusk. Some of the highlights included Red-chested Flufftail, Intermediate Egret, Common Sandpiper, Malachite Kingfisher, Dark-capped Yellow Warbler, Drakensberg Prinia, and Buff-streaked Chat. Mammals seen were Blesbok, an eastern subspecies of Bontebok.

Day 8 Northern Drakensberg Escarpment and Mount Sheba:
The highveld grasslands and wetlands surrounding Dullstroom offer excellent birding and a good opportunity to track down some of South Africa’s scarcer species. Over the course of several hours we worked our way north along a rural dirt road where we picked up a good number of target species including Red-winged Francolin, Eastern Long-billed Lark, Wailing and Wing-snapped Cisticolas, Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Buff-streaked Chat, and our best bird of the morning – a single Yellow-breasted Pipit.

Continuing north we visited a protea-covered hillside quickly picking up the endemic Gurney’s Sugarbird. After lunch we settled into our accommodation at Mount Sheba and birded for over an hour in the dense Afromontane forests within the reserve. Here we picked up a fair number of our forest targets including Knysna Turaco, Buff-spotted Flufftail, Olive Woodpecker, Olive Bushshrike, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Yellow-throated Woodland-Warbler, and the spectacular Orange Ground-Thrush.

Day 9 Mount Sheba Nature Reserve:
With most of our targets in the bag, we birded the forest before breakfast searching for the remaining targets. Narina Trogon was top priority and we were eventually successful. Elsewhere the shy and elusive White-starred Robin was joined by Chorister Robin-Chat, Grey Cuckoo-shrike, and a distant African Emerald Cuckoo calling up a slope.

For the remainder of the day, we birded areas outside Mount Sheba mainly focusing around Pilgrim’s Rest. Here we birded along a stream as well as a picturesque valley. A good number of new birds were had including Southern Bald Ibis, Rufous-necked Wryneck, African Reed Warbler, Lazy Cisticola, Groundscraper Thrush, African Golden and Village Weavers, Red-backed Mannikins, and a tree full of two dozen Amethyst Sunbirds.
Day 10 Mount Sheba to Kruger Park:
We did one last walk around the Mount Sheba forest before packing up and heading out of the reserve. The drive to Kruger National Park, our next destination, took us along the scenic route through the Drakensberg escarpment. We made a stop at the Taita Falcon eyrie and were rewarded with distant but good scope views of one of these rare species up on the cliff face. In South Africa they are considered critically endangered. Also present were Purple-crested Turaco, Cape Vulture, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Black-collared Barbet, White-throated and Red-capped Robin-Chats, Mocking Cliff-Chat and White-bellied Sunbird.

Dropping down the escarpment, we lost a lot of elevation and entered a diverse network of savanna habitat. This change in habitat added large numbers of new species to our trip list. We arrived at the Park gate, where we had lunch and were interrupted frequently by new birds, but this was a good thing! Grey Go-away-birds, Southern Yellow-billed and Southern Red-billed Hornbills, Crested Barbets, Brubru, Southern Black-Tit, Ashy Flycatcher, Yellow-billed Oxpecker, and Red-billed Firefinch were just some of the new species for our tour.

We continued east towards Satara Camp, where we would spend the next couple nights. Along the way we continued picking up a large number of species with raptors stealing the show – Bateleur, White-backed Vulture, Wahlberg’s Eagle, Tawny Eagle and African Fish-Eagle soared overhead while Lilac-breasted Roller, Magpie Shrike, Violet-backed Starling, Golden-breasted Bunting, and Red-billed Buffalo-weaver were just some of the new additions along the road edge. We also had our first concentrations of mammals on the tour with the likes of Elephant, Common Zebra, Giraffe, African Buffalo, Bushbuck, Greater Kudu, Common Waterbuck, Impala, and Blue Wildebeest.

We arrived at camp, checked into our accommodation, and took an hour’s walk around the grounds, which tends to be quite active. African Mourning-Dove, Green Wood-hoopoe, Common Scimitarbill, Brown-headed Parrot, Arrow-marked Babbler, Grey Tit-Flycatcher, Scarlet-chested and Marico Sunbirds, and Green-winged Pytilia were joined by a Spotted Bush Snake, Southern Tree Agama, Variable and Rainbow Skinks, and a colony of roosting Peter’s/Wahlberg’s Epauletted Bats. Our biggest surprise came on our return to our rooms when we stumbled upon a Transvaal Thick-tailed Scorpion and an African Wild Cat. A family of African Wild Cats managed to get into the camp sometime in the past and if you’re lucky enough, you may catch a glimpse!

Day 11 Full day game viewing and birding in central Kruger:
Being our first full day in the park, we opted for an early start and worked our way north into the vast open grasslands and bushveld savanna of central Kruger. Before breakfast we had already seen 80 or more species! Highlights included Red-crested Korhaan, Greater Painted-
Snipe, Temminck’s Courser, Hamerkop, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Grey-headed Bushshrike, Red-backed Shrike, countless Sabota and Rufous-naped Larks, Desert Cisticola, and Yellow-throated Longclaw to name a few.

Our breakfast vista overlooked the scenic Olifants River Valley. Here we watched soaring raptors at eye level and scanned the river’s edge below for waterbirds. Highlights included African Harrier-Hawk and Yellow-billed Stork, as well as Klaas’s and Dideric Cuckoos calling from nearby.

We continued north and new birds didn’t slow down. At a river viewpoint we had Goliath Heron, African Jacana, Little Bee-eater and Spectacled Weaver, while further north we stumbled upon a stunning Martial Eagle with a full crop – one of the largest, most powerful eagles in the world. Elsewhere we picked up Double-banded Sandgrouse, Collared Pratincole, Squacco Heron, White-fronted Bee-eater, and White-browed Scrub-Robin.

After lunch, the remaining part of the day was spent slowly working our way back to Satara. Although we had been in the park for 24 hours, new birds did not slow down. Along the way we picked up Burchell’s Coucal, Bearded Woodpecker, Terrestrial Brownbul, Collared Sunbird, Yellow-throated Petronia, African Hawk-Eagle, White-headed and Lappet-faced Vultures, Barn Owl, Kori Bustard, and Secretarybird – always a favourite! Other highlights included Nile Crocodile, Common Warthog, Hippopotamus, Lion, and Serrated Terrapin.

A night drive this evening helped add a few more mammals to our trip list including Scrub Hare, Black-backed Jackal, Small-spotted Genet, and Bush Duiker.

**Day 12 From central to southern Kruger:**

Today was a travel day from central to southern Kruger. Of course, this meant birding and mammal watching the entire way. Along the way we added Brown Snake-Eagle, Black-bellied Bustard, Hooded Vulture, Purple Roller, and Bennett’s Woodpecker along with Spotted Hyena and Nyala.

We made good timing and proceeded to bird a few sites outside our next camp, Skukuza, until check-in. Spending most of your time in Kruger in a vehicle (for obvious reasons!) it’s always nice to be able to stretch your legs and bird on foot. We did just that at the native plant nursery. Here we had Red-chested and African Cuckoos (summer migrants), and Lesser Honeyguide among others. Nearby we headed to a bird hide overlooking a small lake and had over 40 species in under an hour. Highlights here included Emerald-spotted Wood-Dove, Jacobin Cuckoo, Water Thick-Knee, Marabou Stork, and Little Sparrowhawk.

Around camp we had some of the best birding in the park, probably due to its proximity to the Lower Sabie River and the well-watered grounds around the camp providing excellent shade
and food producing trees. African Green-Pigeons fed on the fruits in the wild fig trees, Crowned Hornbills flew overhead, while Bearded Scrub-Robin sang from the dense underbrush and Red-faced Cisticolas called from the reeds along the river. After dark we had a surprise find when we spotlighted the river and found a White-backed Night-Heron feeding out in full view! An excellent ending to a successful day.

Day 13 Exploring southern Kruger:
Our last full day in the park, we didn’t waste time. Focusing on the southern region of Kruger we jumped in our open-top safari vehicle and hit the ground running. Before breakfast we picked up Retz’s Helmetshrike, Knob-billed Duck, African Black Duck, White-crowned Lapwing, and we had a Giant Kingfisher perch right in front of us allowing excellent photos.

However, it wasn’t the birds that made today as exciting as it was – it was the mammals! Personally, this was one of my best days in Kruger ever. We started the morning off with a small pack of African Wild Dogs. This was shortly joined by a Leopard sleeping in full view on a rock along the road. After breakfast we stumbled upon several Giraffe behaving oddly until we noticed what they were staring at – two Cheetah! In the end, we saw the full “magnificent seven” in a single day – Buffalo, Leopard, Lion, Cheetah, White Rhino, Elephant and Wild Dog.

Back to the birds - the remainder of the day we wandered around the southern section of the park adding White-winged Widowbird, Spotted Eagle-Owl, White-faced Scops-Owl, Black Cuckooshrike, Dark-Chanting Goshawk, Striped Kingfisher, and Eurasian Golden-Oriole.

Day 14 Kruger to Johannesburg:
Sadly, all tours must come to an end and today was our travel day back to the airport. This didn’t stop us from finding new birds on our way out of Kruger Park. A family of eight Southern Ground-Hornbills were an excellent find right along the road as well as a Thick-billed Cuckoo, a scarce migrant into the region. Elsewhere along our drive out we added Black Cuckoo, Wattled Lapwing, White-crowned Shrike, and Olive Sunbird.

Before arriving at Johannesburg’s OR Tambo International Airport, we targeted one last new bird for the trip – the endemic Karoo Thrush. Our search didn’t take long before we found one feeding in someone’s front lawn.

What better way to end a successful trip than with one last endemic?