South Africa: Tanqua Karoo 2-day guided loop

22-23 September 2012

Trip Report and Photographs by leader: Tertius A Gous

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Overview: On this 2-day tour we targeted some of South Africa's sought-after endemic species and Karoo specials not easily seen close to Cape Town. We visited key sites in the Western Cape including Mitchell’s Pass, Karoopoort, Eierkop, Skitterykloof, Swartruggens mountains and the Tanqua Karoo.

Total number of bird species: 111
Tour Participants: Ross and Sandy Mackintosh


Detailed trip report:
I collected Ross and Sandy at their Guest House in Cape Town at 7h00 on a rather overcast and cool morning. There was some drizzle on the way to the Tanqua Karoo but the weather cleared as we made our first stop at Mitchell's Pass close to Ceres. This stop was prompted by a very obliging female Cape Rock-Thrush next to the road, but we were soon entertained by several Swee Waxbills feeding on grass seeds near the car, as well as Rock Martins and Greater Striped Swallows foraging overhead. There was excitement when no less than three Booted Eagles, two pale form and one dark form bird, soared past.

We pushed on to the farmhouse near Karoopoort where an Olive Thrush was the first bird seen. This was soon followed by Cape Sparrow, Cape Weaver and Pied Starling. The star bird here was a pair of very vocal Namaqua Warblers that for once
provided clear and prolonged views. A cheeky Familiar Chat followed us around and Malachite Sunbirds were feeding on aloes along the road. Skulking Karoo Scrub-Robins were frustratingly difficult to see but fortunately many were found during the remainder of the trip.

The next stop a short distance further on was the picnic site as one enters the semi-desert plains of the Tanqua Karoo. Here we were treated to several endemic and near-endemic birds such as Mountain Wheatear, Layard's Tit-Babbler, Fairy Flycatcher, Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, White-throated Canary, White-backed Mousebird, Grey-backed Cisticola and a pair of South African Shelduck flying past. A surprise find was a very confiding but busybody Cinnamon-breasted Warbler that provided excellent views as it clambered and crept amongst the rocks.

On the way to Eierkop a Grey Rhebok dashed across the road and we also stopped to appreciate a pair of Sickle-winged Chats flitting from bush to bush. A distinctive Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk sat prominently perched on telephone poles along the road. Eierkop is a distinctive tillite hill and the many flowering succulents on its slope attracted Dusky, Malachite and Southern Double-collared Sunbirds, as well as Karoo Chat, Grey Tit, Rufous-eared Warbler, Large-billed Lark and a calling Karoo Lark were found on the adjacent plains.

Late in the afternoon we headed for Skitterykloof on the way to our overnight stop in the Swartruggens mountains. We found a foraging group of Grey-backed Sparrowlarks next to the road and a small puddle had both male and female Black-headed Canary quenching their thirst. At Skitterykloof, Cape Bunting was particularly common and we also found White-necked Raven and Rock Kestrel. The small wetland produced Common Waxbill, Southern Red Bishop and Levallant's Cisticola, and Cape Spurfowl was common in the mountain scrub. The next day on our way back to Skitterykloof and the Tanqua National Park we heard and saw a few Cape Clapper Larks in the fynbos plains on the Swartruggens plateau. Early morning birding at Skitterykloof was very productive and we managed to find a Spotted Eagle-Owl being mobbed by Black-headed Canaries, a lone adult Black Harrier quartering the valley and a very vocal African Reed-Warbler in the reedbeds. A colourful Bokmakierie called from its perch on a Clanwilliam aloe (Aloe comosa).
Then it was on to the legendary P2250 road but not before stopping at an acacia-lined river to find an obliging Pririt Batis. Soon after turning onto the P2250 we found a pair of nest-building Black-eared Sparrowlarks with the male hovering right above our heads! Yellow Canary, Tractrac Chat, Lark-like Bunting and numerous Red-capped Larks were also found in the vicinity.

A stop at the Oudebaaskraal Dam produced waterbirds such as African Fish-Eagle, Greater Flamingo, large numbers of Black-necked Grebes, Kittlitz’s Plover, Three-banded Plover, Little Stint and Common Greenshank. The open areas next to the dam had a few Capped Wheatears and numerous European Bee-eaters hawked insects overhead.

On the way to the Park Office we found a large Puff Adder crossing the road and kept our distance as it disappeared into the roadside scrub. The Paulshoek area, which I fondly call ‘korhaan corner’, did not disappoint and we found a group of five Ludwig’s Bustards and two Karoo Korhaans.

Shortly thereafter a pair of Spike-heeled Larks made an appearance. On the way back after a very satisfying trip we found a Secretarybird right next to the road.

A suitable ending to a successful tour!