

# South Africa Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report

Sept. 15 – Oct. 1, 2018 | Written by Participant Karen Worcester



Photos by Greg Smith

With Guides Nick Fordyce, Dalton Gibbs, and Greg Smith, and participants Karen, Dawn, Ralph, Sheri, Robert, Corinne, Andrea, Rensje, Biny, June, Judith, and Wendy



## Monday, September 17 Arrivals

Today was arrival day, with everyone making their way to the Greenwood Guesthouse, which would be our lodging for the next three nights. One of the commonly seen menu items in this part of the world is Butter Curried Chicken, which was served for dinner. Here we met Nick and Dalton, who along with Greg, would be our guides for the next two weeks. All three were energetic, knowledgeable, and charming. Dalton, who managed a reserve system in the Cape areas as his day

job, is an encyclopedia for the natural history of this area. He was well versed in botany, could provide geological, geographical, political, and social context with ease, and had a sense of humor as well. He gave an overview of our

trip and the extraordinary South African biome we would be exploring. Nick was lively, funny, and kind, and they made a great team.

At least 20% of Africa's plant diversity is in the Cape Town area. There are 319 threatened species and 13 which are already extinct. As small as it is, it is considered the sixth floral kingdom of the world, with 1000 plant species per square kilometer. For example, there are 700 species of Erica (heather) here, while Scotland has only three. Birds are equally diverse, with 950 species and 144 endemics! In this area, the warm waters of the Indian Ocean meet the cold water of the Atlantic, and the climate is "Mediterranean." In addition, there is great topographic diversity, which causes diversification through isolation. The fynbos, and to a lesser extent the dune strandfeld, are fire adapted ecosystems. So, ants are one of the primary protectors of seed stock during these events, by storing prodigious numbers of them underground.

The sandstone mountain ranges, including Table Mountain, are very dry, and create sandy, nutrient poor soils. Plants specialize because of the low nutrient environment, creating the "nutrient paradox" — very high diversity — while insects here tend to be generalists and thus are less diverse. Because of the low nutrient environment, mammals here tend to be smaller than their counterparts farther north, though many are rare or no longer found in this area.

## Tues., Sept. 18 West Coast National Park

We traveled in the opposite direction of the oncoming rush hour traffic of prosperous Cape town, and soon saw the coastal strandfeld that is the predominant habitat along the west coast. This habitat is found on sandy alkaline soils, and is very reminiscent of the coastal dune scrub of coastal California. *Arista's* replace grasses in these habitats but have been invaded by European annual grasses, also not unlike California. This habitat is reminiscent of the forests in Eastern South Africa, but the ironwoods and other trees are miniaturized down to shrub size. It used to be populated by elephant, rhino, and the other larger mammals still found to the north. Eland have been reintroduced as a management tool to keep the vegetation healthy through their browsing.

The rain mainly cooperated with us, by happening primarily while we were in transit, but it was definitely a cool and rainy day. We made a few stops on our way north to West Coast National Park. The first stop was to search for the Black Korhaan, a west coast endemic, and we located several. We also met other fowl here,



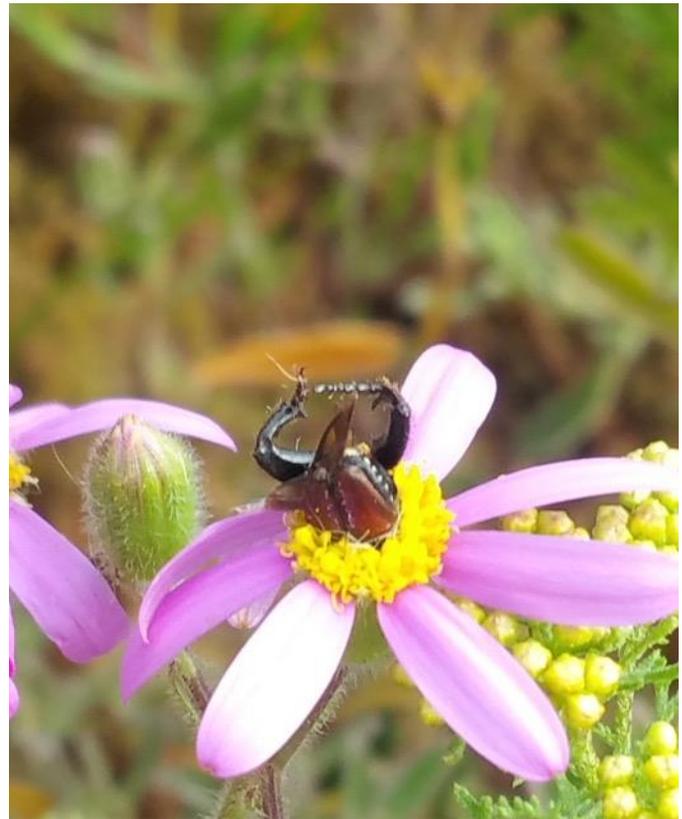
including Grey-winged Francolin and Helmeted Guineafowl. The iridescent emerald Malachite Sunbird also made his first appearance. The air was filled with the sound of rain frogs (*Breviceps*), who only croak in the rain. They are very difficult to find and are generally identified by their voice; this species, the sand rain frog, had a nice baritone croak.

Dalton introduced us to several botanical oddities. *Microloma sagittatem* produces pollen sacs that collect on the tongues of Malachite Sunbirds, so that they carry it to the next flower. *Babiana ringens* provides a rigid perch, or “rat tail” for the sought after Malachite Sunbird, and thoughtfully arranges its flowers upside-down, so that when the sunbird leans over to take a sip, it collects the pollen on its bill. Many of the flowers here open only for sunny days to conserve energy/water, and unfortunately for us the big white and yellow daisy type flowers we saw blanketing the Cape are closed today. But there was still plenty of color, from the brilliant purple *Senecio elegans* and others. Some are highly aromatic. Dalton explained that energetically, it is “cheaper” to produce aromatic oils than thorns. Both are protection against browsing. Some of the smaller antelope actually sluff off the lining of their intestines periodically to rid themselves of the toxins associated with odiferous plants.

Our next stop was alongside a reservoir, where we found Red-knobbed Coot, Kelp Gull, Blacksmith Lapwing, Button Quail and the exotic Egyptian goose. Again we were amazed by the diversity of even the roadside vegetation.

Our last stop was West Coast National Park. What a beautiful place! The soils here are also alkaline, so no proteas are found here in the strandfeld. In fact, nearby is West Cape Fossil National Park, where many species of animals can be found fossilized in phosphorus. The park surrounds Langebaan Lagoon, an enormous, mostly saline bay, which is the source of many of the new species we saw here. A large flock of Great White Pelicans announced our arrival — this is the largest pelican in the world. The air was filled with the soprano croaking of the Namaqua rain frog. Beautiful Blue Crane, the national bird of South Africa, grazed by the roadside.

We lunched at a lovely old Cape style lodge that once was the Governor’s mansion. These buildings are built of mud brick and typically have highly sculpted false fronts; some date back to the 1700s. We sat outside on the patio under a colony of Cape Weaver Birds, who were busy tying and retying the knots that make up their beautiful igloo nests. These homes have a front door facing downward, and a second room to keep the babies safe. Dalton says they are the only species besides humans that tie knots and that they can do it even without parental training. While we were eating lunch, a Rock Kestrel landed overhead to much commotion; she had caught a field mouse and proceeded to enjoy it, much as we were our luncheon below (on the menu was springbok, fried sardine, lamb liver, antelope (aka venison) pie, and other tasty treats).





After lunch we walked out a long boardwalk over extensive wetlands to a bird blind overlooking the bay. The water, the algae, the pickleweed, and other plants made for a beautiful mosaic of colors — rusts and reds, golds and greens. Hundreds of flamingos fed along the shoreline. Beautiful spotted Cape Teal dabbled in nearby ponds, and other birds included Pied Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Greenshank, Glossy Ibis, Grey Heron, Black-headed Heron, Kittlitz's Plover, and Hartlaub's Gull. White-throated Swallows were nesting along the boardwalk and swooped and circled overhead, while in the far distance we could see a herd of eland munching away on the landscape, just as they are paid to do! When we arrived back at the van we were treated to a spectacularly beautiful Orange-throated Longclaw, singing and showing off his flaming-orange throat.



We drove through the park, down along the sand dunes and up into the higher elevations. We came upon an ostrich pair ushering their giant brood of babies across the road and then up and over a hill. Parent ostriches are colonial nesters and steal younger babies to increase their crèche size to improve the survival odds of their own chicks. Crèches as large as 200 have been documented! Ostrich also have synchronized breeding, to maximize the number of plump baby ostrich that hit

the streets at once, again reducing overall loss by predation. Baby ostriches mimic the South African porcupine in form, which needless to say, is another protective mechanism for them, for who would want a mouthful of quills?

We had the good fortune to have not one, but five sightings of the endemic Black Harrier, hawking low over the scrub, one carrying off a lizard for lunch. Dalton declared this a personal harrier record for him! Other birds we sighted along the way included Cape Robinchat, Glossy Starling, Pied Starling, African Black Oystercatcher, Black-bellied Plover, Greater Flamingo, Bar-throated Apelas, Whimbrel, Speckled Mousebird, Crowned Lapwing, and the endemic Large-billed Lark.

At one stop, a flock of Cattle Egret foraged in fields of yellow flowers, looking as picturesque as an egret can. Above them the subtle brownish stripes of the Cape Mountain Zebra made them vanish against the hillside, and we also got a look at a Greater Kudu in the distance. Up closer, we found the fly-pollinated *Ferraria crispa* and the fluffy seeds of the native bedstraw (*Galenia*) that are transported by birds as nesting material. A Monkey Beetle was found headfirst in a gazania, attracted to the decoy beetle created by the flower, and inadvertently doing the pollinizing work for the flower!

Finally home after 7:00 PM, we cleaned up for dinner, and headed out to a lovely old Cape-style mansion turned restaurant, where we were served a fine meal. The crispy duck was superb, and the accompanying fennel and orange salad alongside was perfect. A fitting end to an excellent day.

## Wed., Sept. 19 De Hoop Nature Reserve



Today was a travel day; we had five hours of driving to reach De Hoop Nature Reserve. Fortunately for us, the rain, while continuing today, was predicted to dry up over the next several days. We left the alkaline soils of the west coast and returned to the nutrient poor sandy soils of the Cape and its beautiful proteas (named for the god of many forms). This is a fire driven landscape and proteas have adaptations to cope with the periodic burning. The heat of the fire and the resulting warmth of the blackened soils breaks the seed dormancy. The seeds are sealed tight in cones, and the resinous bracts surrounding them burn readily. Most of the protea are dependent on ants to move seed safely underground for storage. *Protea repens* (sugarbush) is common in this coastal landscape, and here we found Cape Sugarbird perched nearby.



Masses of brilliant yellow *Leucodendron* brighten the hillsides. Male and female plants look very different, and beetles love the pollen found in the male plants. To attract the beetle into the female plant to do the fertilization work, the female plant has a UV signature that mimics the males, and on cloudy days, beetles climb inside the bracts where it is warmer. Hence, pollination occurs!

In spite of stormy skies, we ventured out into the Kodelberg Nature Reserve in Betty's Bay, to enjoy the

African Penguin colony here, along with the ever-present Rock Hyrax, closest relative to the elephant. The landscape here has been heavily impacted by invasive acacias, and the restoration efforts have caused the landscape to look a bit bleak, but penguins still find shelter in burrows and concrete pipe houses. Acacia branches infected with a weevil are staked in stands here and there to aid in biocontrol. The colony is immediately below large coastal residences, and a boardwalk extends through it so they can be appreciated by visitors, so it is a far from pristine environment. In spite of that, we were able to see the Speckled Mousebird, Speckled Pigeon, Peregrine Falcon, Hartlaub's Gull, and four species of cormorant (Bank, White-breasted, Crown, and Cape). Betty's Bay is a prosperous town with many lovely houses perched to take advantage of the sweeping coastal views. Dalton explained that there are few protections for the high number of endemics in the landscape of this area, including the critically endangered Micro Frog, which is the size of a fingernail.

Back in the van, we turned inland and entered a huge agricultural area, where miles and miles of wheat and rapeseed have virtually eliminated an entire habitat type since cultivation began in the 1700s. The Renosterveld was unique in that it had no Erica or Arista, and but was loaded with many bulb species. It grew in these highly layered, shale-based soils, that once disturbed, can no longer be used for restoration purposes. It supported rhino, zebra, antelope, and other large mammal species. Only small fragments of this habitat remain.

Lunch was at a quirky and enormous mercantile, which literally had at least one of anything you might want. There were at least a thousand lamps hanging from the rafters over the dining area, an entire room of doorknobs, every sort of picture frame, dog jacket, wind chime, knick-knack, and chotsky imaginable. We sat down to plates of sturdy food: enormous doughnut like vetkoek, pork fat with apricot jam, pig shank, snook liver, and more. But we still had some distance to cover.

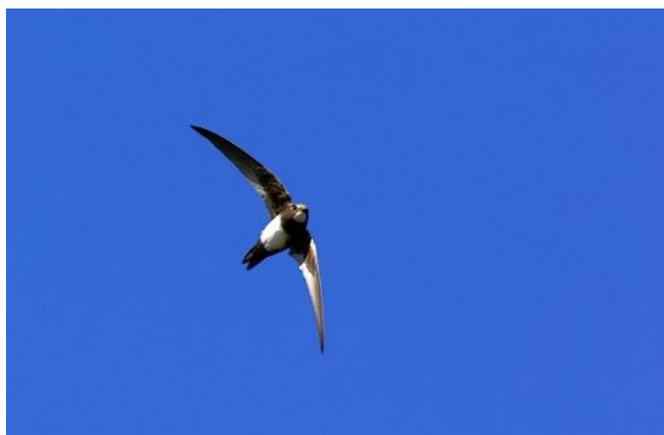
This agricultural land is still beautiful, but in a more cultivated way. Rolling fields of green and gold punctuated by farm ponds and windmills and stands of eucalyptus hosted Blue Crane, more Egyptian Goose, and other waders. The endemic Jackal hunt the land, while Steenbok and Springbok browse the fields, and the stunning Red Bishop shows off on wires. We also saw Grassveldt Pippit, Red-capped Lark, Fork-tailed Drongo, African Stonechat, Cape Sparrow, and Karoo Korhaan. A Yellow Mongoose entertained us from afar, running, stretching tall for a look, then running some more.



Because of all of the entertainment along the way, we arrived at De Hoop Reserve just before the main entrance gate closed, which is better than the alternative. This area is limestone fynbos with a large amount of endemism because of the unique soils. The reserve is 45,000 hectares and is adjacent to another large track of privately held land that included a missile silo and testing grounds. We drove down into the flats where the old ranch house, now a lodge, is located. On the flats, Bontebok, Eland, and Ostrich were abundant. We stopped to watch a large Eland bull paying attention a herd of females. This is an enormous, heavy animal, and Eland have a loose social structure which creates little need for additional forms of defense.



The lodge was in the lovely old Cape style, with thick white walls and doors that swung open to a patio, lawn, and the De Hoop Plei (a very large brackish lake) beyond. It was comfortably appointed with overstuffed couches by the fire, and an overstuffed spaniel making his rounds. Indigenous basketry and shell jewelry were displayed on the bookshelves and we were served a fabulous dinner of rack of lamb before retiring to our spacious cabins, which had three bedrooms, a kitchen, a lovely dining table, and only want for heat. Fortunately, the South Africans appreciate such niceties as electric blankets.



## **Thurs., Sept. 20 De Hoop Nature Reserve**

After a remarkably substantial breakfast, we walked the cliffs above the lake. Four species of swift darted overhead, and on the far shoreline we could see African Spoonbill, Grey-headed Gull, African Darter, Cape Teal, and a large flock of Greater Flamingo, with one small, hot pink Lesser Flamingo trying to hide among them. An African Fish Eagle soared past as we became aware of swarms of harmless gnats, whose hum was audible and who at times were so thick around us they made excellent subject matter for videos.

The scrub here is thorny and diverse, with occasional bursts of color, for example from the *Polygaria multifolia* (Fabaceae). A Speckled Mousebird called from the nearby scrub and we discussed how these birds are unique in that they eat leaves, and like termites and cows, ferment those leaves in their gut to digest them. Dalton said they are heavy and “meaty” in the hand, and almost furry feeling, unlike any other bird he’s held. We were also lucky



to see a small flock of Namaqua Sandgrouse, which are very rare away from arid areas. These birds collect moisture on their breast feathers from remote waterholes for their babies to drink.

Dalton also tells stories, which I cannot help but write down. For example, he showed us the nests of the *Chromatigaster* ants, built in the branches of shrubs. A certain caterpillar produces secretions the ants love, and are carried into the nest, where they can pupate safely. He also showed us the milkwood tree. “Bad” mites eat holes in the leaves. In response, the tree grows tiny hairs around the holes, creating habitat for “good” mites, who then make it their business to eat the bad mites. We really know so little ....



Other birds we saw in the area included the showy Robinchat, the Boubou Shrike, and the Bar-throated Apelas, among others.

After our bush wander, we loaded up in the vans and went up the road to take a look at this unique fynbos habitat growing on the calcareous dunes of the coast. The beautiful and bright red *Protea obtusifolia* was in full bloom, making a perfect perch for a Sugarbird posed nearby. They feed on the nectar of Proteas and Leucospermum and sadly, protea farmers used to put



strychnine in the protea blooms to eliminate them, because their sharp claws pierced the blooms and marred them for commercial sale. In this case, public outcry served to eliminate this practice.

We saw both Orange-breasted and Southern Double-collared Sunbirds here, catching the light on their luminous feathers. Plants that caught our eye and interest included *Leucodendron galpini*, *Leucodendron meridianum*, *Erica plukoneti* with its protruding anthers, and an herbaceous *Polygaria umbellata*. A Grysbok, a tiny reddish antelope, trotted up the road and off into the bush, a new species for the trip.

Later we drove out and paralleled the foredunes before reaching the beach. An enormous Leopard Tortoise was crossing the road for our viewing pleasure, and we stopped to visit with several Cape Mountain Zebra. These are the true zebra (*Zebra zebra*), and there are only a thousand or so remaining. At the ocean we climbed to the top of the dunes for a sweeping view of the coastline, where we could see Arughlus Point, the very farthest southerly tip of Africa. Southern Right Whales breached and spouted and lounged in front of us, making for the perfect setting for our group photo.

We returned to our lodging to find Baboons rummaging in one of the other kitchens for coffee and sugar. We were very grateful it wasn't one of our doors that was left unlocked!

Back at the lodge, we again enjoyed an excellent meal, this time of braised oxtail and chicken Kiev. The inky black sky was filled with Southern constellations and our own solar system, the Milky Way.



## Fri., Sept. 21 Harold Porter Botanical Garden | Cape Town

We strolled the cliffs along the lake before breakfast and the start of our trip back to Cape Town. The bush was full of birds, including Southern Chagra, Cape Bulbul, Cape Robin Chat, and Southern Boubou Shrike. We flushed a Spotted Eagle-Owl from a shrub as flocks of swifts and a Rock Kestrel surfed the overhead breeze. We found a small creeper whose flowers have sticky pollen sacs inside that stick to the tongue of the sunbird. So many brilliant ways to move that pollen around!



We watched large flocks of flamingoes fly up the lake in formation. As darters and cormorants fished and a Caspian Tern sailed overhead. The Dalton factoid for the morning was that Rock Hyrax urinate in the same place all the time and the urine dries and builds up there. Some swear by it as a key ingredient of a healthful tonic. Not so much for any of us ....



We left our lovely lodge and traveled back through the fynbos and the agricultural fields of the valley, with occasional stops for the endemic Agulhas Long-billed Lark (found only on shale soils), Stone Chat, Cape Canary, and Yellow Bishop. We chased after the endangered Cape Vulture, and watched them soar up the valley to their nest sites. The other vehicle spotted a large group of them feeding on the remains of a sheep so we all got to see some of the 450 of these white vultures that remain in the wild.

Lunch was (eventually) at the Harold Porter Botanical Garden. This small but lovely garden is situated below a lovely waterfall pouring off the mountains. We ordered lunch and set off to bird the ground where we got to see Swee Waxbill foraging along the lawn in front of the restaurant. Dalton demonstrated yet another pollination adaptation: When a bird sticks its beak in *Salvia africana lutea*, the anther pops out and pollinates the top of the

bird's head. And then it flies off to the next flower.

Birds here included Olive Thrush, Sombre Greenbill, White-Eye, Double Collared Sunbird, Cape Bulbul, Bar-throated Apelas, Cape Rock Thrush, Red-winged Starling, Cape Siskin, and Cape Bunting. We gave it a good try, but were unable to get the Cape Rockjumper out for a view.

We changed for dinner, which was at a nearby restaurant specializing in seafood. The table was soon laden with prawns and paella and we finished with some of the best panna cotta ever!

## Sat., Sept. 22 Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden | False Bay Nature Reserve

We spent the morning at the most beautiful botanical garden in the world, Kirstenbosch. Paths wound all over the



slopes below Table Mountain, and the strange and diverse plants of the Cape were set to their best advantage. Pincushions in full bloom were visited by iridescent sunbirds; a lot of the group stalked them with cameras until achieving the perfect shot. Silver swords towered over the additional *Leucodendrons*; they are endemic to the granite fynbos found only in this area. We also met the indigenous African pine - *Woodringtonia* - which has diversified across a discontinuous distribution along the granitic mountains of Africa, all the way north to the pines of Lebanon. Nick chased down a Lemon Dove for us, who was cooperatively picking along the ground under deep forest canopy. Above him was a rather spectacular canopy walk, where we saw the very striking African Olive Pigeon. We mugged with an extremely large and colorful grasshopper, toxic because of the Asclepius here he feeds on, and we strolled through the cycad garden, complete with sculptures of the prehistoric beasts they evolved with millions of years years ago. One of the cycad species is technically extinct, as all remaining thirteen individuals are male; the rest having been harvested for railroad ties many years ago. The Bird of Paradise plant (yes, native here!) has another unique pollinating scheme, where the weight of the a bird landing opens up the pollen chamber. The gardens were alive with bird life, including the always charming Spectacled Mousebird, Dusky Flycatcher, Sombre Greenbill, Orange-breasted and Double Collared Sunbird, and Forest Canary. A Steppe Buzzard soared high over Table Mountain.

We left the gardens and traveled through modest neighborhoods to False Bay Nature Reserve, where we spent the afternoon. Our planned whale watching trip today was scuttled due to high winds and 6-meter swells; I think there was a collective sigh of relief heard among us. Dalton manages this reserve, among others; he is clearly a respected and even beloved figure. We picnicked near the reserve entrance and were joined by a baby porcupine, who rattled his sprouting quills in his little box. His hind end, with its emerging quills, is very reminiscent of a baby bird just coming into its feathers. And a little Grey Mongoose darted in and out of the vegetation.

From there we traveled to an enormous complex of wetlands formed by the discharge from the city's wastewater treatment system. Here there were large mixed flocks of Greater and Lesser Flamingos; the former are bottom feeders, the latter surface, hence they don't compete with one another. Among the marsh and water birds we saw were shovelers, Cape and Red-billed Teal, Southern Pochard, Black-necked Grebe, Valon Distichler, Purple Swamp Hen, Reed Cormorant, Wood Sandpiper, Pied Avocet, White Stork, and Water Thick-Knees, with Black-shouldered Kite, Swift and Caspian Terns, and African Marsh Harrier overhead. It was blustery, and the Kelp Gulls sailed on the winds.

We were treated to an up-close encounter with the Gantouw Project, bringing Eland back to the management of the Rondevlei Nature Reserve. Very close to a housing project, we entered a fenced reserve area, avoiding in the mounded holes created by giant mole rats, while inspecting a Red-faced Mousebird in the bush. A short walk up the trail brought us face to face with five elegant young eland, tended by a herder. They walked up to Dalton, who they clearly knew, and even came over and inspected us. One caught Nick's legs between its horns and fortunately did not give its head a quick twist. They were here to browse the pepper shrub that dominates the habitat, to keep it open so that the plant diversity will increase, and so that wildfire temperatures are reduced. These animals are trained to load into a trailer, to keep them safe from local hunters.



Next, on this day of many small adventures, we loaded up into boats to find Hippo. They were reintroduced to this small natural lake in 1992 because Hippos have been hit pretty hard by drought in Africa; in the 1990s, 80% of the Hippo populations were lost. Hippos are an important part of the lake ecosystems as they move nutrients from the land back into the water. Alas, no Hippos appeared for us, so we consoled ourselves with Great Crested and Little Grebes.



We took a quick van ride to the edge of a more suburban lake, where our host, Tom, transported us by boat to his home on the lakeside for a braai (barbecue). He grilled sausage and meat and then we enjoyed dinner, a bonfire, wine, and fellowship with him, his girlfriend Margit, their friend Lucy, and three adoring dogs (Batman, Laptop, and Ruby). They were warm and welcoming and it was a fine evening.

## Sun., Sept. 23 Elandsberg

Today we took a trip north east of Cape Town to Elandsberg Farms. Dalton entertained us with stories en route about the war between the Afrikaners and the British, which was started over access to the gold and diamond mines to the north. The Afrikaner fighters were unorganized farmers, but fought fiercely like guerrillas and gave the British a run for their money. There was a tremendous amount of slaughter, including Afrikaner women and children. The British in their red jackets made easy targets and later changed their own uniform colors to khaki to lessen this impact. In the end, the British claimed the mines and bitter relationships between the two remained for generations. Dalton said when in military the Afrikaners joked that the red jackets of the British were designed to hide the blood, and therefore surely their underpants were brown. The words commando and khaki come from Afrikaans during these battles.

Elandsberg Farms is an old farmstead that was built in the classic style for the landed gentry: a beautiful, large home with broad veranda, blooming vines, lovely, extensive grounds, and elegant appointments. It now provides access to and protects a large area of Renosterfeld, a habitat type that has been virtually eliminated by farming. Only 4% of the original acreage of Renosterfeld remains. Renoster means rhino, and clearly Rhino at one time roamed these parts, but now have been entirely eliminated. This beautiful landscape is rich in bulb forming plants like *Moreia*, *Babiana*, and *Brunmania*. It is also home to the extremely endangered Geometric Tortoise. There are only 500 of these left in the wild, and 32 of them are protected here. We took an open-air vehicle out across the



land to visit the tortoise enclosures and to soak in a new environment for the trip.

Our group was the first delivered by vehicle to a small lake where we wandered around the shore while waiting for the rest of the group to join us. We got a brief look at Red Hartebeest departing the lakeside and we found a Clicking Stream Frog near the water's edge. Dirt colored termite mounds dotted the land, and here and there they were ripped open by hungry Aardvarks. Kapok (wild rosemary) was abundant and fluffy white with seeds; it has been used in the past for stuffing. There were many flowers, including the delicate white and pink *Monsonia*, which hosted a pair of Monkey Beetles inside. Silver-bottomed Brown Butterflies flitted around the water. We found the endemic orchid *Coricium orobanchoides*. There are 1400 plant species on the reserve; it was mind-bogglingly diverse.



All sixteen of us rode in or hung off the safari vehicle for our ride back, with Sherry riding shotgun on the hood. The Bokmakerie, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, and Cape Canary cheered us on and we arrived at the farm ready for lunch at the lakeside boat house

And what a lunch it was! We were greeted at the boat house with champagne, dry sausage, and candied nuts. After enjoying the view, we went upstairs for an extensive and beautiful meal including lamb, buttermilk fried chicken, scalloped potatoes, and squash and spinach in cream sauce. The dessert was extraordinary: chocolate mousse, sea salt ice cream, and caramelized milk chips. Before the drive home we visited a Barn Owl high up on a ladder inside a silo. After leaving the farm, we saw a handful of "quasi Quagga" mixed in with a herd of tuberculosis free Cape Buffalo. The Quagga were hunted to extinction with nothing but 20 skins remaining to remind us of what they were. This program is selecting Plains Zebra with Quagga-like characteristics for breeding, and they now have recreated a stripe free animal that resembles a Quagga. They will ultimately compare the DNA of the new "Quagga" to that from the skins, in the hopes of creating an animal that will fill a similar niche. And after leaving the more formal grounds of the farm we had a pair of Bat-eared Foxes put in an appearance next to the road.

We returned back to Cape Town from this lovely outing in time for bobotie at our lodging, a curry-like Afrikanar specialty that was served with bananas rolled in coconut and chutney. Then it was time to pack for our next adventure and our morning flight to Kruger!

## **Mon., Sept. 24 Johannesburg | Kruger National Park**

We had an early wake-up call so that we could be at the airport by 7:30 AM to catch our flight to Johannesburg. In some ways it was a pleasure to have nothing to do for a few hours, as some of us managed to catch more than one nap in transit. Once arrived, we piled back into two vans and headed out. Johannesburg was made prosperous by the largest gold mines in the world, some over five kilometers deep. A prehistoric meteorite hit the earth, pushing up the gold-bearing quartz in veins forming a concentric pattern that can still be detected in the mountains of the area.

We passed mile after mile of gold mines, coal mines, tailing piles, and coal-fired power plants. Dalton said that this area has the highest concentration of greenhouse gases in the world. Eventually, the landscape became more rural, and again it reminded us of California: grasslands punctuated by stands of eucalyptus, Monterey pine, and acacia. We ended our drive in Dullstroom, which is a town themed on the put-and-take fishing that is popular here. We settled into our guesthouses owned by the Rose Inn, which were all comfortable and nicely appointed. Most of the group went on an afternoon outing, while some stayed back and caught up on various projects. In



keeping with the town's identity, we dined at the Mayfly, and had a most enjoyable meal including garlic snails, mussels, smoked trout salad, chicken livers, and carpaccio with capers. Yum.

## Tues., Sept. 25 Driving to Kruger

Today we finished our drive to Kruger. It's an enormous park and a long way from Johannesburg. We drove back out the road visited by last night's field trip, an area comprised of sandstone and relatively nutrient poor soils. Grasslands are dotted with *Protea repeli*, the only protea in this part of Africa. We scanned the hills for the Guernsey Sugarbird, which we did ultimately locate enjoying a sip out of a protea bloom and darting back and forth in a most challenging way. Double-collared Sunbird was also spotted here. This should be a treeless landscape, (except proteas) but acacias, pines, eucalyptus, and other exotics are present. Dalton pointed out the "Rhino rubbing posts;" volcanic rock smoothed over eons of time by the horny hides of itchy rhinos. White-backed Vulture soared overhead, and we got our first look at Burchell's (or Common or Plains) Zebra. We saw Red Hartebeest far off on the skyline and a group of three Oryx climbed the hills.



We left sandstone and transitioned to volcanic soils, and so no more proteas or sugarbirds. A Gyriosaurus sp. (Plaited or Crag Lizard) provided photographic entertainment and Buff-streaked Chat and Sentinel Rock Thrush also made an appearance. The two Grysbok we spooked promptly got dubbed "gonebok" as we entered the Lost Valley Nature Reserve (which was made up of arid grasslands fed by summer rains and freezing winter temperatures). We stopped to examine a rock outcropping and found gnidia or harebell (an iris), and very tiny, prostrate euphorbs, well adapted to grazing pressure. We saw a Blesbok on the far horizon and a Grey Rhebok crossing the road and we also saw Stone Chat, Mountain Wheatear, and Mountain Long-billed Pipit. We took far too many photos of the Eastern Long-billed Lark while others photographed an exquisite fire lily (*Cryptanthus*) blooming naked on the rocks — a kind of crazy amaryllis.

We lunched at an out of context restaurant themed around the American West at Lydenberg (Mashinging) and then continued to climb a 7000-foot pass, while passing through the largest artificial pine forest in the world (measuring 500 km long and 400 km in width). These pines, including our California's familiar Monterey Pine, are mostly harvested for pulp. We passed mile after mile of this pine forest, as far as the eye could see. Needless to say, there were few birds in this area, but we did stop to look at a monument erected in memory of the Long Tom cannons used in these mountains by the Afrikanaars during the Boer Wars. These French cannons could shoot

155 mm shells, and were used to shell the British camps down below in the valleys.

We arrived at Sanbonani Lodge at dusk. This is a large, private lodge outside the park. We were greeted by a welcome drink and gratefully retreated to showers. Dinner was set outside, and some of us were lucky enough to see a turaco making a ruckus in the nearby trees.

### **Wed., Sept. 26 Kruger National Park**

Now it is time for safari! Back in the day when the British were colonizing parts of Africa, they would “go to bush” to check out the resources of the areas they were overseeing, and to administer British policy. During these trips, white hunters who traveled with them provided meat for the camps. Safari, a Swahili word that means “journey,” was originally the term for these trips, but has since been romanticized into the adventures we expect today.

We had a 5:30 AM departure from our lodge to reach the Phabeni gate before it opened. The half hour drive was lit by a dust red sunrise, and it was surprisingly cool still; fortunately we had blankets in the jeep for the ride. This park was enormous, almost half the length of California, with 520 bird species, and an important stronghold for many species of mammal. It’s the largest pristine area in Africa. The park was protected by a national act similar to the one in the U.S. that created Yellowstone. Kruger is three times the size of Yellowstone!

We drove parallel to the Sabie River in mostly granitic soils today. This part of the park has highly leached soil with low nutrients, and we saw bush willow, sickle bush, and marula tree growing. Another tree was appleleaf, or rain tree, so named because the spittle bugs that favor them are so abundant, anyone standing beneath them is soon wet with spittle.

Early in our day, we found cape buffalo next to the road. The first time you see these animals it’s hard to believe the weight they carry on their heads, with their massive helmet of horns. These are very aggressive animals, and for predators, are very hard to bring down and kill. Needless to say, they are hard headed. At one time there were 5-million of these animals, but now, their numbers are closer to 35,000, primarily due to disease. We had our first introduction to Impala soon after; these delicate but numerous antelope are hugely important part of the predator food base. Nick quipped that the M marking on their rumps stands for McDonalds, essentially fast food. They are highly successful, being both grazers and browsers, and have evolved very little over many thousands of years.

And of course, there were many, many new birds for us. We caused quite a commotion with passing cars, as they all assumed we were stopped for charismatic megafauna, when in fact, we might have been braking for the much smaller, but equally charismatic Emerald Spotted Dove. Early in the morning we saw Lesser Striped Swallows, Wire-tailed Swallow, Grey-headed Bush-Shrike, Striped Kingfisher, Southern Cordon-bleu Waxbill, African Wattled Lapwing, and the beautiful but abundant Glossy Starling. We enjoyed the first of many Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, as well as the less common Grey Hornbill. Stunning African Green Pigeon enjoyed the fruit of the jackleberry tree. There were many raptor species here, too, and a few that we saw included Chanting Goshawk, Lizard Buzzard, and Long-tailed Wahlberg’s Eagle.



We passed a Steenbok, or “Rockbok,” sitting still as a small reddish boulder in the sun. He buries his dung and sits quietly to camouflage himself from predators. A Southern African Squirrel was deep in the foliage of a tree; Andrew (our Kruger guide) said they use their own tail as a shade parasol. We also passed the first of many Rhino middens; these are dug out areas used by Rhino for defecating and urinating. Andrew called it the “rhino bulletin”. We were not to see Rhino on this trip and of course their numbers are very low. Poaching continues to be a problem in the park. Though a poacher may only get \$2000 for a horn (compared to the street value of \$2 million), that may represent a quarter of his annual income. So, the incentive to poach is very high for a man trying to feed his family.



Our first watering hole brought us a large herd of Cape Buffalo and Hippo, which looked like occasionally snorting rocks at the water’s surface. Warthogs trotted by with tails up, business to attend to, and Giraffes grazed nearby, casting their gentle gaze in our direction. Pied Wagtail and Blacksmith Plover picked at the water’s edge. The water levels here were very low, and on one end of the pond, dead Bream, Tilapia and Catfish floated on the water, probably because of low oxygen levels and high nutrients from all of the animal activity. Though it would seem these artificially constructed water holes would be important for animal survival, 50% of them have now been removed from Kruger, because they change animal migration patterns, concentrate animals, cause trampling of the habitat, etc.



We continued to add an amazing variety of new birds and mammal to our lists, including Burchell’s Zebra and Blue Wildebeest (Grindled Gnu), White-bellied Sunbird, Yellow-breasted Apelas, Brubru Chat, Golden Breasted Bunting, African Hoopoe, Red-billed Hornbill, Crowned Lapwing, Bateleur, and Gabor Goshawk.



At our first major river crossing, we found Elephant! The Elephant here in Kruger are one of only three places in Africa where males with very large tusks can still be found. Andrew explained that they get calcium and phosphorus from the grass they eat, but that as they get older, more calcium goes to growing their tusks than to their teeth. Consequently, tooth growth doesn’t keep up with the wear associated with their diet, and older animals ultimately starve to death. Elephants are formidable dung producers — up to 150 kg per day! We also saw Kudu at the river crossing. Kudu, Andrew opined, make great biltong. Also, White-crested Helmet Shrike, Tawny Eagle, Bearded Woodpecker, and Magpie Shrike.



As the soils started to become more fertile, we moved into Acacia thorn scrub. Acacia were used in the past to build kraal — a thorny, circular enclosure to protect livestock and humans as well. I wonder if the origins of this Afrikaner word are shared with the word “corral?” We entered a different type of human enclosure, a fenced and blinded trail, in order to reach a hide set up over a wetland area. Here we sat for some time watching birds coming in to the water. We got great looks at Pied Kingfisher, Red-billed Wood Hoopoe, Little Bee-eater, Striated Heron, Cardinal Woodpecker, Brown-hooded Kingfisher, Water Thick-Knees, and Black-collared Barbet. Bushbuck with their white spots, Hippo, and Giraffe could be seen at a distance, and a Crocodile floated by.



We stopped for lunch at Sukuza. We didn't really eat breakfast until nearly eleven, and we reached Sukuza by three, so most of the group opted out, but enjoyed sitting in the shade by the river and watching the very showy and brazen Glossy Starling beg for sandwich crumbs.

After lunch we continued to travel along the Sabie River, looking for Lion. The river floods well over the level of the bridges a couple of times a year during the rainy season. In its current lazy, low-flow configuration that is hard to imagine. We stopped at various river vistas, with many views of Elephant, Hippo, Zebra, and various antelope. A dead White-throated Rock Monitor on the road, was soon forgotten as we found a herd of Waterbuck, which have very pungent oil glands. We returned home to Sanbonani Lodge and outdoor patio dining overlooking the pool.



### **Thurs., Sept. 27 Kruger**

We left early to continue our exploration of this enormous, 20,000 square kilometer park. Spring was starting to show itself here in Kruger. Cream-colored blooms were emerging on the Knob-thorn acacias and the marula trees were leafing out in soft, fresh greens. Marula produces the tasty, high vitamin C fruit that is used for jams, beer, and the popular Amarula liqueur.

Camel thorn trees with their yellow acacia flowers also made up an important component of the woodland savannah here. In places, the weeping boer-bean tree was in dramatic bloom, its deep red flowers “weeping” nectar to the advantage of many birds and insects.

Everywhere we looked were the ubiquitous termite mounds, or “termitaria.” These are an important part of the nutrient cycling of the bush. Termites bring clay particles to the surface, and break down nutrients from their food, to create a nutrient rich soil environment that holds more water and can support more diversity than the surrounding soils. Termite mounds can grow very large and very often support various tree species.

Stick nests of various construction were abundant here. The Red-billed Buffalo Weaver builds large, loose nests compared to their tidier weaver cousins. The iconic Hamerkop builds an enormous nest of sticks and other found objects, including bones, hide, trash, allegedly women's lingerie, and anything else that has washed down the river. They build the largest nests in South Africa, but are the smallest bird relative to their nest size. They are compulsive nest builders, building several nests a year whether they are nesting or not. Sometimes their nests are taken over by others, such as the solemn, pink-lidded Verreaux's Eagle Owl.



As we traveled through the park we moved out of the woodlands into flatter, richer basaltic soils that support the more nutritious grasslands. Everywhere we looked there were herds of Elephant and Impala. Here and there Waterbuck with their "toilet bowl" ring on their backsides, Steenbok, and Cape buffalo. We also saw the less common Nyala antelope and a dozen or so of the rare Sable crossing the river bed. There are only 60 to 80 of these antelope in all of Kruger. They are water dependent and the practice of building watering holes that concentrate wildlife has changed the riparian habitat in a way that is less advantageous to Sable.



The river crossings were always the sites of much animal action. Marabou Stork overlooked from the water's edge, where Black crane, Lesser, Intermediate, and Great Egrets, and Water Thick-knee went about their business. We looked repeatedly for the elusive African Finfoot, which continued to evade us. Hippos surfaced here and there in the river pools. Impala came cautiously to the river's edge to drink, always wary of Nile Crocodile. We watched the antics of the sometimes-intimidating Chacma Baboons. They can be aggressive, even with their own. A large male kicked a baby out of his way, and chased Impala from the area. But the youngsters were funny, jumping from limb to limb of the bright green sausage trees, and tumbling with each other in play.



We searched the shady spots for the elusive Leopard, and some of us managed to see the ear and paw of a kitten, reaching out of a crack in a rock crevice. But mama Leopard refused to show herself, hiding deep under the road in a culvert. Today, instead, was a day for Lions. The Lion population in the park is 1600, down from about 2500 because of bovine tuberculosis. But unlike Leopards, Lions almost seem to enjoy being admired, often parking themselves for their naps within easy view of the road, paws in the air, full bellies exposed for our appreciation. Two males rested in the shade of a tree beside a partially devoured giraffe carcass, with Hooded and White-backed Vultures looking on.



Round-bellied Zebras grazed in small groups. Like Hippos, Rhinos, and Elephants, they are not ruminants. They rely on hind gut fermentation to break down the grass they consume. Andrew explained they are full of gas as a result, which explains their distended, musical bellies. In areas we passed the highly territorial Klipspring antelope, perched on granitic outcroppings where large-leafed rock figs grew like giant bonsai.

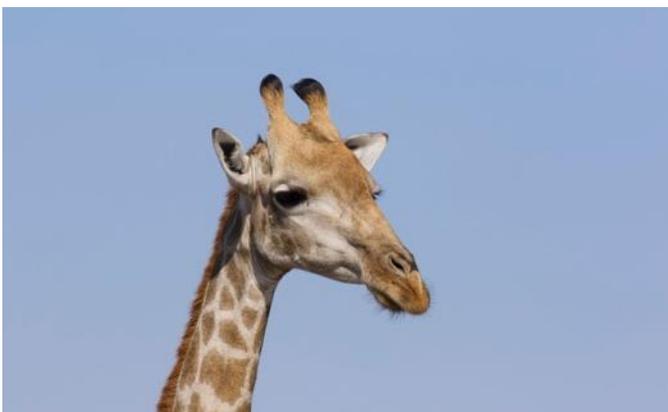
We stopped for lunch at Tshokwane, a bush kitchen where one could acquire an Eland sausage if one desired, and a few did. We picnicked in the shade, with Glossy Starling looking on with interest. These birds shined in iridescent blue and green and begged for more crumbs with their piercing yellow eyes.



There are many eagle species in Kruger, and we got to see Wahlberg's Eagle, Bateleur, and Brown Snake Eagle. Vultures were ubiquitous. The Hooded Vulture is usually the first on the kills. They are more maneuverable, not requiring thermals to rise in flight like the larger White-headed and Lappit-winged Vultures. The Tsotsis believe vultures can see into the future. They transfuse vulture blood into their own to give them special powers. Killing of vultures for this purpose, and by poachers because they give away the location of kills, is taking its toll on their numbers.



We saw many Giraffe and Gnu grazing in grassland habitat where we scoured for Kory Bustard and Secretary Bird. As the light grew lower we found a Verreaux's Eagle-owl perched in a tree, blinking his pink eyelids at us in the warm afternoon light. And three Green Wood Hoopoe were highlighted against the setting sun. We arrived at near dark at Sitara, where we would stay in round, grass thatched rondavels with small outdoor kitchens. Very nice! Some were lucky to see Bush Baby, Honey Badger, and African Wild Cat on the grounds.



Today we saw all three species of francolin found in the park, including Crested Francolin, Natal Spurfwl, and Swanson's Spurfwl. Other bird highlights included Grey-headed Bush Shrike, Go-away-bird, Tawny-flanked Prinea, Wood Sand Piper, Cisticola, White-throated Robin Chat, Bearded Woodpecker, African Green Pigeon, Arrow-marked Babble, Chin-spot Batis, White-crested Helmet Shrike, and African Grey Hornbill.

## **Fri., Sept. 28 Kruger**

We said goodbye to Andrew and Jaffrey after our

morning drive and had a more leisurely afternoon than usual, so that we would be rested for an evening game drive. We loaded up into park vehicles and slowly drove the roads sweeping each side with spot lights. The effect of the lights on Impala eyes was dramatic; the herds lit up as though each eye had its own power source. We would occasionally see herds of Elephant or Giraffe and at one point encountered a Spitting Cobra, coiled by the side of the road. A young Hyena was wandering in the vicinity looking somewhat stunned, and Dalton surmised he had been hit in the eyes by cobra venom. Other night animals we encountered, including the beautifully spotted Serval cat, the African Civet, and the African Porcupine. It was quite a night for small mammals!



### **Sat., Sept. 29 Mt. Sheba**

Today was a travel day, out of the game vehicles and back in our vans, as we needed to get far up into the mountains to the beautiful Mt. Sheba Lodge. We continued to bird and watch the abundant wildlife of Kruger as we headed towards the Orpen gate. It took us several hours to get out of the park. We stopped once at an overlook of the river bed, now dry, but still a beautiful view. It was a pleasant stop, with concrete benches in the shade of a roof. While there, a Vervet Monkey decided it would like to go for a van ride, but was quickly deterred. Once we were out of the park, we found a lovely restaurant several miles away at an eclectic lodge, with shops, nursery, car museum, and outdoor art. The restaurant had excellent choices and even better food.



We began climbing in elevation, and the rock cliffs and distant views were very spectacular. We stopped at Abel Erasmus Pass to look for the very rare Taita Falcon. It is patchily distributed through southern and eastern Africa, and this is the only known location in South Africa. We scanned the cliffs for whitewash for a long while to no avail, but were joined after a time by a local guide who was able to finally locate the bird, sitting on a favorite perch, far up the cliff face. Several ladies from the curio shops across the street came over to join us, laughing and teasing us about the bird. And of course, afterwards we crossed back over to browse their shops and buy a few things from them. These small purchases can make a huge difference in their income.



Onward we traveled, up into the mountains, as the sun dropped and night fell. The last several miles were on gravel, off of the main road, and we traveled into deep forest before arriving at the lodge with its sweeping views of the surrounding forest and mountains. We were met at the door of the Mt. Sheba Lodge with a glass of port and a roaring fire. We dined in the formal dining room, and enjoyed our last night together as a whole group and then retired to a room with a fireplace and a cozy loft. It was a very pleasant place to stay!



## Sun., Sept. 30 Mt. Sheba

We breakfasted down in a less formal dining area adjacent to the pool. This lodge clearly hosts a lot more than just birders, including wedding parties and vacationers. The group went walking to seek the beautiful Knysna turaco and were fortunate enough to see at least five of these stunningly beautiful birds. Other highlights from this walk around the grounds included the rare Samango Monkey and more mountainous bird species.



Some decided to hike to one of the beautiful nearby waterfalls and it was well worth doing. The trail dropped steeply through dense cloud forest into a moist, mossy landscape. Water dripped off the rocky walls of the canyon onto ferns, selaginellas, and liverworts. In one place, strange tuber-like growths that looked like big balls of jicama hung from roots that were suspended in mid-air because of cliff erosion. The waterfall itself was quite lovely, and a refreshing mist saturated the air. We cooled down and prepared for our steep hike back up the hill.

After a healthy lunch, we took to the vans and explored higher, less forested locations where raptors and vultures put on a show! Dinner was back at the lodge and it was a fun farewell; we would be heading back to Johannesburg in the morning.



## Mon., Oct. 1 Departures

Most long-distance flights left in the evening from Johannesburg, so it was a leisurely drive back from Mt. Sheba. We said our farewells at the airport with fond memories of all the adventures we shared with one another.

