

South Africa: Birding & Wildlife Safari

Sept. 16 - 30, 2025 | Trip Report by Bryan Shirley



NJ Guide Bryan Shirley & excellent local guides Dalton & Nick with participants: Carol, Kate, Mark, George, Kay, Kate, Sheila, Peter, Deanna, Lorretta, & Marlo



Tues., Sept. 16: Introductions and Pre-tour Dinner

Finally, our long-awaited tour started this evening! We all met up for dinner and a presentation from our local guides, Dalton and Nick, at our guest house. The presentation was packed full of information about the areas we would be visiting, and we were all the more excited for our tour. The staff at the guesthouse prepared a wonderful dinner for us and it was fun to get to know the group.

Wed., Sept. 17: West Coast National Park

We were all excited to get out and get birding today! We had a great breakfast at our guesthouse and then hit the road heading west out of Cape Town. Our first stop was a spot along the ocean called Hol Bay. We got a wonderful look at a Bar-throated Apalis as soon as we got out of the vans. Dalton explained about the unique habitat that is along the coast here and then we walked through the dunes to where we could see the ocean. A couple of African Oystercatchers flew past, showing off their bright orange bills in the morning sunlight, and a



White-fronted Plover was feeding on the sand nearby. A little further west we took a road through some agricultural areas hoping for a few specialties. One of our main targets here was the endemic Black Bustard (or Southern Black Korhaan according to Dalton and Nick). We ended up seeing a few, usually either far away or briefly, although we did have one relatively close that all we could see was its head above the grass. Another highlight here was a gorgeous pair of Blue Cranes. They were on the crest of a small hill and looked so elegant as they strutted around – a great choice for the national bird of South Africa!

We reached our main destination for the day, West Coast National Park, and started seeing lots of mammals – nice herds of Bontebok and Mountain Zebra. One of the specialty birds of the park is the Black Harrier. They are an endangered species with only about 1500 remaining and are only found along the west coast of South Africa, so we were pretty ecstatic to see a few of them today. We had a picnic lunch overlooking a picturesque bay. It is the location of human footprints over 100,000 years old known as Eve's Footprints – the oldest human footprints ever discovered. As if the Black Harrier and Eve's Footprints weren't enough, West Coast NP is also famous for wildflowers and we time our tour so we can see them here. The flowers peaked a bit early this year and we were about a week late, but it was still impressive to see the zebras and other wildlife walking around in a carpet of colorful flowers.

Back in Cape Town we enjoyed dinner at a nearby Italian restaurant and had fun doing our first checklist of the trip – lots of lifers for everyone today!

Thurs, Sept. 18: Pelagic Trip | 6 types of Albatross!

Today was a very exciting day. We left early and drove about an hour to the picturesque city on the coast called Simonstown (or Simon's Town). Upon arrival we got ready for our boat trip and had a nice boxed breakfast on the picnic tables on the wharf. Before long we were aboard our boats and working our way along the coast of False Bay toward the Cape of Good Hope. We were anxious to get out into the open ocean for the truly pelagic birds, but we stopped a few times for notable species like a group of African Penguins. On the ride out, we were going into the current and it was a bit rough, but the promise of albatross kept us moving. The captain had a report of a trawler and he knew it would be surrounded by hundreds of birds. When we finally reached the trawler, the ride out was quickly forgotten – there were hundreds if not thousands of seabirds picking up the fish scraps left by the trawler. Pintado Petrels (formerly called Cape Petrels) were everywhere, as were White-



chinned Petrels. White-capped (Shy) and Black-Browed Albatross numbered in the hundreds! As we got used to the more common species, we started to pick out the odd species mixed in, such as both Atlantic and Yellow-nosed Albatross. The giant Northern and Southern Royal Albatross were both in the area and much to our delight, they would fly past every once in a while. We also had both Northern and Southern Giant-Petrels and even had the rare white morph as well. For us traveling from North America, it was quite special to be able to see these remarkable denizens of the southern oceans, but also the sheer numbers of birds made for an unforgettable experience.

Back in False Bay we went by a few rocky islands to look at the Bank Cormorants. They are endemic to the coastline of Southern Africa and numbers have been in serious decline in recent years. Another island was covered with the endemic Cape Fur Seal.

Our guest house had made arrangements for a braai, a South African style barbecue. Dalton grilled the meats and the staff prepared a delicious mix of side dishes. It was the perfect ending to our day!

Fri., Sept. 19: Kirstenbosch Gardens | Cape Town Wetlands

After breakfast and watching the garden feeders for a bit, we drove about 30 minutes to the world-famous Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens. Covering 528 hectares on the slopes of Cape Town's Table Mountain, Kirstenbosch was started in 1913 to conserve and showcase the spectacular flora of southern Africa. Our guide, Dalton, is like a walking encyclopedia and gave us a ton of info about the array of plants here – not just the names, but how and why certain plants evolved the way they did, who pollinates what, and other interesting facts. The gardens are wonderful birding as well. The South African endemic family Promeropidae, the Sugarbirds, has 2 species and both have a very limited distribution. Cape Sugarbird is limited to the Fynbos habitat around the cape and specifically likes to feed on proteas. In the Fynbos section of the gardens today we saw several of this exciting species, and it was great for photographers since they would always be perched on some kind of beautiful protea flower! Southern Double-collared Sunbird was abundant and kept us busy trying to get the perfect photos of this gorgeous bird. Cape Spurfowl wandered around the gardens and a pair of Spotted Eagle-Owls were nesting, just arm's length from the path. An African Paradise-Flycatcher was another exciting find here. We enjoyed the gardens until about lunchtime, then while everyone checked out the gift



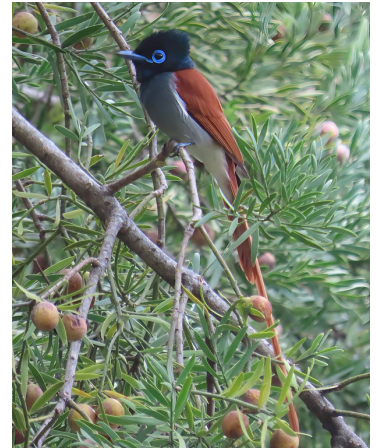
shop, the guides prepared our picnic lunches. We sat on the grass and ate surrounded by flowers and Egyptian Geese and Helmeted Guineafowl feeding nearby.

After lunch we went to visit some of the wetlands around Cape Town. We started at Rondevlei Nature Reserve. We went to several bird hides that overlooked the marsh. Red-billed Duck and Cape Shoveler were in front of one of the hides and several African Darters were here as well. Southern Masked-Weavers were busy building their nests in the reed beds. A pair of Lesser Swamp Warblers in the reeds eventually popped up and gave great views. Levillant's Cisticola posed for photos just outside one of the blinds. We heard several Little Rush Warblers and after playing the call in several locations finally got a great look of it as well.

Sat., Sept. 20: Cape Rockjumper | De Hoop Nature Reserve

After another nice breakfast, we made our way out of the city and headed to the east side of False Bay. It is bordered on the east side by an impressive mountain range known as the Kogelberg (formerly called the Hottentot Mtns.) and Rooi-Els, a small vacation-home community between the mountains and the sea. Our goal here was the Cape Rockjumper. There are 2 species of Rockjumpers, both are endemic to South Africa. In fact, it is one of the two families endemic to South Africa, the Chaetopae. Of course, this was a big target for most of our group. Rooi-Els is the best-known location for this species, but even here they can be tricky because they spend most of their time on the ground on rocky hillsides and occasionally jump up on the boulders. When we arrived, we started scanning the hillsides. While we were looking for the Rockjumper, we had a few other good birds like Yellow Bishop, and both Cape and Sentinel Rock Thrushes. Before too long we heard the Rockjumper calling far up the ridge and a few of us got brief looks before it would drop back into the scrub. Eventually, the pair of Rockjumpers worked their way down the slope toward us and then popped up onto some large boulders, giving us great views of them! On the way back, a Booted Eagle showed off its gorgeous black and white underwing pattern (reminded us of the pattern of a Swainson's Hawk).

Our next stop was the Stony Point Penguin Colony where we were treated to nice looks of African Penguins. According to Dalton and Nick, the numbers have really plummeted in the last few years and they are worried about this species' survival here. For lunch today we had another picnic at Harold Porter Botanical Gardens and then took a walk around the gardens, enjoying the interesting flora and variety of birds. We had nice looks at Cape Sugarbird again (the other South African endemic family), Streaky-headed Seedeater, Cape Batis, and more. Possibly the best bird here was a Klaas's Cuckoo – it was unbelievable how bright its emerald color was!



After leaving the botanical gardens we had a two-hour drive to reach De Hoop Nature Reserve, but made a few stops for good birds like a small bunch of Denham's Bustards. While looking at the bustards we had a cell phone fall out the door of the van and we didn't realize it until about 10 minutes later. The crisis was averted as miraculously Nick found the phone on the side of the highway! Upon our arrival at De Hoop, we were treated to very close looks at a Bontebok and an Eland (largest antelope) only a few feet from the road and lots of Ostriches as well.

Our restaurant this evening was cozy and warm with a fire for our dinner and bird list, then we went to bed excited to explore the area in depth tomorrow.

Sun., Sept. 21: De Hoop Nature Reserve | Denham's Bustard Display

We started the day with an optional pre-breakfast walk around our lodge and the adjacent campground. There were lots of birds, including two endemic Bushshrikes, Southern Boubou and Southern Tchagra in the campground. Overlooking the lake, we had our first African Fish-Eagles (would see them much better in Kruger). Sorting through the swifts we were able to ID 4 species – African, Little, White-rumped, and Horus.

After breakfast we took a drive outside of the reserve and explored the nearby farmlands. One big surprise was that we got stunning views of Common Quail! We heard one calling and, as is normally the case, we weren't able to coax it into view. But then, a bit further down the road, we heard another and this time it ran away from the vehicle, then stopped in plain view! After lunch and some downtime, we took a short drive to the coast. It was very cold and windy, but we managed to find a very distant Southern Right Whale before we retreated back to the warmth of the vans. As we drove back toward the lodge, we had a remarkable Denham's Bustard displaying on a ridgetop. It was puffed up like a beach ball made of feathers with a head poking out of the top. It was a truly amazing sighting.

Mon., Sept. 22: Blue Cranes | Back to Cape Town

We started the day with another nice walk around the lodge before breakfast. It was mostly the same species as the previous morning, but nice to see them all again. We spent a bit more time focused on the swifts today and had the same species as yesterday, plus a few African Black Swifts mixed in. We had a long drive today, but were not really in a big hurry to leave this wonderful location. After birding, we had another wonderful



breakfast, a bit of free time to finish packing, and have one last look around. A Hoopoe made a last-minute appearance for several of us.

As we worked our way back towards Cape Town, we made several stops, one of which was for a flock of nearly 20 Blue Cranes not far from the road. We had seen them multiple times so far, but today they were close enough to allow us to get stunning photos and enjoy watching their interactions at a closer distance. It is no wonder they are the National Bird of South Africa – such a beautiful and graceful bird! Another bird that we all were hoping for better looks today was Southern Red Bishop, so we stopped at a small marshy area where they had a breeding colony and spent a bit of time enjoying them before carrying on.

After a picnic lunch we made another stop to look for some Karoo specialties since our road was near the edge of the dry Karoo habitat that covers a large portion of central South Africa. It was mid-day and a bit hot, so the birds were not very active, but we did see several Pale Chanting-Goshawks – one of our targets here. Back at our guesthouse the lovely staff had prepared another great dinner for us to enjoy for our last night in Cape Town.

Tues., Sept. 23: Flight to Johannesburg | Dullstroom Nature Reserve

Today was mostly a travel day but we still managed to get a few birds. We said goodbye to Cathy and the gang at our guesthouse after another wonderful breakfast and made the short drive to the Cape Town airport for our morning flight to Johannesburg. Our flight went as scheduled and we arrived in Johannesburg, picked up our rental vans, and started the drive east out of the city. We made one stop for a quick lunch and then continued on to the picturesque village of Dullstroom. We were all excited to get in some birding in this new area, so we quickly dropped our gear at our lodging and then drove a couple of minutes to Dullstroom Nature Reserve. We only had about an hour until sunset so we just did a short walk part of the way around the lake. The grassy areas and rocky hillside were quite productive. We saw our first endemic Buff-streaked Chats and had nice looks at both Wing-snapping and Wailing Cisticolas. A Nicholson's Pipit kept us busy debating the finer points of pipit ID and a Black Crake was sneaking along the shoreline of the lake. Dinner tonight was at the Dullstroom Inn – an



old, English style pub complete with a resident ghost (we dipped on the ghost though) and a cozy fireplace with a fire that has been burning for nearly 50 years.

Wed., Sept. 24: Verloren Valei | Kruger NP Leopards!

We started the day with a walk around our lodging. We were hoping for thrushes and it didn't take long – just outside of our lodging we had Kurrichane and Karoo Thrushes feeding along the roadside. We also got a Grosbeak Weaver this morning – the only one of our trip. Breakfast was pancakes, French toast, fresh fruit, eggs, and wonderful coffee at the historic Rose Cottage. From there we birded the Verloren Valei Birding Route. We were off to a good start with a Long-crested Eagle perched just above the birding route sign, which featured a Long-crested Eagle! The dirt road wound up through some small mountains and into a dry grassland. One of the highlights of the day (in fact one of the birds of the trip for a few people) was a Red-throated Wryneck perched on a fencepost next to the road. Gurney's Sugarbird was not easy, but after working so hard to see one that was half way up the mountain, we had another one perch much closer giving us all wonderful views. Along with the Cape Sugarbird in Cape Town, we now had both species of this Protea-loving family endemic to South Africa.

We had a lunch at a restaurant whose interior could best be described as an African attempt at American Indian décor. The food was quite good though and then we continued on to Kruger National Park. We arrived at Kruger NP Phabeni Gate at about 4 PM and met up with our two safari guides. We were all excited to switch to the safari jeeps and start our adventure in one of the premier safari parks in Africa. We were not disappointed! As soon as we entered, we had birds galore welcome us to the park: Ostrich, Black-bellied Bustard, African Palm Swift, Lilac-breasted Roller, and too many others to name! We were greeted by more than birds though – we were only a few minutes into Kruger when we spotted our first Leopard laying on some rocks in a dry river bed. Eventually it moved into the brush so we moved too. Amazingly we had another Leopard later sneaking along though the grass! What a great introduction to Kruger! We arrived at Skukuza Camp a few minutes after the 6 PM curfew, excited to be in this amazing national park!



Thurs., Sept. 25: Skukuza Camp & Kruger National Park

The entire trip we were talking about how hot it would be in Kruger – last week’s temps were nearly 100 degrees every day. A cold front arrived overnight and this morning was cold and raining! We left Skukuza a bit after 6am, bundled up in our warm weather gear again. A few minutes from Satara Camp we had our first great sighting of the day – Lions! A few males were walking parallel to the road so we followed them for a bit until they moved too far off the road to see anymore. From there we started down the road that followed the Sabie River. The rain was intermittent as the clouds slowly started to break, but the animals didn’t seem to mind.

Giraffe, Cape Buffalo, Elephant, and loads of Impala kept us busy. A gorgeous Nyala fed right alongside us. This species is endemic to Southern Africa and was a favorite mammal for some of the group. At the bridge over the Sabie River, we had lots of great birds including Trumpeter Hornbills & Brown-headed Parrots. A Hamerkop flew past and a Malachite Kingfisher shot by like a tiny turquoise dart.

We stopped for brunch at Lower Sabie Camp. Around the camp there were Vervet Monkeys eyeing the picnic tables. Hippos lounged in the Sabie River, giving us the perfect backdrop while we ate. The trees above us were full of Greater Blue-eared Starlings and a few Retz’s Helmetshrikes as well! The drive back to Skukuza was great as well. The rain had finally stopped completely and the sun was out. One of the best sightings of the day was a pair of Honey Badgers (Ratel) that were looking for food and playing a few feet from the road. Normally only seen after dark and hard to see well, we were very lucky to be able to not only see them while still light, but we were able to watch them for several minutes before we carried on to Skukuza.

Fri., Sept. 26: Skukuza Camp to Satara Camp | Night Drive Lions

We woke up excited for another day in Kruger! We started the day with a walk around the camp. Skukuza camp is huge, like a small city, and since it is fenced in, we can safely walk and bird. The morning started well when, just before our meeting time, Bryan spotted two Purple-crested Turacos behind his cabin. Luckily, they stayed there until the group met, and they were joined by a pair of Black-collared Barbets in the same tree. We walked down to the river and were happy to find a pair of African Black Ducks. We got lots of passerine species – mostly birds that we had seen from the safari jeeps, but easier to see well now that we were on foot.



We had a nice breakfast before checking out. Today we were working our way north to Satara Camp for the next two nights. Our first stop was at a picnic area where we got into a nice kettle of birds including Terrestrial Brownbul. Along the drive north we passed an area where vultures come to drink in the river. There were probably close to a hundred White-backed Vultures there and we were able to pick out one White-headed, one Lappet-faced, and two Cape Griffons as well. We had another lion sighting today when a female and a sub-adult lion appeared along the road.

At our lunch stop we sorted through the abundant Ring-necked Doves and picked out a Mourning Collared-Dove, the only one of the trip. We had great views of Southern Ground-Hornbills – even close enough to see the long eyelashes as they fed a few feet from us. We also had one of largest flying birds – Kori Bustard. Lots of mammals along the way too. We had a herd of about 150 Cape Buffalo, a lot of Giraffes and more elephants than on previous days. We were trying to get to Satara by 4 PM because we had a busy evening planned, but it is basically impossible to get anywhere as planned in Kruger – there is too much to see! Despite that, we arrived fairly on schedule, which gave us time to check in and get settled in our rooms before an early dinner.

As soon as we finished dinner we left for our night drive. We were in a large open vehicle, probably about 25 people total. We spotted a few Scrub Hares hopping along the road and had a brief view of a distant Common Genet. The most exciting sighting was three lions that had killed something (buffalo?) and were feasting. It was a nice ending to the night drive and a wonderful day!

Sat., Sept. 27: Satara Safari Drive

We left early again today in the safari vehicles, beginning with some good sightings of Spotted Hyena. Several adults and at least one cub were milling around the roadside. Today, we were driving east toward Mozambique. The habitat appeared a bit more open than the areas we had been in up until now. That gave us opportunities to see some different bird species – more larks and grassland birds. We made our way east until we were near the border and stopped for a late breakfast at N'wanetsi picnic area. While we ate, we watched a few lions laying in the brush a few hundred yards away. A small herd of Giraffes coming toward the water near the picnic area could probably smell the lions, causing a standoff that was still going on when we finally left. The birding was good around the picnic area too – we had our only Wattled Starlings of the trip fly in and land by us while we ate. At the view point above the picnic area, we could see African Jacana, Striated Heron, and other



waterbirds below us in the river and a Marabou Stork and White-backed Vultures soared overhead (maybe in Mozambique?). For the drive back to Satara, we took a dirt road that followed a small river across the grasslands. Many large mammals were along the river – loads of elephants, giraffes, and many herds of Zebras. We had a bit of downtime in the afternoon, then went on a short drive to Nsemani Dam for the evening. There was a lot of activity at the water. A herd of about 40 elephants came in to drink and were stunning in the evening light. Both Saddle-billed and Marabou Stork were present and we counted 13 Water Thick-Knee along the shoreline. A Pearl-spotted Owlet started calling and it didn't take long for us to find it. It was an awesome spot to spend the evening and the perfect ending to another great day.

Sun., Sept. 28: Goodbye to Kruger | Welcome to Mount Sheba

We started our last day at Kruger with a walk around the camp. As in all the camps thus far, the birding was great. By this point we had seen most of the possible species, but it was nice to be able to walk around as the birds were much easier to photograph than when we'd see them from the vehicles. We had good numbers of Common Waxbill, Southern Cordonbleu, Green-winged Pytilia, and Firefinches. We also had our best looks of the trip at Brubru.

After breakfast we took our last safari drive toward the Orpen Gate where we would leave the park. We enjoyed our last elephants, zebras, giraffes, and all the other things that make Kruger so wonderful. We even had a few more lions – that made it four days in a row! Kruger is a special place and our time here was wonderful. At Orpen Gate we used the bathrooms and said goodbye to our safari guides, then had a picnic with a very tame Yellow-billed Hornbill watching and hoping for a snack.

The drive from Kruger climbed back up the escarpment through farmland and plantations until we reached Mt. Sheba. It was misty and drizzling, but we thought we should make the best of it since the forecast for the next day was even worse. We did a walk around the property, trying to find anything in the mist. Our efforts paid off as we had great looks at a Narina Trogon and a Yellow-throated Woodland-Warbler. Dinner was a buffet and afterwards we sat around the warm, cozy fire to do our checklist for the day.



Mon., Sept. 29: Mt. Sheba: Turacos in the rain

Unfortunately, the weather report didn't lie. It had rained most of the night, but when we met in the morning it was foggy with a bit of drizzle, but not so bad that we couldn't bird. We walked around the gardens and forest edges working hard to find birds in the mist, slowly picking up a few. We had a few Knysna Turaco sightings, but they were quite shy and the fog didn't help. Every once in a while, somebody in the group would gasp when they finally got a good view, but we struggled to get satisfying looks for everyone. Olive Bushshrikes were much more cooperative.

After breakfast the rain picked up again, so we took this opportunity to catch up on photos, trip journals, and relax. If you have to be rained out, Mt. Sheba is an ok place – the rooms are comfortable and I think that all of us enjoyed a nice fire in our rooms while we relaxed. Some nice birds were seen from the balconies during the rain as well. One room had a Turaco hanging out just off the balcony and another photographed a Black Cuckooshrike from the verandah.

In the afternoon the rain slowed enough that we could bird some more, so we tried walking up the road into the forest. We heard Narina Trogon calling and waited for an Olive Woodpecker to show at a nest sight, but apparently, they were taking advantage of the break in the rain and out feeding somewhere. Before dinner we met in the lounge and sat around the fire to do our bird list for the day, then Nick and Dalton gave us a recap of the tour. It seemed like so long ago that we were in Cape Town. It was nice to talk about each day and refresh our memories.

Tues., Sept. 30: Last Minute Lifers! | Back to Jo'burg

Today was our last day, but before we headed to the airport, we had unfinished business with some birds at Mt. Sheba! It was still a bit foggy and misty this morning, but definitely improved overnight. We did a pre-breakfast walk around the gardens and along the forest trail hoping to pick up the few birds we were missing and get better looks at some birds from yesterday. The Knysna Turaco performed well this morning – we had multiple sightings and much better views than yesterday. What a great bird! The explosion of red wings when they take flight is truly stunning. We had a great view of a Black Cuckooshrike, which was nice since only Marlo had it



yesterday. A couple members of the group made the trek back down to the river and were rewarded with brief views of a Mountain Wagtail feeding along the river. We worked to get good looks at Samango (Blue) Monkeys, then had them sauntering along on the grass when we went back for breakfast!

One bird we were still missing was the Olive Woodpecker. While we were loading up the vans and getting ready to depart, Dalton heard one call and then it flew in and landed in the tree just above us! We all got wonderful views of it. While we were watching it, we had a flurry of bird activity all around us – it was as if all the birds were coming to say goodbye. That made it hard to leave, but eventually we loaded up in the vehicles and started our drive.

In the open areas along the road from the lodge, we were treated to a fly-by of two Southern Bald Ibis. While we were watching them, a Drakensberg Prinia called so we all jumped out and found it. A bit later we had another Bald Ibis collecting nesting material and carrying it up into a small cave on the nearby cliff. We picked up one more new bird on the drive when Dalton spotted a couple of Southern Anteater-Chats on the roadside. Lunch was at a restaurant with a large pasture full of a variety of animals including two White Rhinos. Of course, we'd hoped to see them in the wild, but it was still fun to watch them here. After lunch we sat outside watching the animals (and a flock of Red-billed Quelea) and went through our favorite birds, animals, and experiences of the trip. The Blue Crane was voted the best bird with Cape Sugarbird coming in second. Our pair of Honey Badgers was voted the best mammal, with the Leopard and Wild Cat also getting lots of votes. The best experience was hard to choose because it was all so amazing, but the pelagic trip was probably the most notable with several people mentioning the safari drives around Kruger as the highlight as well. Going through all our trip highlights was the perfect way to wrap up our incredible trip.

Photos: Group Photo (Bryan Shirley - BS), Zebra (BS), Cape Weaver (Marlo Kauffman - MK), Sweet Waxbill (BS), Malachite Sunbird (BS), Cape Gannet with petrels (Kay Simmons - KS), Cape Sugarbird (BS), Spotted Eagle-Owl (MK), African Paradise-Flycatcher (MK), Southern Double-collared Sunbird (KS), African Penguins (KS), Group (KS), Bontebok (KS), Blue Cranes (KS), Long-crested Eagle (BS), Lion (KS), African Hoopoe (MK), Trumpeter Hornbill (MK), Giraffe (KS), Retz's Helmetshrike (BS), Purple-crested Turaco (MK), Southern-Ground Hornbill (KS), Lions (BS), Elephant (KS), Kudu (BS), Giraffes (KS), Saddle-billed Stork (KS), African Jacana (BS), Zebras (BS), Southern Red-billed Hornbills (KS), Elephants (KS), African Wild Cat (BS), African Emerald Cuckoo (KS), Blue Monkey (KS)