Birding Africa South Africa Tour: Cape to Kruger

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Tour Report by leader Ethan Kistler

Photos by Ethan Kistler

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Overview
This two-week tour explored a multitude of habitats and landscapes to target South Africa’s unique birdlife and incredible mammal diversity. Starting in the Western Cape, we toured the endemic-rich fynbos, birded a large saltwater lagoon, visited the world famous Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens and went on an exciting deep-sea pelagic. A short flight to Johannesburg brought us to the high altitude grasslands and afromontane forests of the northern Drakensberg escarpment and later ending in the renowned Kruger National Park.

Total number of bird species: 378
Total number of mammal species: 47

Bird Highlights: African Penguin, 4 species of Albatross, 29 species of raptors, Kori Bustard, Blue Crane, Knysna Turaco, Narina Trogon, Cape Rockjumper, 9 species of sunbirds and countless endemics.


Tour Report
Day 1
We began the tour at the world-renowned Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, which offered a great introduction to the birds of the Cape. Noisy groups of Cape White-eyes were joined
by Cape Batis, Olive Woodpecker, Cape Bulbul, Klaas's Cuckoo and Olive Thrush while the flowering proteas played host to hungry Cape Sugarbirds, Southern Double-collared Sunbirds and Malachite Sunbirds. Brimstone and Forest Canaries sung from their favorite perches while Swee Waxbills joined Cape Francolins to feed on the lawns. Overhead African Harrier-Hawk, African Goshawk, Booted Eagle and African Olive-Pigeons were also seen.

Following a great morning at Kirstenbosch we headed for the Strandfontein Sewage Works, one of the finest in the world for birding! Huge numbers of waterbirds congregated here including a couple thousand Greater Flamingos and many species of ducks and geese. Highlights included South African Shelduck, Maccoa Duck, Great White Pelican, African Marsh-Harrier, Black Crake, Water and Spotted Thick-Knees, African Black Oystercatcher, Little Rush and Lesser Swamp Warblers, Cape Longclaw, and a selection of waders (shorebirds).

Day 2

The next morning we were on a Cape Town Pelagics boat trip for eight hours of productive deep-sea pelagic birding. It didn't take long before we found two trawlers, which attracted several thousand birds! Shy, Black-browed, Indian Yellow-nosed and Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatrosses, Southern Giant, Northern Giant, Pintado, and White-chinned Petrels, Great and Sooty Shearwaters, Black-bellied Storm-Petrels, Cape Gannets, Subantarctic Skua, Arctic Terns, and a single Sabine's Gull along with Humpback Whales were some of the highlights. En route back to harbour we had African Penguins and visits to breeding cormorant colonies allowed us to pick up four species of cormorants, several terns, and Cape Fur Seals. We still had a couple hours of daylight left so we made a stop along some alien tree stands where we picked up Lesser Honeyguide, African Paradise-Flycatcher, Pin-tailed Whydah and the locally established Common Chaffinches, which utilize these non-native species.
Day 3
Up the west coast, we stopped along the way to bird some rural agricultural areas where we picked up Southern Black Korhaan, White-backed Mousebird, European Bee-Eater, Bokmakierie, Cape Clapper Lark, Southern Anteating Chat, and 25 Blue Cranes - the national bird of South Africa. The rest of the day was spent birding the productive West Coast National Park. The famous bird hides along the saltwater lagoons provided excellent views of coastal species, such as a dozen species of waders including Kittlitz’s and White-fronted Plovers, five species of tern, African Spoonbills, Greater and Lesser Flamingoes and more, while the surrounding strandveld vegetation produced Karoo Lark, Cape Penduline-Tit, Cape Grassbird, Karoo Scrub-Robin and Yellow Bishop.

Day 4
The following morning we left Cape Town behind and headed for the fertile Agulhas Plains, a mixture of agricultural fields and patches of native habitat. Spending the morning and afternoon traversing this region, we added many exciting new species such as Martial Eagle, Lanner Falcon, Large-billed Lark and the localized Agulhas Long-billed Lark. After lunch we arrived at De Hoop Nature Reserve where we quickly picked up the two main targets for this location - Knysna Woodpecker and Southern Tchagra, along with a host of other species.

Day 5
With the great success the previous evening we spent the next day birding the rest of De Hoop, tallying over a hundred species within the reserve. Highlights include four Grey-winged Francolins, Hamerkop, Cape Vulture, five Denham’s Bustards, and two Cape Siskins building nest in a eucalyptus tree. On the mammal front we had the localized Bontebok, threatened Mountain Zebra, Eland, Rhebok, Yellow Mongoose, and several Southern Right Whales off the coast.

Day 6
Leaving the Agulhas Plains behind, we spent the day working our way back to Cape Town. Our first stop was Harold Porter Botanical Gardens where we picked up Orange-breasted Sunbird, Streaky-headed Seedeeater, and the secretive African Black Duck. Down the road, the African Penguin colony was a popular stop where we were up close and personal with hundreds of penguins at their nesting site. This location also hosts breeding cormorants, which allowed extended views of all four coastal species breeding next to each other for great comparisons.
Our last stop for the day before reaching Cape Town was the local site for Cape Rock-jumper. One of the main targets for visiting birders to South Africa, this endemic is found only in the mountains outside Cape Town. Before long we tallied two groups totalling six individuals. With the main target in the bag, we continued birding picking up Cape Grassbird, Cape Rock-Thrush, Knysna Warbler and Cape Bunting.

**Day 7**

After breakfast we headed to the Cape Town airport for our flight to Johannesburg to continue on our second half of the tour. After a short flight and lunch, we drove towards Dullstroom, our base for the night. These high altitudinal grasslands host a wide array of specialties and the next morning was dedicated to exploring them. By the time we arrived, fog had settled in permitting little visibility. Despite this, we still managed to squeeze in some birding, adding Long-tailed Widowbird and a cooperative African Rail to our list.

**Day 8**

Up until lunch we birded the Dullstroom area. Wing-snapping and Pale-crowned Cisticolas were present in good numbers while Sentinel Rock-Thrushes, Mountain Wheatears, and a Ground Woodpecker all teed up offering great views. A short walk into the grasslands flushed two African Snipe while further down the road produced three endemics - Yellow-breasted Pipit, Red-winged Francolin, and Eastern Long-billed Lark.

En-route to Mount Sheba, our home for the next two nights, we made a stop at a rocky ridge top adding Wailing Cisticola and Buff-streaked Chat. Less than a kilometer from our destination, we were halted by a noisy feeding flock with the likes of Olive Woodpecker, Orange Ground-Thrush, Knysna Turaco, Chorister Robin-Chat, Yellow-throated Woodland-Warbler, and a calling Buff-spotted Flufftail among others adding to the queue. As we assembled for dinner that evening, a nearby African Wood Owl started calling and within minutes we were treated with excellent extended views - it's always a great sighting when you leave the owl in peace without it flushing first!

**Day 9**

An early start before breakfast was an excellent choice, with the highlights being a family group of five Narina Trogons, Blue-mantled Crested-Flycatcher, Orange Ground-Thrush, Olive Bushshrike, Terrestrial Brownbul, Yellow-streaked Greenbul and White-starred Robin. Following breakfast we birded a stretch of forest edge habitat, which provided a different faction of birds such as Drakensberg Prinia, Red-necked Spurfowl, and several species of raptors overhead including Cape Vulture, Black-chested Snake-Eagle, Steppe and Jackal Buzzards.

Following lunch, the gardens surrounding the accommodation held energetic Greater Double-collared Sunbirds joined their more widespread counterpart, the Southern Double-collared Sunbird, while another walk through the forest provided Grey Cuckoooshrike, more good views of Knysna Turaco, and a large family group of locally-threatened Samango Monkeys.
Day 10
Descending Mount Sheba, picking up Barratt’s Warbler along the way, we headed east towards Kruger National Park, where we’d stay the next and final four nights. Kruger National Park is world-renowned as one of the most famous game reserves in Africa, hosting great numbers of birds and mammals. Once inside we immediately started adding a couple dozen new species including Magpie Shrikes, Lilac-breasted and Purple Rollers, several species of francolins and hornbills, Bateleur, Red-crested Korhaan, Arrow-marked Babblers, and Blue Waxbill as well as the expected mammals such as Plains Zebra, Giraffe, Impala, Elephant and more. After lunch at Satara camp, we birded the open savanna to the north picking up key species such as Kori Bustard and Southern Ground-Hornbill along with White-winged Widowbirds and White Rhinos.

Back at camp we added African Scops-Owl, Bearded Woodpecker, and at dusk roughly 75 Double-banded Sandgrouse coming in to drink at the waterhole.

Day 11
With an early start, we left Satara right when the gates opened with packed breakfasts in hand. We didn’t want to waste time rushing back to eat and this allowed us to spend the maximum time birding and mammal viewing during the prime early hours. Soon after leaving camp we already started seeing new birds such as Woolly-necked Stork, Yellow-billed Oxpecker, and a Verreaux’s Eagle-Owl at a nest with a young one peaking out. Continuing our loop we added Lappet-faced Vulture, Brown-headed Parrot, Southern Black-Tit, and an attractive pair of Cut-throat Finches.

We ate breakfast at a picnic site, which allowed us to alight from our van and bird with a view. This area was very productive and as we ate, we had excellent sightings of Common Scimitarbill, Wire-tailed Swallow, Violet-backed Starling, African Pied Wagtail, Spectacled Weaver, Green-winged Pytilia and a nesting Mocking Cliff-Chat pair. Following breakfast, we continued our morning loop back towards Satara seeing Black-crowned and Brown-
crowned Tchagras, Red-billed Firefinches, Tawny Eagle, and a stunning Cheetah!

Back at camp we continued birding during. As with any camp, birds are quite fond of the grassy lawns and easy food and are therefore generally tame. Here we had Little Sparrowhawk, African Green-Pigeon, Dideric Cuckoo, Green Wood-Hoopoe, Crested and Black-collared Barbets, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Grey-headed Bushshrike, and Red-billed Buffalo-Weavers among others. Before dinner and our night drive, another loop to the north produced Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Larks and two Secretarybirds before returning for early dinner.

Our two hour night drive was very successful, yielding a Leopard, Lions just metres away, African Civet, Fiery-necked Nightjar, and Pearl-spotted Owlet to name a few.

Day 12
This morning we left Satara behind, but not before adding Levaillant’s Cuckoo to our trip list. For much of the morning we slowly traveled into the southern region of Kruger towards Skukuza where we’d spend the last two nights. As usual, it didn’t take long before we started having great sightings. We arrived at a dam right in time before a pack of African Wild Dogs disappear in the shrub behind...perfect timing! Birds seen here included a Goliath Heron and a good number of Wood Sandpipers, Three-banded Plovers, Little Stints, and a Common Sandpiper. Continuing we had Brown Snake-Eagle, a very cooperative African Fish-Eagle, Retz’s Helmetshrike, Grey Tit-Flycatcher and Red-headed Weaver before arriving at our breakfast picnic site.

After breakfast we continued the last stretch before arriving to Skukuza, picking up Saddle-billed Storks, Hooded Vulture, Coqui Francolin, African Hawk-Eagle, Purple-crested Turaco, Crowned Hornbill, White-fronted Bee-Eater, and Southern Black-Flycatcher along with more Lions.

The camp itself was active as usual, with the likes of African Palm-Swift, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Green-backed Camaroptera, Ashy Flycatcher, Bearded Scrub-Robin, and Scarlet-chested Sunbird.

Day 13
Before breakfast we did a short loop along the Sabie River riverine forests. Black Cuckoo, Red-faced Cisticola, Marabou Stork, African Cuckoo and Yellow-throated Petronia gave excellent views. Following breakfast we visited a bird hide situated on a very productive lake where we enjoyed an hour of close views and good photography. Some of the bird highlights included Squacco Heron, Striated Heron, African Jacana, three species of kingfishers, Gorgeous Bushshrike, Kurrichane Thrush, Village Weaver and a Common
Warthog barely miss the clinch of a Nile Crocodile. Before lunch we birded a forested area on foot where we had Purple Heron, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, Lesser Honeyguide, Red-capped Robin-Chat and Collared Sunbird.

After an afternoon break, we did another productive loop returning back to the camp gate just before it closed. Highlights along this route included White-throated Robin-Chat, Golden-breasted Bunting and Bennett's Woodpecker.

Day 14
Although this was our final day, we still left the camp’s gate right when it opened in order to make the most of our final morning in Kruger before catching our flights in Johannesburg. We headed towards Pretoriuskop where we would have breakfast, birding along the way. This stretch of road was pretty quiet but after breakfast the camp made up for that. A dozen Purple-crested Turacos teed up on a tree near a Brown-Snake-Eagle while a Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird called nearby. The flowering trees around camp hosted several dozen sunbirds - mainly Scarlet-chested and White-bellied. Other interesting sightings included Red-headed Weaver, four species of starlings, Willow Warbler, Red-chested Cuckoo and Brown-headed Parrots, which were feeding on the fruiting trees.

Following breakfast we did our one last short loop nearby, which continued to add more species to our trip list such as Croaking Cisticola and our ninth francolin - Shelley's Francolin. Following a successful four days in Kruger National Park, we sadly headed back towards the airport with a tasty lunch en route.