South Africa Tour: Ultimate Endemics Tour
(Tour # BA095)

26 Nov - 09 Dec 2017

Tour Reports by leaders: Ethan Kistler (West) and Joe Grosel (East)

www.birdingafrica.com

Overview On this 23-day tour we target South Africa's endemic bird species, large mammals and a diversity of landscapes: from coast to mountain, desert to grassland, and savanna to forest. We visit all of South Africa's key birding areas: from the Fynbos of the Cape to the arid Karoo biome, Zululand's humid tropical coastal and sand forests, the dramatic highlands of the Drakensberg and Lesotho, the Wakkerstroom grasslands and Kruger's raptor and mammal-rich lowveld savannas.

BA095 Ultimate Endemics Tour (Western leg) 17-26 November 2017

Tour Leader: Ethan Kistler
Total number of bird species (Cape): 266
Total number of mammal species (Cape): 23

Bird Highlights (Cape): African Penguin, 4 species of albatross, Black Harrier, Ludwig's and Denham's Bustards, Northern Black, Southern Black, and Karoo Korhaan, Blue Crane, Narina Trogon, Knysna Woodpecker, Greater Kestrel, Cape Rockjumper, Fairy Flycatcher, 12 species of lark including Karoo, Cape and Agulhas Long-billed Larks, Black-eared Sparrowlark, and Karoo, Red, and Sclater's Larks; Victorin's and Knysna Warblers, Cape Sugarbird; Tractrac, Karoo and Sickle-winged Chats, 6 species of sunbirds including Orange-breasted Sunbird, and Protea Canary

Mammal Highlights (Cape): SA Porcupine, Bat-eared Fox, Cape Mountain Zebra, Eland, Cape Grysbok, Klipspringer, and Gemsbok (Southern Oryx)

Day 1: Cape Town to Hottentots Holland Mountains

What better way to kick off a South Africa endemics tour than to target one of South Africa's most iconic species – the Cape Rockjumper. Rooiels was our first stop of the morning and after a bit of searching, we
found three striking individuals. This prime Fynbos area produced a host of other species including Ground Woodpecker, Cape Grassbird, Cape Sugarbird, Cape Rock-Thrush, Orange-breasted Sunbird, and Cape Siskin among others. Offshore we added African Oystercatcher among some other coastal species.

Next stop was the Stoney Point African Penguin colony. Here we observed penguins up close and personal – always a trip favourite. Other highlights here included all four coastal cormorants - most notably Crowned and Bank - as well as a local rarity, Black-winged Pratincole, which flew over our heads and disappeared. These generally do not occur in the Cape and we alerted the local rare bird alert.

After lunch we birded the pleasant Harold Porter Botanical Gardens, which, despite being midday, was quite birdy. Here we picked up a lot of new species including African Olive Pigeon, Speckled Mousebird, Cape Batis, African Paradise-Flycatcher, Amethyst and Malachite Sunbirds, the attractive little Swee Waxbills, and the secretive Victorin’s Warbler.

We finished off the day birding the Strandfontein Wastewater Treatment Plant, which helped push our day list to an impressive 123 species. Countless species were had including Southern Pochard, Maccoa Duck, Greater Flamingo, African Spoonbill, African Marsh-Harrier, African Fish-Eagle, Black Crane, 16 species of waders (shorebirds) including the continuing rarity - Pectoral Sandpiper, large numbers of Whiskered Terns, Spotted Eagle-Owl, Lesser Swamp and Little Rush Warblers, Levant’s Cisticola, and plenty more.

Day 2: Pelagic off Cape Point

Today the weather co-operated for a successful run at a pelagic off Cape Point. Spend the morning and early afternoon, we had great looks at Black-browed, Shy, Indian Yellow-nosed, and Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatrosses, Southern and Northern Giant Petrels, White-chinned Petrel, Cory’s, Sooty, and Flesh-footed Shearwaters, Brown Skua, and Pomarine Jaeger.

With some remaining daylight hours after the pelagic, we headed back to Strandfontein for some more excellent birding, picking up Spotted Thick-Knee, Grey-headed Gull, Sandwich Tern, and Southern Masked-Weavers amongst others.

Day 3: West Coast National Park

North of Cape Town is one of the most important saltwater lagoons in Africa for birds. Today we focused on birding this area and surrounding strandveld (beach scrub). En-route we made a detour on a dirt road through some agricultural fields picking up Booted Eagle, Blue Crane, Southern Black Korhaan, European Bee-eater, Bokmakierie, Red-capped Lark, Capped Wheatear, Pied Starling, and more.

We continued north to the West Coast National Park gate seeing Black Sparrowhawk along the way. Once inside, we visited two bird hides right on the lagoon. These provided us close views of 19 species of waders (shorebirds) including Chestnut-banded, White-fronted, and Kittlitz’s Plovers, Red Knot, and Bar-tailed Godwits along with South African Shelduck and Lesser Flamingo. Elsewhere in the park we had Common Ostrich, African Rail, Namaqua Dove, White-backed Mousebird, Cardinal Woodpecker, Karoo Lark, Cape Penduline-Tit, Karoo Scrub-Robin, Karoo Lark, Black-headed Canary, and the highlight of the day – a Black Harrier. Eland were also seen, Africa’s largest antelope.

We worked our way back towards our guesthouse in Cape Town making a couple of stops along the way. White-backed Duck, Pied Kingfisher, and Striated Heron were all added – the latter being another local rarity.
Day 4: Agulhas Plains & De Hoop Reserve

Today was mostly a travel day, though we birded along the way. We headed east over the Hottentot Holland mountains into the fertile Agulhas Plains. Soon Cape Crow and Jackal Buzzard became quite prominent in this landscape and were soon followed by Large-billed Lark, Crowned Lapwing and a couple of African Darters sitting on the dams that dot the landscape. It didn't take long before we stumbled on our first Agulhas Long-billed Lark, which is endemic to this small region, as well as the uncommon Cape Grysbok.

We birded the De Hoop Nature Reserve for the rest of the day which provided Denham's Bustard, Diderick Cuckoo, Willow Warbler, White-throated Canary, and Streaky-headed Seedeater as well as Cape Mountain Zebra, Grey Rhebok, Bontebok, Four-striped Grass Mouse, Leopard Tortoise, and Angulate Tortoise.

Day 5: Grootvadersbosch Nature Reserve

With the specials in the bag, we continued north through the Agulhas Plains towards the mountains. Along the way we added Karoo Korhaan, Lesser Honeyguide, Burchell's Coucal, and Red-chested Cuckoo. We eventually arrived at our accommodation near Grootvadersbosch Nature Reserve, checked in, and birded the prime afromontane forest before dark. African Goshawk, Lemon Dove, Knysna Woodpecker, Olive Bushshrike, Grey Cuckooshrike, Blue-mantled Crested-Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Greater Double-collared Sunbird, and Forest Canary were just some of the new additions along with a Black Cuckoo back at our accommodation.

After dinner, we headed outside and had views of African Wood Owl and Fiery-necked Nightjar – not a bad ending to the day!

Day 6: Grootvadersbosch to Ceres

Before breakfast, we had a very successful walk outside the nature reserve on private land. Our main target was Knysna Warbler. Luck was with us as we had excellent up-close views of the highly localized skulker! Among the 40 other species seen on this short walk was Tambourine Dove, a species we didn’t see again.

After a huge hearty breakfast, we found ourselves back in the forest reserve targeting a last couple species before hitting the road. Olive Woodpecker and the iconic Narina Trogon were just a couple of the highlights.

As we worked our way north towards Ceres, our base for the night, we made a few more random stops picking up Red-faced Mousebird, Malachite Kingfisher, Verreaux’s Eagle and Long-crested Eagle. The latter is a vagrant to the Western Cape province and just so happened to be along our route!

Day 7: Tanqua Karoo birding

Today promised a whole host of new species as we left Ceres behind and entered the arid Karoo biome in the interior. From Ceres, we travelled 250km to Calvina along the longest stretch of road in the country between towns.

Right off the bat we added Pririt Batis, Fairy Flycatcher, African Reed-Warbler, Namaqua Prinia, Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, and Mountain Wheatear at our first stop. We continued north and watched as the desert became more sparsely vegetated. Pale Chanting-Goshawks became regular while small bushes played host to Layard’s Tit-Babbler, Sickle-winged and Karoo Chats, and a Southern Anteater Chat.
At a rocky kloof, we targeted one of the most difficult birds to see in South Africa, Cinnamon-breasted Warbler, and were nothing short of successful! Continuing north, new birds never slowed down with the likes of Tractrac Chat, Greater Kestrel, Chat Flycatcher, Pale-winged Starling and a few mammals namely Steenbok, Klipspringer, and Gemsbok (Southern Oryx).

We eventually arrived at the secluded town of Calvinia, checked in, and headed off to a nearby nature reserve for some last-minute birding before dark, though Rufous-eared Warbler was the only new addition.

**Day 8: To Brandvlei for some Bushmanland birding**

An early departure found us in the next town north early morning when the birding is best. Along the way we made a brief stop at a bridge and watched several dozen South African Cliff Swallows flying in and out of the nesting colony. The main interest in this remote outpost are larks and by the time we ended the day, we tallied: Spike-heeled, Karoo Long-billed, Sabota, and Red Larks along with scarce Black Sparrowlark. Not bad! Other highlights for the area were Northern Black Korhaan, Namaqua Sandgrouse, Black-chested Prinia, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Dusky Sunbird, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, numerous Lark-like Buntings, and South African Ground Squirrels.

That night, some of us opted on a night drive down one of the gravel roads. Luck was with us as we encountered a large termite hatch which brought in some interesting things. Several Bat-eared Fox were so occupied with eating each individual termite, that they paid little attention to us and fed only metres away! Other nocturnal highlights were Rufous-cheeked Nightjar and an incredibly large South African Porcupine. No Aardvark unfortunately tonight, but this is a good area for them.

**Day 9: Brandvlei to Clanwilliam**

Having seen most of the specials already, we spent the morning before breakfast targeting Sclater’s Lark – a difficult endemic to find. We positioned ourselves at a promising water trough and waited. One Lark-like Bunting after another tricked us, but patience paid off when a half dozen Sclater’s arrived to drink for a few minutes before moving off again. Success! Other new additions picked up on our way back to breakfast were Ludwig’s Bustard, Lanner Falcon, and African Palm-Swift.

The rest of the day we travelled to Clanwilliam, where we would spend the night. A few stake-out sites produced African Red-eyed Bulbul and Orange River White-eye – both at the very edge of their ranges.

**Day 10 Return to Cape Town & two more endemics in the bag!**

With little left to see in the Cape, today we targeted two more endemics before heading back to Cape Town for our flights to Johannesburg to begin the second leg of the trip. First up was a beautiful valley where Protea Canary is regularly seen. After a lot of time and patience, we finally had a brief sighting of one before we had to hit the road.

Further south we drove the roads west of Vredenburg in search of the Cape Long-billed Lark, which would be the third long-billed lark of the trip. Although it was windy, we went to a stake-out site, walked out of the car, and immediately found a pair working the grass staying low out of the wind. A successful end to the Cape endemic tour!

Ethan Kistler, Tour Leader
BA095 Ultimate Endemics Tour (Eastern leg) 26 Nov - 09 Dec 2017

Tour leader: Joe Grosel

Total number of bird species (East) : 453
Total number of mammal species (East): 48


Mammal Highlights (East): Sloggert's Ice Rat, Honey badger (Ratel), Cape Clawless Otter, Suricate (Meerkat), Banded Mongoose, Cape Fox pups, Spotted Hyena, Leopard, Lion, African Elephant, both White and Black Rhino, African Buffalo, Bushbuck and Nyala, Greater Kudu, Black Wildebeest (highland grasslands).

Day 10: Arrival in Durban

Leaving Cape Town behind them, three of the original Cape group flew to Durban to meet Joe Grosel, their guide for the Eastern endemics section. Here they were joined by two Australians (father & son) and a British birder. Following a good home-cooked meal at the lodge, it was off to bed after a full day of travel.

Day 11: Durban to Underberg

After overnight rain we woke up to a clear morning. A pre-breakfast walk in the lodge grounds and neighbouring suburbia provided our first sightings of Red-capped Robin-chat, White-browed Scrub-Robin, White-eared- and Crested Barbet, Spectacled- and Village Weaver, Black-bellied- and Violet-backed Starling, Southern Black Flycatcher and Dusky Indigobird. Following a fine breakfast we set off for the town of Underberg in the foothills of the Drakensberg mountains. En route, a picnic lunch was taken at the scenic Howick Waterfall. Here we were lucky to enjoy great scope views of an African Crowned Eagle chick on its nest in the valley below the falls. Other noteworthy birds seen here were Peregrine Falcon, African Black Duck, Mountain Wagtail and African Black- and Alpine Swift. Once we settled into our accommodation in Underberg, we set out for some late afternoon birding around the neighbouring town of Himeville. In one of the local gardens we had great looks at Red-throated Wryneck and African Paradise-Flycatcher while a bird feeder attracted the likes of Pin-tailed Whydah, Cape Weaver, Red-billed Quelea, Cape Sparrow and Southern Red Bishop. In the Himeville Nature Reserve we had our first views of displaying Long-tailed Widowbirds along with Grey Crowned Crane, Banded Martin, African Marsh-Harrier, Little Rush Warbler and Levallant’s Cisticola.

Day 12: Scenic Sani Pass Tour to the Lesotho Highlands

Early morning we met our two local guides and headed off in their 4x4 vehicles up the dramatic Sani Pass. A day of high altitude birding in the Drakensberg mountains and Lesotho followed. Our first stop was at a nearby wetland where Spur-winged Goose, African Reed Warbler, White-throated Swallow, Malachite Kingfisher and Fan-tailed Widowbird were quickly spotted before other species such as Greater Honeyguide, Diederik Cuckoo and Cape Canary were notched up in the adjacent shrubbery. Further on towards the foot of Sani Pass Bokmakierie and Pied Starling were seen well, while at our roadside picnic breakfast stop a Red-chested Cuckoo entertained us with good views and prolonged calling. After a short
search for the endemic Bush Blackcap, we were rewarded with stunning views of this attractive species. The ascent up the spectacular Sani Pass included several stops at key points to take in the magnificent views and to seek out the speciality birds. Our knowledgable guides knew where to find these target species and before reaching the higher elevations we had seen the likes of Wailing Cisticola, Long-billed Pipit, Gurney’s Sugarbird, Fan-tailed Grassbird, Cape Rock Thrush, Buff-streaked Chat, Barratt’s Warbler, Malachite Sunbird, Grey-winged Francolin and Yellow Bishop. Near the summit we had decent looks at a family of Drakensberg Rockjumper and small party of Drakensberg Siskin. Soon after passing through the Lesotho border post, we added two excellent mammals to our list in the form of some appealing Sloggett’s Ice Rats and two Cape Fox pups at a roadside cutting. Before and after lunch we walked through the Karoo-like shrubland picking up Cape Bunting, Large-billed Lark, Mountain Pipit, Layard’s Warbler, Yellow Canary, Fairy Flycatcher, Karoo Prinia, Sickle-winged Chat and Sentinel Rock-thrush. Further on into the interior of Lesotho we were taken to a Bearded Vulture nest site and were soon treated to the sight of these majestic creatures soaring above the towering cliffs. This area also produced Ground Woodpecker and African Rock Pipit. After making our way down the pass, we took a detour via several farm roads north of Underberg where we got great scope views of a Wattled Crane family, the perfect way to round off a fabulous day of birding.

Day13: Marutswa Forest then Eshowe (Zululand)

A pre-breakfast drive to Marutswa Forest near the village of Bulwer proved fairly successful with some excellent birding on the forest fringes. A few endemic Cape Parrot were seen flying in and out of the forest while we also had excellent looks at Drakensberg Prinia, African (Dark-capped) Yellow Warbler, Black Cuckoo, African Dusky Flycatcher, Forest Canary, Red-necked Spurfowl, African Crowned Hornbill and a displaying Red-collared Widowbird. The forest interior proved more challenging and it was hard work finding the target species. Eventually we were rewarded with sightings of Narina Trogon and Knysna Turaco. After breakfast back at the B&B there was time to do some birding in the well manicured gardens. Southern (Common) Fiscal, Greater Double-collared and Amethyst Sunbird, Greater Striped Swallow, Olive Thrush and Cape Robin-Chat proved to be fairly common garden residents. Then it was on the road again as we returned to Durban and then up the coast road towards Zululand. En route we saw the following notable species - Long-crested Eagle, Secretarybird, Jackal Buzzard, Grey Crowned Crane, Cape Crow and many Yellow-billed Kite. A lunch stop was taken at Zinkwazi Beach (Zulu for African Fish Eagle) for an hour. Not surprising one our first species here was the iconic African Fish Eagle. Other birds included Woolly-necked Stork, White-breasted Cormorant, Little- and Common Tern and a good variety of shorebirds including Sanderling, Common Ringed and White-fronted Plover, Common Sandpiper and a scarcity in the region in the form of a Lesser Sand Plover. The town of Eshowe and our guesthouse were reached by late afternoon, time to settle into our accommodation and enjoy a tasty dinner before calling it a day.

Day 14: Dlinza Forest Reserve and St Lucia

Following a quick cup of coffee, we headed straight for the nearby Dlinza Forest Reserve. This patch of coastal scarp forest is unique in that it is largely situated within an urban area. The heavily overcast conditions weren’t ideal for forest birding, although a few good birds were seen from the lookout tower at the end of the aerial boardwalk. Here we managed to get Grey Cuckooshrike, African Emerald Cuckoo, Trumpeter Hornbill, Black-backed Puffback, Ashy Flycatcher, Southern Double-collared, Collared and Olive Sunbirds and Square-tailed Drongo. We headed back to the guesthouse for breakfast and then returned to Dlinza for another crack at some of the forest specials. This time the small hide near the visitor’s centre and the forest trails delivered some lovely species such as Chorister Robin-Chat, Lemon Dove, Green Twinspot, Red-backed Mannikin, African Firefinch (for some) and Tambourine Dove. Before leaving the Eshowe area there was time to visit a small farm dam to the north of the town where African Darter, Hottentot Teal and Pygmy Goose were seen. After a full morning’s birding we headed north to the coastal and estuarine town
of St Lucia. En route we stopped off at the Enseleni Nature Reserve for a picnic lunch and ticked African Cuckoo Hawk in the process. Before entering the town of St Lucia we stopped off at the bridge that crosses the estuary. With literally hundreds of Little Swift overhead we spotted several Hippo and Nile Crocodile in the estuary along with Grey-headed Gull, Caspian Tern and a good variety of weavers building nests in the reed beds below. These included African Golden, Southern Brown-throated and Grosbeak Weavers. We checked into our B&B, then set out for a late afternoon walk along the iGgwalagwala trails, traversing the lush coastal dune forests on the outskirts of town. Here we had some excellent birding with notable species being Brown Scrub-Robin, Green Malkoha, Red-capped Robin-Chat, Rudd's Apalis, Terrestrial Brownbul, Livingstone's Turaco, Eastern Nicator, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, and Purple-banded Sunbird. Later we celebrated all the day's lifers with some great seafood in a St Lucia restaurant.

Day 15: iGwalagwala Trails, St Lucia and Bonamanzi Nature Reserve

The day started with a good sighting of a Southern Snake-Eagle soaring over the B&B and yet another very productive walk along the iGgwalagwala trails where we quickly added Grey (Mouse-coloured) Sunbird, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Sombre Greenbul, Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher, African Green Pigeon, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Crested Guineafowl, Grey Waxbill, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Green-backed Camaroptera, Black Saw-wing, and a very obliging Narina Trogon! Then it was back to the B&B for breakfast before heading off for another walk. This time, along the beach and the St Lucia estuary mouth in rather blustery conditions. Noteworthy coastal and marshland birds seen included Yellow-billed Stork, Great Egret, African Spoonbill, Goliath Heron, Kittlitz’s Plover, Pied Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Collared Pratincole, and Little, Common, Caspian and Great Crested Terns. A good variety of migratory shorebirds were also recorded – Ruff, Common Greenshank, Grey Plover, Wood, Marsh, Common and Curlew Sandpipers, Little Stint, and Sanderling. After this bracing walk we set off for the False Bay region of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park and Bonamanzi Nature Reserve, which was reached by early afternoon. Soon after entering the gate the first large mammals were spotted - Impala, Nyala and Common Zebra. Once we were settled into our accommodation a large pan and adjacent woodland were explored on foot. Here we spotted White-faced Whistling Duck, Blacksmith Lapwing, Water Thick-knee, African Jacana, Brown-hooded Kingfisher, Striated Heron, Black Crane and more weaver colonies with Village Weaver being even more vociferous than the rest. An imminent storm then forced us to have an early shower followed by a listing session and dinner.

Day 16: Mkhuze Game Reserve

Our earliest start of the trip so far with a pre-dawn walk into the sand-forest to search for African Broadbill. Our efforts were soon rewarded with at least two males doing their strange little song & dance routine in full view. Other species seen on the forest walk included more Narina Trogons, Forest Weaver, Black-collared Barbet, Southern Black Tit and Bearded Scrub-Robin while Yellow-throated Longclaw was seen in a marshy patch on the way back to the lodge. A couple of Greater Painted Snipe were seen well at the lodge waterhole. After breakfast we departed for the Mkhuze Game Reserve further north in Zululand. Along one of the gravel roads we had great views of Lemon-breasted Canary and Blue Waxbill. On reaching the park a quick walk was taken through the camp ground situated at the entrance gate. Here we spotted White-faced Whistling Duck, Blacksmith Lapwing, Water Thick-knee, African Jacana, Brown-hooded Kingfisher, Striated Heron, Black Crane and more weaver colonies with Village Weaver being even more vociferous than the rest. An imminent storm then forced us to have an early shower followed by a listing session and dinner.

A short walk into the dry sand-forest near the hide parking area produced some real beauties in the form of Neergaard's Sunbird,
Pink-throated Twinspot and the apply-named Gorgeous Bush-Shrike. The late afternoon was spent around Nsumo Pan, a large stretch of shallow water flanked by yellow-barked fever trees. From the viewing platforms we spotted Squacco and Black Heron, African Fish Eagle, Black-crowned Night Heron, Little Egret, White-winged and Whiskered Terns, Osprey, Pink-backed Pelican, African Openbill and many more. The day was rounded off with dinner under a thatched pavilion in the company of a very inquisitive Greater Galago (Bushbaby).

Day 17: Mkhuz to Wakkerstroom

A dawn excursion to the south and east of the camp proved quite successful with a variety of ‘bushveld’ birds and mammals seen. An hour or so spent at the KuMahlala game viewing hide and waterhole gave us Purple-crested Turaco, Crowned Hornbill, Crested Guineafowl, several Nyala, Red Duiker and a troop of Chacma Baboons. After breakfast back at the camp the sun started to bake down so it was decided to return to the Kumasinga Hide. This proved to be an inspired decision as we were thoroughly entertained by the endless stream of large mammals and birds coming in for a drink while a large White Rhino bull wallowed within ten meters of the hide. Golden-breasted Bunting, Red-billed Oxpecker, Violet-backed Starling, Yellow-fronted Canary, Wire-tailed Swallow, Jameson’s Firefinch and White-browed Scrub Robin were just a few of the birds seen from the hide plus hoards of Zebra, Wildebeest, Giraffe, Warthog, Impala and more Nyala. A fitting way to end our visit to Mkhuz!

All too soon we were on a longish road trip to the upland grasslands of Wakkerstroom. Near the settlement of Dirkiesdorp we popped into an area of grassland and fallow cornfields. Here we had our first looks at some of this region’s grassland species such as Southern Ant-eater Chat, African Pipit, Pale-Crowned Cisticola, Amur Falcon, South African Cliff Swallow and our target bird for this spot, the White-bellied Bustard. Closer to Wakkerstroom we had a cracking views of a pair of Denham’s Bustard. Before checking into our guesthouse, we opted to do some late afternoon birding from the bridge that crosses the Wakkerstroom wetland. As usual this great site didn’t disappoint with large numbers of fine birds which included African Purple Swamphen, Malachite Kingfisher, South African Shelduck, Little Rush Warbler, Glossy Ibis, Yellow-billed Duck, African Rail (for some), Purple Heron and African Marsh-Harrier. As a lovely bonus we had two lots of African Clawless Otter swimming close to the bridge. The Bistro provided a great dinner which we completed just before a huge storm broke over the village.

Day 18: Wakkerstroom grassland birding

We were met at our guesthouse by a top local community bird guide, who accompanied us for the day and whose local knowledge would be put to great use in locating the speciality birds. A pre-breakfast drive along some farm roads in the hills south of Wakkerstroom produced Eastern Long-billed Lark, Black-winged Lapwing, Yellow-breasted Pipit, Cape Longclaw, Sentinel Rock Thrush, Wing-snapping Cisticola, Horus Swift, Mountain Wheatear, Yellow-crowned Bishop, Grey-crowned Crane and many Long-tailed Widowbirds. Then it was back for breakfast, after which we were directed to the guide’s favourite local birding spots in the farmlands north of Wakkerstroom. Significant sightings for the late morning excursion included Blue Crane, Southern Bald Ibis, Pink-billed Lark, Blue Korhaan, Eastern Clapper Lark and a rare Botha’s Lark at its nest in a patch of short grassland. Our packed lunch was enjoyed whilst scanning the Fickland Pan for water birds. Apart from hundreds of Red-knobbed Coot, Great Crested Grebe, Maccoa Duck, Cape Shoveler, Southern Pochard, Red-billed Teal and African Spoonbill were also seen. The critically endangered Rudd’s Lark was seen on a walk through the adjacent grassland along with Montagu’s Harrier. Interesting mammals seen in the grasslands of Wakkerstroom included the endemic Black Wildebeest and Blesbok and smaller critters in the form of Yellow Mongoose and several groups of Meerkats (Suricates). Another great dinner in the village rounded off a long, but rewarding, day!
Day 19: Wakkerstroom to Kruger National Park

One more visit to the Wakkerstroom wetland before breakfast gave us Black Sparrowhawk, Purple Heron, African Wattled Lapwing, Giant Kingfisher, Intermediate Egret, Hottentot Teal and Little Bittern. Then it was back on the road and the long journey to the Kruger National Park. Kruger’s Malelane Gate was reached by mid-afternoon and the long journey was soon forgotten as the group patrolled the high-water bridge over the Crocodile River, Kruger’s southern boundary. Water Thick-knee, Reed Cormorant, Grey and Black-headed Heron, Little and Great Egret, Pied and Giant Kingfisher, Lesser Striped Swallow, Three-banded Plover, and White-fronted Bee-eater, along with many Nile Crocodile and Hippo, were just a few of the species that made up our Kruger welcoming party. Once through the gate we had another 70km to get to Skukuza Camp, our destination for the day. This was a good opportunity to get Kruger’s commoner yet eccentric birds out of the way. So the likes of Southern Red-billed- and Yellow-billed-Hornbill, Lilac-breasted and Purple Roller, White-crowned Shrike, Greater Blue-eared and Burchell’s Starling, Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, Magpie Shrike, Natal and Swainson’s Spurfowl, Grey Go-away-bird and Red-crested Korhaan, were spotted along the way. Several White Rhino and Elephant sightings kept the group focused while Greater Kudu, Klipspringer, Bush Duiker and Steenbok were ‘new’ antelope for the mammal list. Impressive raptors such as Martial, Tawny, Wahlberg’s and Lesser Spotted Eagles were possibly rivalled by a large Kori Bustard seen struttling through the savannah. Skukuza was reached just before gate-closing time and once everyone had freshened up in their ‘rondawels’, a great dinner was enjoyed in the camp restaurant.

Day 20: Southern to Central Kruger

We departed for an early drive south-west of Skukuza and were soon rewarded with a great sighting of a Leopard which crossed the road in front of our vehicle. Further along we had two male Lion near the road, a group of lionesses and cubs on a rocky outcrop and a third lion sighting for the drive, this time a lone male lying up at a waterhole. Other mammals of interest seen were the diminutive Smith’s Bush Squirrel, Dwarf and Banded Mongoose and hefty African Buffalo. Birding highlights for this excursion included Little Bee-eater, Common Buttonquail, Senegal Lapwing, Cardinal Woodpecker, Crested Francolin, Mocking Cliff-Chat, Red-headed Weaver, Black-crowned and Brown-crowned Tchagra, African Grey Hornbill, Southern Ground-Hornbill, many Red-backed Shrikes and European Rollers. After breakfast back at Skukuza we packed up and spent some time at the Lake Panic bird hide (so named because of its proximity to the Skukuza Golf Course). This gave the photographers in the group an opportunity to indulge themselves with close-up views of amongst others Black Crake, Pied Kingfisher, Squacco and Striated Heron, and Lesser-masked Weaver.

We continued our journey to Satara via the Sabie River and Lower Sabie, enjoying many interesting sights along the way with Common Scimitarbill, Bateleur, Brown Snake Eagle, African Hawk-Eagle, White-backed Vulture, Saddle-billed Stork and White-crowned Lapwing. Lunch at Lower Sabie camp was followed by a 75km drive to Satara Camp. En-route we had good looks at Secretarybird, Knob-billed Duck and Black-chested Snake-Eagle and from a lofty view point we spotted Common Ostrich and Black Rhino in the open plains below. Satara was reached by evening and during our dinner at the camp restaurant a huge thunderstorm broke out, ruining any chance of going out on a much anticipated night drive.

Day 21: Exit Kruger and on to Magoebaskloof

The day started off early with a drive in rather damp conditions to the Olifants River in the central region of Kruger. The early start paid off as we had two excellent carnivore sightings in the form of Spotted Hyena and Lion. Interesting birds seen on this drive included Pallid Harrier, Wattled Starling, Lappet-faced and Hooded Vulture and Hamerkop. Back at Satara Camp we packed up, had breakfast and went on a short
walk through the camp finding Brown-headed Parrot, Orange-breasted Bush Shrike, Chin-spot Batis, Southern Carmine Bee-eater, African Hoopoe, Woodland Kingfisher, Mourning Collared Dove, Brubru (on a nest), Marico Sunbird and Long-billed Crombec. Then we headed westward where the park was exited via the Orpen Gate. This last section of our Kruger visit produced some nice birds such as Levaillant’s Cuckoo, Dusky Lark, Arrow-marked Babbler, Black-bellied Bustard and many European Rollers flying in from the north. Just after entering Limpopo Province, the Moholoholo Ya Mati Lodge situated on the sub-tropical Blyde River below the northern Drakensberg Escarpment, was the day's lunch stop. One more birding stop was made outside the town of Tzaneen where a roosting Bat Hawk showed well. Magoebaskloof was reached after a very steep ascent in misty conditions. Our hosts at our guesthouse provided a delicious dinner before we retired to our very comfortable suites.

**Day 22: Woodbush Forest to Polokwane Game Reserve**

The day started off with a drive to the nearby Woodbush Forest, a large, pristine Afro-montane forest with a single track running through the middle of it. Despite the drizzly conditions we did pick up some great birds including Orange Ground Thrush, Chorister Robin-Chat, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, African Olive Pigeon, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Southern Double-collared Sunbird, White-starred Robin, Knysna Turaco, Olive Woodpecker as well as both Olive and Black-fronted Bushshrike. Then it was back for breakfast and a quick walk through the gardens during which delightful little Swee Waxbills were seen. Soon we were on the road again heading westward to the dryer Acacia savanna habitats of Polokwane plateau some 50km west of Magoebaskloof. After lunch, we set off for the nearby Polokwane Game Reserve. The afternoon walk through some well-preserved thornveld provided some lovely bird sightings. White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, Kalahari Scrub-Robin, Jacobin Cuckoo, Burnt-necked Eremomela, Spotted Thick-knee, Pearl-Spotted Owlet, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Cape Penduline Tit and Marico Flycatcher to name but a few. After this eventful afternoon we returned to the Lodge for the listing session and dinner.

**Day 23: Polokwane Game Reserve and return to Johannesburg**

The final morning of the tour was again spent in the Polokwane Game Reserve. At the entrance gate Fiscal Flycatcher and Lesser Masked-Weaver were seen before we headed into the interior of the reserve. Blue Wildebeest, Greater Kudu, Tsessebe (Topi), Giraffe, Zebra, Impala and Red Hartebeest were some of the mammal species seen. During the morning visit to the reserve more than a hundred bird species were recorded of which the following are worth a mention Barred Wren-Warbler, Desert Cisticola, Black-chested Prinia, Chestnut-vented Warbler, Great Sparrow, Ashy Tit, Acacia Pied Barbet, Scaly Weaver, Violet-eared and Black-faced Waxbill, Coqui Francolin, Shaft-tailed Whydah and Northern Black Korhaan. Also Short-clawed Lark, an uncommon inhabitant of semi-arid thornveld, is a special in this reserve.

After this incredible morning we reluctantly bid the Polokwane Game Reserve farewell. Taking the N1 route southwards to Johannesburg and finally OR Tambo international airport, we said our final goodbyes. A very successful end to the Eastern endemic South Africa tour!

Joe Grosel, Tour Leader