Overview
On this 23-day tour we targeted all of 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 visited all of South Africa's key habitats: from the fynbos of the Cape to the dry Karoo, Zululand's humid tropical coasts and sand forests, the dramatic Drakensberg and Lesotho mountains, the Wakkerstroom grasslands, and Kruger's raptor and mammal-rich savannas.
Total number of bird species: 524
Mammal species: 57

Highlights: African Penguin, 7 species of storks, all 5 cormorants, 41 species of raptors, all 10 bustards/korhaans, all 3 cranes, 32 species of waders (shorebirds), all 13 doves and pigeons, all 3 turacos, 10 species of cuckoos, Narina Trogon, 3 species of rollers, 7 species of kingfishers, Southern Ground-Hornbill, Cape and Drakensberg Rock-jumpers, 18 species of larks, Knysna Warbler, Bush Blackcap, both sugarbirds, all 11 species of starlings, Orange and Spotted Ground-Thrush, 13 species of sunbirds, 12 species of weavers, Pink-throated Twinspot, Cape and Drakensberg Siskins.

Day 1
What better way to start the tour than tracking down the iconic local endemic, the Cape Rockjumper. Travelling east out of Cape Town, we spent the day birding the mountainous fynbos of the Hottentot Hollands range in search of some of the Cape’s top endemics. Our first stop of the day yielded two groups of Cape Rock-jumpers along with Cape Grassbird, Victorin’s Warbler, Cape Sugarbird, Cape Rock-Thrush, Orange-breasted, Malachite, and Southern Double-collared Sunbirds, Cape Siskin, and a lost Lark-like Buntings well outside of its range.
Next stop was Stoney Point, which hosts a large number of breeding African Penguins. In addition to the penguins, we also had all four coastal species of cormorants including Bank and Crowned. Two African Black Oystercatchers and Cape Girdled Lizards were a nice addition. Before lunch, we did an hour stroll around a small botanical gardens that produced Speckled Mousebird, Ground and Olive Woodpeckers, Cape Batis, African Paradise-Flycatcher, Cape Bulbul, Brimstone Canary, and Cape River Frog to name a few.

After a successful morning and afternoon, we headed back towards Cape Town and finished the day at the famous Strandfontein Sewage Works. Several thousand Greater Flamingos were joined by high numbers of ducks, herons, ibis, and waders (shorebirds) along with Black Crake, Spotted Eagle-Owl, Lesser Swamp and Little Rush Warblers, and African Jacana, a local rarity. In the end, we tallied our first day with 114 species.

**Day 2**

Today we headed out to sea for a Cape Town Pelagics trip off the Cape Peninsula. Unfortunately the weather was not in our favour, but we still observed some great seabirds including Black-browed and Shy Albatross, Northern Giant, Pintado, and White-chinned Petrels, Sooty Shearwater, Cape Gannet, Sabine’s Gull, and Parasitic Jaeger. The mammals didn't disappoint either with excellent sightings of 15 Humpback and a single Bryde's Whale. Back along the coast Cape Fur Seal occupied the rocky islands off the coast.

With a couple hours still left, we stopped at another wetland reserve near the sewage works, which produced our first African Harrier-Hawk, African Marsh-Harrier, Pied Kingfisher, and Pin-tailed Whydah of the trip.

**Day 3**

To the north of Cape Town, the West Coast National Park and the Langebaan Lagoon offers some of the best birding in the Cape! The lagoon hosts some of the best wader (shorebird) counts in the country among other coastal species, while the surrounding rolling hills of strandveld vegetation hosts a number of localized species.

En route to the park, we made a detour down a dirt road to target a few species more reliably found here. Here we had Southern Black Korhaan, White-backed Mousebird, African Hoopoe, European Bee-Eater, Bokmakierie, Red-capped Lark, Southern Ant-eating Chat, Pied Starling, and South Africa's national bird, the Blue Crane.

Our main focus in the park was to visit a series of bird hides conveniently situated around the lagoon and a freshwater pond. Over the course of the day we had South African Shelduck, Greater and Lesser Flamingos, 14 species of waders (shorebirds), and 4 species of terns - Caspian, Common, Little, and Swift all in one group. It was great seeing the size comparison between Caspian and Little!

Moving inland, we continued birding targeting strandveld specialties. Namaqua Dove, Cardinal Woodpecker, Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, Karoo Scrub-Robin, and Karoo Thrush were some of the highlights. Really though, the raptors gave the best show of the day with sightings of Black-shouldered and Yellow-billed Kites, Pale Chanting-Goshawk, African Marsh and Black Harriers, African Fish-Eagle, and Rock Kestrel all being recorded. Angulate Tortoises were also out in full force as well as a single Mole Snake. Again, we finished the day with another century list of 106 species.
Day 4
Leaving Cape Town behind, we headed east entering the fertile Agulhas Plains, a productive area that plays host to several localized endemics. It didn't take long before we stumbled upon our first good sighting of the day - two Secretarybirds feeding not far off the road. Eventually we left the tarred road and spent the next two and a half hours birding a gravel road through a mixture of agricultural fields interlaced with tracks of native habitat. Here we had Jackal Buzzard, countless Blue Cranes, our first Cape Crows, and two endemic larks - Large-billed and Agulhas Long-billed. The latter is restricted to the Agulhas plains.

After lunch, checking into our accommodation, and a quick break, we did an evening drive in search of bustards. By the time we returned, we had excellent views of five Denham's Bustards and an obliging Karoo Korhaan. A great way the end the day! Mammals from today include Small Grey and Yellow Mongoose, Mountain Zebra, Cape Grysbok, Steenbok, Rhebok, and the attractive Bontebok.

Day 5
A pre-breakfast walk down the road from our accommodation provided us with a half dozen Cape Clapper Larks in full display. These endemic larks get their name from their display, which involves flying straight up flapping (clapping) their wings before dropping straight back to the ground. Other highlights on our walk include Acacia Pied Barbet, Amethyst Sunbird, Dideric Cuckoo, and Red-faced Mousebird - our third and final mousebird species.

The rest of the morning was spent at the nearby De Hoop Nature Reserve, a very productive reserve that offers a decent chance of a couple targets - Southern Tchagra and Knysna Woodpecker. The large inland vlei held the typical array of waterbirds including Great Crested Grebe, African Darter, and Caspian Tern. We then searched the milkwood trees eventually having excellent views of both of our targets, the tchagra and woodpecker. A flyover Cape Vulture, from the nearby colony, was an added bonus.

We worked our way north towards Grootvadersbosch where we'd spend the night. En route we picked up a Giant Kingfisher, eight cooperative Grey-winged Francolins, and Springbok. Following dinner we had a pair of African Wood Owls calling right outside our accommodation providing excellent views as Fiery-necked Nightjars called nearby.

Day 6
Much of the morning was spent birding Grootvadersbosch, the furthest western big patch of Afromontane forest in the Western Cape. We had a good number of targets here and checked them off one at a time: Forest Buzzard, Red-chested, Black and Klaas's Cuckoos, Narina Trogon, Olive Bushshrike, Grey Cuckooshrike, Blue-manted Crested-Flycatcher, Terrestrial Brownbul, Knysna and Yellow-throated Woodland Warblers, Greater Double-collared Sunbird and Forest Canary.

After a successful morning in the forest, we drove to Ceres in the afternoon, our base before heading north into the Tanqua Karoo. Prior to dinner we drove up a nearby pass in search of another localized endemic. It didn't take long before we had a Protea Canary right at a stakeout.

Day 7
At sunrise, we found ourselves at a narrow mountain pass, the gateway into the Tanqua Karoo. Along a small stream here we picked up our first endemic of the day - Namaqua
Warbler. There were quite a few birds around including African Reed-Warblers, Speckled and Red-faced Mouebirds, and Acacia Pied Barbet.

We continued north onto the R355 - the longest road in South Africa between settlements. This gravel road is renowned for its excellent Karoo birding and we spent the whole day slowly birding north. At our breakfast stop we picked up the attractive Fairy Flycatcher, Layard's Tit-Babbler, and several Mountain Wheatear, while further north produced Yellow-bellied and Karoo Eremomelas, Karoo Lark, Sickle-winged and Karoo Chats, and Rufous-eared Warbler.

Mid-morning we reached a series of rocky slopes at the base of the Swartruggens Mountains. Our main target here was the localized Cinnamon-breasted Warbler. This secretive warbler that blends in perfectly with the color of the rock sung quite a few times for us from atop the kloof. A few of us were able to get some quick glimpses but nothing could entice it down. Nearby we had African Rail in the vlei, flyby Greater Honeyguide, Long-billed Crombec, and five more Fairy Flycatchers along with a host of other species. Before arriving at our accommodation, we picked up Lanner Falcon, Greater Kestrel, Tractrac Chat, and an impressive five Burchell's Coursers - never a guarantee on tours!

Day 8
Today we headed out before sunrise and continued our way north towards the lark-rich area of Brandvlei. Several bridges along the way hosted large breeding colonies of South African Cliff-Swallows. Before reaching Brandvlei we had Namaqua Sandgrouse, Spike-heeled Lark, Chat Flycatcher, and our main target for the region - the highly localized Red Lark.

For the rest of the day, we worked our way around the outskirts of Brandvlei adding Ludwig's Bustard, Pirit Batis, Karoo Long-billed Lark, Cape Penduline-Tit, Black-chested Prinia, Dusky Sunbird, and White-browed Sparrow-Weaver. This leaves us one main target for tomorrow - Sclater's Lark.

Day 9
With all of the specials in the bag except for Sclater's Lark, this became top priority. Before breakfast we set out to track down this final species. Driving slowly along the gravel road, one spot in particular looked really good so we jumped out and started walking. Within minutes we found Sclater's Larks. The group coined this "Birds Before Breakfast".

The rest of the day was spent traveling back south towards Clanwilliam, our base for the
night. En route we picked up Verreaux’s Eagle, Pale-winged Starling, Cape Glossy-Starling, and Orange River White-eye.

**Day 10**

Today was basically a travel day working our way towards Cape Town and catching our flight to Durban to start off the Eastern half of the tour. That still didn't stop us from seeing more! Heading south we passed a couple productive estuaries which provided our first Goliath and Purple Herons. One of our main focuses of the morning though was Cape Long-billed Lark. After a short while while we stumbled upon one by accident. Someone spotted a Cape Longclaw and in order to get a view, we jumped out of the van and found a lark feeding on the ground nearby. This ended up being our third of four species of endemic Long-billed Larks on this trip.

Before arriving back in Cape Town we made one last stop at a salt works for Chestnut-banded Plover. As usual, we had an excellent number and great views of this striking plover. There were a dozen other species of waders (shorebirds) around including two Red-necked Phalaropes - a vagrant to South Africa. Later in the afternoon we took a short flight to Durban.

**Day 11**

Pulling ourselves away from lush gardens of our accommodation near Durban, which offered a whole new set of birds typical of Eastern South Africa, we headed towards the bird-rich Hela-Hela Pass and montane grasslands for an afternoon and morning of birding before finishing at the base of the Drakensberg Mountains.

Descending the valley towards the Umkomazi River, we made periodical stops to explore the great habitat along the road. Five species of cuckoos and African Black-headed Orioles called from various directions, and loud groups of Green Woodhoopoes flew overhead and danced on nearby bare branches, while Green-backed Camaropteras and White-browed Scrub-Robins called from the thick understory. From the river crossing we had African Pied Wagtail, African Pygmy-Kingfisher, and Southern Black-Tit while an African Crowned Eagle overhead as an added bonus.

Ascending back up the river valley, we made a stop at a high montane grassland, which promised Blue Swallow. This threatened species has been declining rapidly due to habitat destruction in both its wintering and breeding range. Their total adult population size is estimated between 1,000-2,500 individuals and decreasing. It didn't take long before we had two stunning individuals flying past us on a couple occasions as it hunted for insects in the air. Other birds in the grasslands include Wailing Cisticola, African Stonechat, and Cape Longclaw.

We eventually arrived at our accommodation, unpacked the van, and headed back out for a couple hours birding the surrounding rural roads. Quite a few new birds were picked up including White-backed Duck, White Stork, Long-crested Eagle, Dark-capped Yellow Warbler, and the impressive Long-tailed Widowbird.

**Day 12**

Today we headed up the renowned Sani Pass into the Kingdom of Lesotho to target all of the Drakensberg Mountains specialties. By the time we reached the border, less than 14 miles from the bottom of the valley, we already accumulated 75 species in just over three hours. Our tailgate breakfast stop combined with exceptional mountainous views provided

By the time we reached the top, we were surrounded in thick fog so we pushed on and drove into Lesotho where the clouds vanished. Spending the next several hours and lunch birding around Lesotho's highlands, we added seven sightings of Bearded Vulture, Horus Swift, a pair of cooperative Drakensberg Rock-jumpers, Grey Tit, Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Mountain and African Rock Pipits, and the last Drakensberg endemic - the Drakensberg Siskin.

After an excellent day up Sani Pass, we headed back down and headed back towards town adding Rufous-necked Wryneck, Jacobin Cuckoo, and a pair of stakeout Wattled Cranes.

**Day 13**

Sunrise found us at a productive patch of afromontane forest, where we would spend the next several hours targeting forest species. Highlights here included Knysna Turaco, Narina Trogon, Olive Bushshrike, Barratt's Warbler, Lazy Cisticola, White-starred Robin, and the main target of the morning - Orange Ground-Thrush.

Working our way up the coast, we arrived in Eshowe, unpacked, and after lunch headed to the Dlinza Forest. This forest offered more exceptional forest birding providing Trumpeter Hornbill, White-eared Barbet, Yellow-rumped and Red-fronted Tinkerbirds, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, and our second main target of the day - Spotted Ground-Thrush. Natal Red Duiker was the mammal highlight.

**Day 14**

With special permission, we returned to Dlinza Forest before it opened to focus on getting better views on Spotted Ground-Thrush before people walked the trails flushing them. By the end of our loop, we had superb looks at four individuals! Other birds along the trails included African Goshawk, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, and Red-backed Mannikin. From the observation tower we added Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon, Woolly-necked Stork, African Palm Swift, Black-bellied Starling, and excellent scope views of a Green Malkoha sunning itself.
We then headed up the coast towards St Lucia picking up Black-throated Wattle-eye, Nile Crocodile, and Hippo along the way. A trail through dune forest offered a whole new mix of trip birds with the likes of Livingstone’s Turaco, Crowned Hornbill, Rudd’s Apalis, Red-capped Robin-Chat, and Brown Scrub-Robin.

Just before sunrise we ended the day at the iMfolozi River mouth to scan trough roosting flocks of gulls, waders (shorebirds), and herons picking up Pink-backed Pelican and several new shorebirds including Wood and Common Sandpipers along with a vagrant Common Redshank - a good bird for the area!

Day 15
The first half of today was spent birding the various loops and hides at iSimangaliso Wetland Park. This region of South Africa was experiencing a serious drought with most pans being dried up and a good number of hippo carcasses lying around. Although water bird numbers were certainly lower, we still had an excellent morning birding the park. Cape Vidal campground offered Woodward’s Batis, Crested Guineafowl, Brown and Bearded Scrub-Robins while the grasslands to the south held Yellow-throated Longclaw, Croaking Cisticola, Rufous-naped Lark, Little Bee-eater, Black-winged and African Wattled Lapwings, Black-bellied Bustard, Red-billed Oxpecker, Red-headed Weaver and Red-headed Quelea.

Raptors didn’t disappoint either! By the time we left iSimangaliso, we added African Cuckoo-Hawk, Brown Snake-Eagle, and African Hawk-Eagle to the growing trip list. Leaving St Lucia behind for Mkuze Game Reserve, we picked up Southern Brown-throated Weavers on the edge of town.

Mkuze Game Reserve is renowned as one of the top birding destinations in South Africa and even Southern Africa.

With a list boasting over 450 species of birds and excellent mammal diversity, the next couple of days promised excellent birding! We arrived early evening and in our short amount of time before dark, we picked up Lappet-faced Vulture, Bateleur, Tawny Eagle, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Chinspot Batis, White-crested Helmetshrike, Gorgeous Bushshrike, Red-backed Shrike, Eastern Nicator, Wire-tailed Swallow, African Yellow White-eye, Pink-throated Twinspot and Blue Waxbill to name a few.
We finished the day with 18 species of mammals with excellent sightings of Leopard, Banded Mongoose, White Rhino, Giraffe, African Buffalo, Blue Wildebeest and more. Other highlights included Serrated Terrapin and an attractive chameleon.

Day 16
Birding Mkuze the whole day resulted in excellent birding, which yielded over 120 species of birds and 22 mammals. We covered a lot of area within the park visiting a couple hides, sand forest, acacia savannah, woodland, riverine forest, grassland, and pans.

As with St Lucia, the draught has taken its toll on the pans here as well resulting in the lowest water level I have personally seen at Mkuze. Once again a good number of dead Hippos scattered the dry ground while a few alive individuals congregated in the remaining shallow pools. A good number of waterbirds were still present including our first Hottentot Teal, Yellow-billed Stork, African Openbill, and Marsh Sandpiper. Large numbers of White-backed Vultures were present due to the number of dying animals and an Osprey was flying overhead.

In the various forests and savannahs we picked up Crested Francolin, Little Sparrowhawk, Martial Eagle, Grey Go-away-bird, Common Scimitarbill, Orange-breasted Bushshrike, Brubru, Burnt-necked Eremomela, Kurrichane Thrush, Purple-banded and White-bellied Sunbirds, Ashy Flycatcher, and the attractive White-throated Robin-Chat. Summer migrants were well represented as well with the likes of Eurasian Golden Oriole, Willow Warbler and Spotted Flycatcher to name a few.

On the mammal front we had African Elephant, Common Zebra, four White Rhinos, Common Warthog, Giraffe, and a whole host of ungulates species. Most of the group opted for an optional game drive which produced a few nocturnal animals as well namely Greater Galago, Scrub Hare, White-tailed Mongoose, and Small-spotted Genet.

Day 17
First stop this morning was at a hide in the bird-rich sand forest, where we accumulated 45 species in just over an hour and a half. Green Woodhoopoe, Cardinal Woodpecker,
Gorgeous Bushshrike, and a cooperative Pink-throated Twinspot were the highlights. Our next stop was another productive hide which again produced a great count of 44 in just over an hour and a half. By this time of day, many birds were coming into the water's edge for a drink so we had excellent views of new trip birds including White-winged Widowbird, Red-billed Firefinch, and Dusky Indigobird, while a Broad-billed Roller circled overhead and a pair of White-fronted Bee-Eaters hawked for insects over the parking lot.

The afternoon was spent traveling towards Wakkerstroom, our base for the next couple nights. We made great timing, which allowed for a good hour of birding at the local wetland before sunset. Little Bittern, Squacco Heron, and Black-crowned Night-Heron were some of the new additions.

**Day 18**

Today we spent the day birding the endemic-rich Wakkerstroom grasslands, which is an important stop for several of South Africa's highly restricted endemics. We had a local guide join us for the day to further improve our chances ticking off all of our targets and ended the day with nearly 110 species.

Our first targets of the day were White-bellied Korhaan and the near-threatened Blue Korhaan. It didn't take long before we were watching four Blue and two White-bellied. Nearby we picked up Southern Bald Ibis, another South African endemic and listed as vulnerable due to habitat loss and degradation. Larks are the main attraction in this region and throughout the morning we saw Eastern Clapper and Eastern Long-billed Larks, the endangered Botha's Lark, and the vulnerable Rudd's Lark.

Elsewhere we added Swainson's Spurfowl, Red-chested Flufftail, Wing-snapping Cisticola, African Quailfinch, Buffy Pipit, and vulnerable endemic - Yellow-breasted Pipit. Cape Clawless Otter and Meerkat were the mammal highlights.

**Day 19**

A brief visit to the Wakkerstroom wetlands before breakfast produced a Baillon's Crake, an excellent start to the day. Following breakfast we headed towards the famous Kruger National Park arriving in the afternoon for a sit-down lunch. The neighboring grounds hosted Woodland Kingfisher, Crested Barbet, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, a noisy group of Arrow-marked Babblers, and our first of many Greater Blue-eared Starlings.

Heading towards Skukuza Camp, our base for the night, we made several more stops picking up White-faced Duck, Dark Chanting Goshawk, Striped Kingfisher, African Gray and Southern Red-billed Hornbills, Magpie Shrike, Burchell's Starling, Mocking Cliff Chat, Red-billed Buffalo-Weaver, and a family group of six Southern Ground Hornbill.

Being one of the largest and most popular game reserves in Africa, the mammals didn't disappoint either with excellent sightings of all of the usual African species with Spotted Hyena and Sable being added to our mammal list. A night drive added Verreaux's Eagle-Owl and Lesser Galago among others.

**Day 20**

An early start to the day along the Sabie River and a productive hide on a lake offered some new species including Hamerkop, Brown-headed Parrot, and Striated Heron. After breakfast we picked up Red-faced Cisticola around camp before heading north towards the Satara region. En route we added White-headed Vulture, Comb Duck, Saddle-billed Stork, Marabou Stork, Purple Roller, Malachite Kingfisher, and several Wattled Starlings.
following a Buffalo heard.

An evening drive north of camp into the vast open grasslands offered a mix of species typically found in the open including Red-crested Korhaan, Double-banded Sandgrouse, Lesser Grey Shrike, and Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark.

Other highlights for the day include a couple of groups of Lions, Rock Monitor, and Leopard Tortoise.

**Day 21**
Before leaving Kruger for points west, we made the most of the day birding several loops in the central part of the park. Natal Francolin, Black Stork, Hooded Vulture, Black-chested Snake-Eagle, Shikra, Amur Falcon, Kori Bustard, Collared Pratincole, Yellow-billed Oxpecker and Green-winged Pytilia were some of the new trip birds from the morning and afternoon along with a whole host of large mammals.

We then worked our way west to exit the park before the gates closed picking up Steppe Eagle and Pallid Harrier along the way. We headed up into the mountains and settled in at our secluded lodge in the forest and enjoyed an excellent home cooked meal.

**Day 22**
Our second from last day, we spent the morning targeting a few specialties in the mountains before continuing on. Just after sunrise we had excellent views of Cape Parrot at a stakeout location. Further in the forest we picked up two more targets - Black-fronted Bushshrike and Yellow-streaked Greenbul. Our final stop was in the middle of a tree plantation - not an area that you'd expect good birding. Nonetheless, a Bat Hawk pair has bred here for many years now and offered great views this afternoon.

We then descending the mountains and headed west towards Polokwane, which offered Kalahari scrub habitat and a whole new mix of species. Our main target in this region was Short-clawed Lark and after hearing several calling, we finally located on distant bird teed up on a small bush. Nearby we had great views of Pearl-spotted Owlet, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Ashy Tit, Common Whitethroat, Kalahari Scrub-Robin, Marico Flycatcher, Red-headed Finch, Violet-eared Waxbill, Black-faced Waxbill, and Shaft-tailed Whydah. Red Hartebeest and Gemsbok were the new mammals recorded today. Not a bad ending to our last full day!

**Day 23**
We spent our last day cleaning up on some species with Birding Africa leader Joe Grosel who lives there, before heading south towards Johannesburg to catch our flights home. In all we added more than a dozen new trip birds to our trip list. While the more open grassy areas provided Common Buttonquail, Tinkling and Desert Cisticolas, Great Sparrow, and Scaly-feathered Finch, the more dense scrub produced Levaillant’s and African Cuckoos, Bearded Woodpecker, Olive-tree Warbler, Barred Wren-Warbler, Groundscraper Thrush, Marico Sunbird, and Long-tailed Paradise-Whydah.

Following an excellent lunch stop, we organized our bags and headed to the airport after another successful Ultimate Endemics tour!