

# South Africa: Birding & Wildlife Safari | Trip Report

September 28 – October 12, 2022 | by Bob Meinke



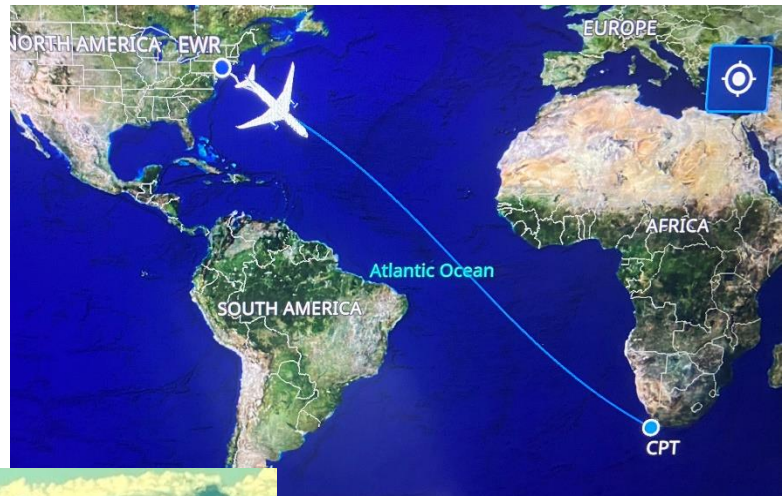
**Naturalist Journeys Tour Leader:** Bob Meinke **Birding Guides and Local Experts:** Dalton Gibbs, Nick Fordyce **Tour Participants:** Sandy, Jim, Jonathon, Jacqueline, David, Deborah, Christine, Alex, Jean, Gary, Jordan, and Mason



## Monday-Wednesday Sept. 26-28: Arrivals at Cape Town International Airport | Rest and Relax After Long Flights | Welcome Dinner on the 28th

Although the tour did not officially get underway until July 28<sup>th</sup>, most of the group opted to arrive one or even two days early, to get accustomed to the time change and rest up a bit after many hours enroute.

Getting to Cape Town necessitates either an ultra long-haul flight straight from the east coast of the U.S., clocking in at 15 hours non-stop, or traveling via Europe with a connecting flight from there to South Africa. Those coming in from the U.S. were over the Atlantic Ocean essentially the



entire way, spotting land for the first time just as the plane approached Cape Town.

For U.S. departing travelers lucky enough to have a left-hand window seat on the plane, the view of Table Mountain, Lion's Head, and the verdant highlands above the city (draped with its characteristic Fynbos vegetation) was a welcome and exhilarating sight, especially for those on their first visit to South Africa. We were met by our drivers upon arrival, and after zipping through immigration

and gathering our bags, we were soon off to our lodgings in the Pinelands, a beautiful park-like suburb of Cape Town.

Driving in, we immediately began ticking off birds that were lifers. For many of us our first new species was Red-winged Starling, initially seen at the airport, followed quickly by Red-eyed, Ring-necked, and Laughing Doves, as well as Pied Crow, Cape Sparrow, Hadada and African Sacred Ibises, Olive Thrush, Southern Masked Weaver, Egyptian Goose, African Swift, and Cape Canary, spotted as we drove into town. These are all birds that have adapted well to urban environments, and which we would see again many times on the tour.





Our accommodation in Cape Town was at Greenwood Villa, situated in a lush, peaceful area within walking distance of shops and restaurants. We had two lovely guest houses to stay in, across the street from each other, all with our own rooms and private baths.

With the exception of two nights at De Hoop Nature Reserve, Greenwood Villa would serve as our base until October 5<sup>th</sup>, as we explored the Western Cape Province (before flying to Johannesburg for wildlife viewing and birding in eastern South Africa). Staying at a single location for several days, especially in such a quiet neighborhood, was a real plus,

allowing us to completely unpack and settle in. The interiors at Greenwood Villa were immaculate, and we would gather together in one backyard for our social activities, catered meals, reviewing our species lists, etc. Cathy Turrell (owner and manager of Greenwood Villa) and her staff were simply outstanding, and made sure we were well taken care of no matter what came up.

Those of us arriving early spent time getting acquainted with the birds at the backyard feeders, and also during our walks to lunch and dinner the first couple of days (when we were on our own ahead of the tour starting on the 28<sup>th</sup>). Italian is generally a good option wherever you are, and we found ourselves frequenting a pleasant side-walk café serving excellent South African wine, appetizers, and pizza. This is where we initially learned of the local fondness of escargot, which appeared on menu after menu during the tour!

Some of our first backyard birds at Greenwood Villa (a number of which were flyovers) included Egyptian Goose, White-faced Whistling Duck, Kelp Gull, Hadada Ibis, Cape White-Eye, Speckled and Red-faced Mousebirds, Cape Bulbil, White-throated Swallow, Southern Double-collared Sunbird, Brimstone Canary, Cape Robin-Chat, Southern Masked-Weaver, Cape Wagtail, African Swift, and Olive Thrush. And at dusk and dawn we often heard Spotted Thick-Knee.

Some of us also took time to explore Cape Town on our own, or hike at Table Mountain, while the Naturalist Journeys and Birding Africa tour leaders joined up at nearby Rondevlei Nature Reserve to get acquainted, and to check out native habitats that are home to many rare, endemic plant species as well as a large number of aquatic birds. We'd be visiting this site later on with the whole group. Highlights here included African



Swamphen, African Darter, Greater Striped Swallow, Gray and Purple Heron, Long-tailed Cormorant, Malachite Kingfisher, Klaas's Cuckoo, Three-banded Plover, Speckled Pigeon, African Spoonbill, Lesser Swamp Warbler, Levallant's Cisticola, African Dusky Flycatcher, Hartlaub's Gull, Red-knobbed Coot, and several duck species.



Late afternoon on the 28<sup>th</sup> marked the start of the tour, when we enjoyed a catered dinner at Greenwood Villa, courtesy of our tour hosts at Birding Africa. Afterwards we had a presentation by Dalton Gibbs

(lead guide for our tour), where we learned about the areas we would be visiting. To say that Dalton is an exceptional all-around naturalist is an understatement, and we all agreed that his talk was one of the very best tour introductions given by a local guide that we'd ever experienced. We retired for the evening soon after, with a very early start planned for the morning and the first of many busy days ahead.



## Thursday, Sept. 29: Hol Bay | West Coast National Park

We were up early, but not ahead of the Green Villa staff, who already had coffee and a fantastic breakfast buffet waiting for us. Our focus today would be West Coast National Park, north of Cape Town. The area in and around the national park is interspersed with low scrub, grasslands, granitic outcrops, and sandy flats, and we'd have the opportunity for excellent birding, as well as some botanizing among the many wildflowers.

However, on the way we first stopped in at Hol Bay, for a chance to spot marine species along the shoreline and out on

the water. It was a good thing we dressed warmly, as the breeze coming in off the sea was cool. In no time we spotted a familiar sight to those of us who have birded North America's coasts, an oystercatcher! But, of course, despite its similarity to Black Oystercatcher back home, this was African Oystercatcher, separated by

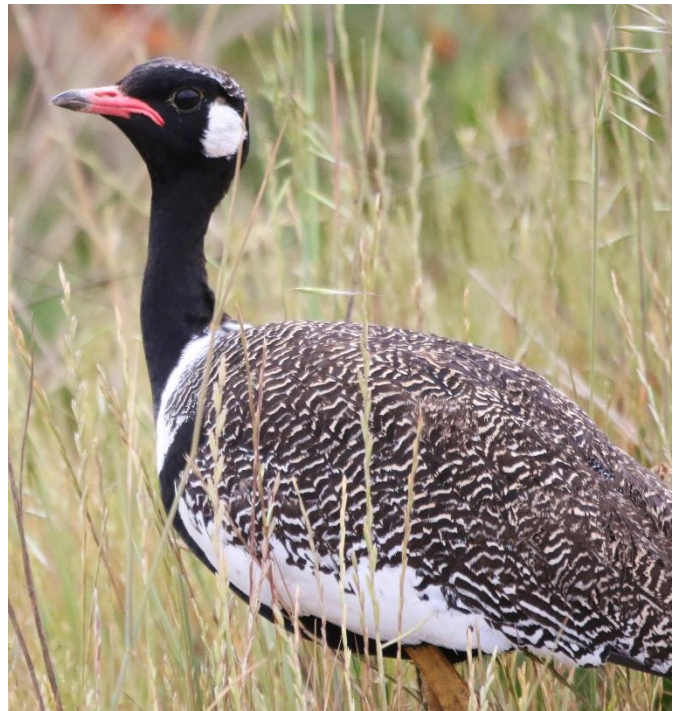
Naturalist Journeys, LLC PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632 PH: 520.558.1146 | 866.900.1146

[naturalistjourneys.com](http://naturalistjourneys.com) | [travel@naturalistjourneys.com](mailto:travel@naturalistjourneys.com)

its pink legs. Additional species of interest spotted here included White-fronted Plover, Common and Sandwich Terns, and Crowned and Great Cormorants. We also picked up Red-headed Cisticola and Karoo Scrub-Robin on the dunes.



We soon headed further north along the coast, and spent time birding along Ganzekraal Road, a hotspot the guides were keen to visit. We immediately spotted Gray-winged Francolin in the grass, a scarce species that we all had great views of. The related Cape Spurfowl was also seen, as well as the impressive Black Bustard, Black-winged Kite, African Pied Starling, the iconic Blue Crane, Black-headed Heron, Black-chested Snake-Eagle, African Marsh-Harrier, African Stonechat, African Pipit, and Capped Wheatear.



Moving on, we entered West Coast National Park. The park is primarily noted for its botany, birds, and reptiles, and to a lesser extent larger species of wildlife. But that said, although mammals typically don't take center stage here the way they do in Kruger National Park, for example, we ended up with one of our best sightings of the entire tour today, when we had prolonged views of an adult Caracal hunting along a nearby hillside. A secretive and uncommon species, and typically nocturnal, this elegant, long-legged cat was a trip highlight, and from our guide's reactions was quite unexpected.

And as we continued through the park, we soon had another wildlife encounter that reminded us to always listen to your guide. Dalton spotted something on the road ahead, and excited as we were after the Caracal encounter, our guides had to caution us as we piled out for a better look. It was a large (over one meter long) Puff Adder, casually making its way into the roadside brush! Its enormous girth (this one likely approached 10 lbs.) and its venomous fangs commanded our respect, and we stood back. Although found



throughout much of Africa (outside the wet tropics), the Puff Adder populations in West Coast National Park are reportedly among the most strikingly patterned. And in what was an odd coincidence, Naturalist Journeys tour leader Bob had been to this area on his first trip to Africa 18 years earlier, and also saw a Puff Adder along this very road. He'd never seen one before or since, until now.



We weren't disappointed by our next birding stop, i.e., the Abrahamskraal Hide, a large shelter from which we could quietly view an expansive marsh area that attracted numerous birds. We saw Common Ostrich in the nearby fields, our first of what would be many, and White-throated Swallows were everywhere, overhead as well as nesting inside the hide! On and around the marsh we then spotted Cape Shoveler, Yellow-billed Duck, Eurasian Moorhen, Black-winged Stilt, Little Rush Warbler, Cape Weaver, both Yellow and Southern Red Bishop, African Sacred Ibis, Little Grebe, and Pied Crow, and we heard our first Bokmakierie. It was a beautiful location, and there was plenty of room in the hide for everyone to spot birds and take photos.

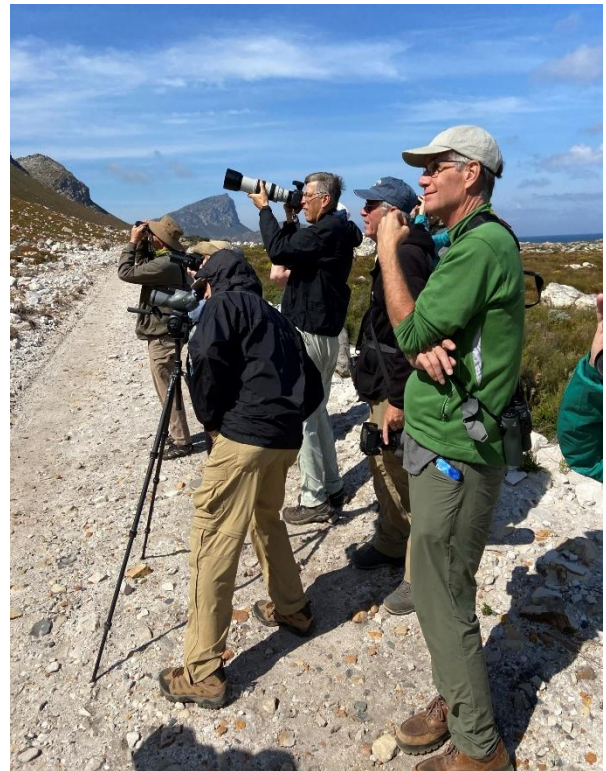
After a picnic lunch we continued back through the park, spotting additional species such as Rock Kestrel, Banded Martin, Crowned Lapwing, Gray Tit, Zitting Cisticola, White-throated Canary, Bar-throated Apalis, a large flock of Greater Flamingos, and a Cape Wagtail mother feeding a hungry youngster. We were back at Greenwood Villa in Cape Town by late afternoon, just in time to freshen up and grab a drink, go over our species list, and settle in for dinner.



## Friday, Sept. 30: Rooi-Els | Stony Point Penguin Colony | Arrival at De Hoop Nature Reserve

After another filling Greenwood Villa breakfast (with early coffee for those up and watching the feeders at dawn), we hopped in the vans and drove east from Cape Town along the coast. We were headed to De Hoop Nature Reserve, where we would stay two nights before returning to Cape Town. A nice thing about Greenwood Villa was their willingness to let us leave most of our packed belongings behind in our rooms, even though we'd be gone for two nights, allowing us to just take the essentials with us for our two nights at De Hoop.

The main highways in South Africa are generally in excellent condition, in better shape than many U.S. interstates, and we made great time. While traveling we had our first look at White-necked Raven. Our initial stop would be Rooi-Els near the Hottentot Holland Mountains, located on the east side of False Bay, with steep, rocky slopes rising up from the shoreline. Our target species here would be the endemic and near threatened Cape Rockjumper, at home on the boulders of Rooi-Els. The area was incredibly scenic, and one of our group (Mason) mused about possibly buying a vacation home here. Bob would definitely come visit.



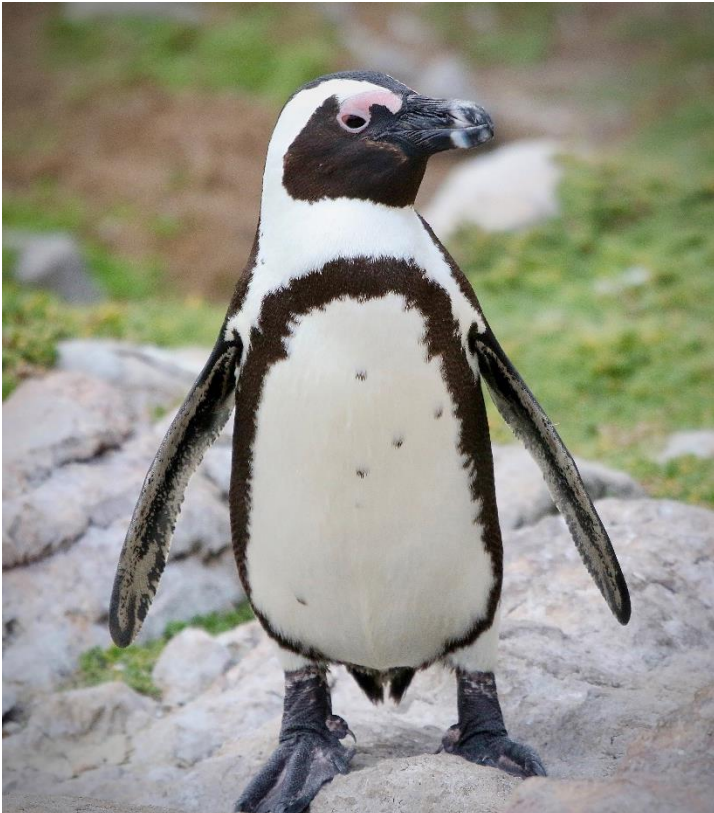
After considerable effort, with our guides straining their ears against the pounding surf for a clue to their whereabouts, they finally spotted a pair of rockjumpers well up on one of the rocky slopes. For most of us there were limited opportunities for photos, but we did see the species well in the scopes.



Other additions to our trip list here included Cape Grassbird, Rock Martin, Cape Rock-Thrush, Familiar Chat, Orange-breasted Sunbird, Nicholson's Pipit, Southern Fiscal, and we had our first look at Cape Sugarbird (we would have better views later).

Our walk at Rooi Els also featured dozens of beautiful flowering plants characteristic of the Fynbos vegetation regime, including numerous local endemics. In addition to his birding skills, Dalton is also an accomplished, professional botanist, and we never saw anything in bloom he couldn't identify!

We were then on to our next stop, at Stony Point, with an opportunity to get up close and personal with African



Penguins. There is an established wild colony here, and the birds are easy to spot. Not the least bit bothered by visitors, we were able to study them at length as they loafed on the beach and dove off the rocks. African Penguins are considered endangered and declining due to a reduction in food supply, largely the result of commercial fisheries targeting anchovies and pilchard.





We also had the chance to watch Bank and Cape Cormorants (both endangered, the latter species with young), as well as the more common Great and Crowned Cormorants, along with Hartlaub's and Kelp Gulls, Blacksmith Lapwing, Cape Weaver, and Alpine and African Swifts. And on nearby rocks were several sluggish Rock Hyraxes eying us suspiciously. We had a light lunch at a small, outdoor seafood restaurant within sight of the penguins, while watching the swifts overhead.

Continuing on, we birded along Route 319 on the Agulhas Plains as we drove into De Hoop. New birds seen along this stretch of road included Kittlitz's Plover, Jackal Buzzard, our first (of many) Cape Crows, Red-capped Lark, Pearl-breasted Swallow, Malachite Sunbird, and Pin-tailed Whydah. We also spotted several antelope species, including Eland, Cape Grysbok, Steenbok, Bontebok, and Rhebok, as well as Cape Mountain Zebra.

By late afternoon we had checked into our lodgings at De Hoop, which consisted of a series of spacious, well-appointed individual cottages. We then gathered to review our species list, and were soon ready for dinner in the stylish Fig Tree Restaurant located in the main lodge complex. It was a long (yet very productive) day, and most of us headed straight to bed after dessert.



## **Saturday-Sunday, October 1-2: De Hoop Nature Reserve | Birding De Hoopvlei and Koopie Alleen | Harold Porter Botanical Garden | Return to Cape Town**

Those of us ready for some dawn birding woke to the sounds of Southern Boubou, Fiscal Flycatcher, Cape-robin Chat, and Southern Tchagra, all of which were common in the milkwood scrub surrounding the cottages, and we also spotted several Yellow Mongoose. A fun start to the day.



After breakfast the group then birded the low vegetation and river lagoon (i.e., De Hoopvlei) that lay below the lodge complex. In addition to a few species at least some in the group had previously seen, such as Spur-winged Goose, African Darter, and Little Grebe, we also spotted Cape Griffon and Common Buzzard overhead, and had good views of several other new birds, including Water Thick-Knee, South African Shelduck, White-rumped Swift, Greater Striped Swallow, Black Sawwing, Knysna Woodpecker, Pied Avocet, Common Greenshank, African Fish-Eagle, Little Egret, and even a distant Hamerkop.



We then ventured outside the nature reserve to bird the grasslands, farm fields, and small ponds slightly to the north of De Hoop, focusing on open country east of Bredasdorp. Once in the farm country we added Common Quail, Sombre Greenbul, and both Curlew and Wood Sandpipers to our list.

We then had our first critical looks at the always-difficult larks, a group well-represented in South Africa, including Cape Long-Billed, Red-capped, and Large-billed that we saw today. Other common birds in this area included African Pied Starling, Black Kite, Capped Wheatear, Southern Red Bishops, and African Sacred Ibis.

It was then time for lunch at De Hoop, which, being close to the coast, not

surprisingly featured some excellent seafood. The menu today included a very tempting mussel chowder as one of their daily specials, and it was just outstanding. Bob was only slightly exaggerating when he said that soup by itself might be enough to bring him back to South Africa.



We ended October 1<sup>st</sup> with a late afternoon visit to the dunes and beach at Koopie Alleen, at the south end of the De Hoop preserve. In addition to nice views of Fork-tailed Drongo, Cape

Naturalist Journeys, LLC PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632 PH: 520.558.1146 | 866.900.1146

[naturalistjourneys.com](http://naturalistjourneys.com) | [travel@naturalistjourneys.com](mailto:travel@naturalistjourneys.com)

Grassbird, Eurasian Hoopoe, Black-winged Kite, Plain-backed Pipit, and Pied Barbet on the drive down, we also spotted a very familiar (to most of us) Caspian Tern and a Cape Gannet once we reached the beach, the latter diving for fish. But for most the highlight was the pair of Humpback Whales and the pod of Southern Right Whales easily visible beyond the surf. We headed back at dusk, for a species list review, drinks, and another excellent dinner at the Fig Tree, capping off a great day.



October 2<sup>nd</sup> was mostly a driving day, as we slowly made our way back to Cape Town. After birding in the morning around De Hoop, trying for species we'd missed (we added Little Swift, Southern Gray-headed Sparrow, and Black-winged Lapwing, and also spotted a beautiful Klaas's Cuckoo, which some of us had missed earlier), the only significant stop was at the Harold Porter National Botanical Garden near Betty's Bay.

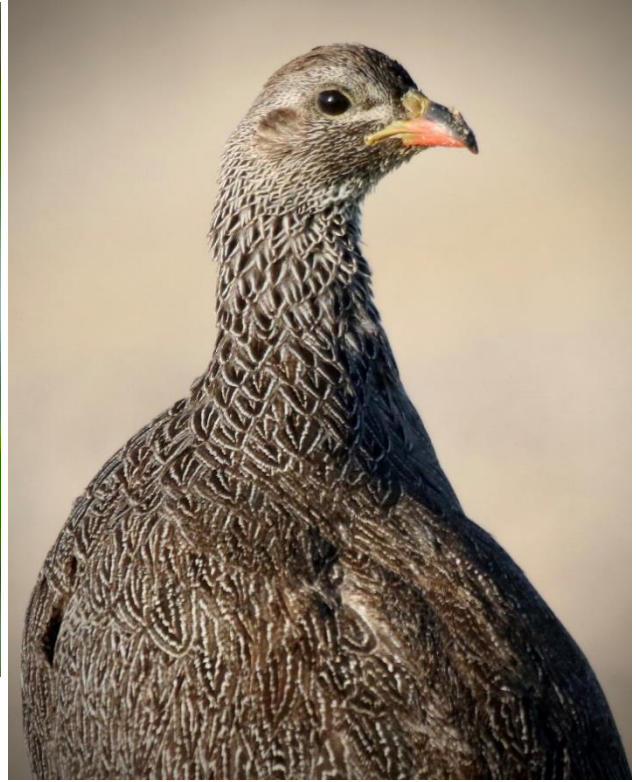
Our target here was African Paradise-Flycatcher, which some of the group spotted along a shady trail. We also saw Piping Cisticola and Cape Batis for the first time on the tour, and had good looks at Karoo Prinia, but otherwise the mid-afternoon birding was a bit slow. It was then back to Cape Town and Greenwood Villa, in time to go over our species for De Hoop and a quick supper before retiring.

### **Monday, Oct. 3: Cape Town | Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden | Strandfontein Water Treatment Facility**

If things had gone according to plan, today was the day we were set to go on our pelagic cruise from Simonstown Harbour, for a day of offshore birding. But departure times for pelagic trips are notoriously fickle, and the weather was such that our trip had to be postponed. So after breakfast this morning we switched things up, and headed across town to Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden.



Kirstenbosch is renowned as one of the world's premier gardens, and deservedly so. Situated on the eastern flank of Table Mountain, trails initially wind through conventional beds and plantings in a park-like setting, before transitioning into wild, native Fynbos habitat as one walks upslope.

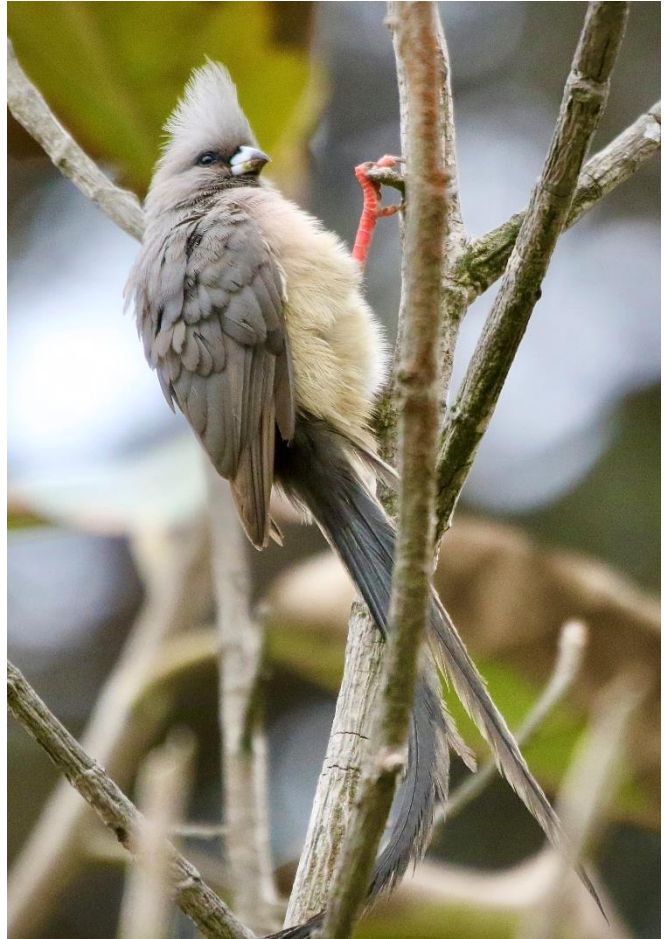
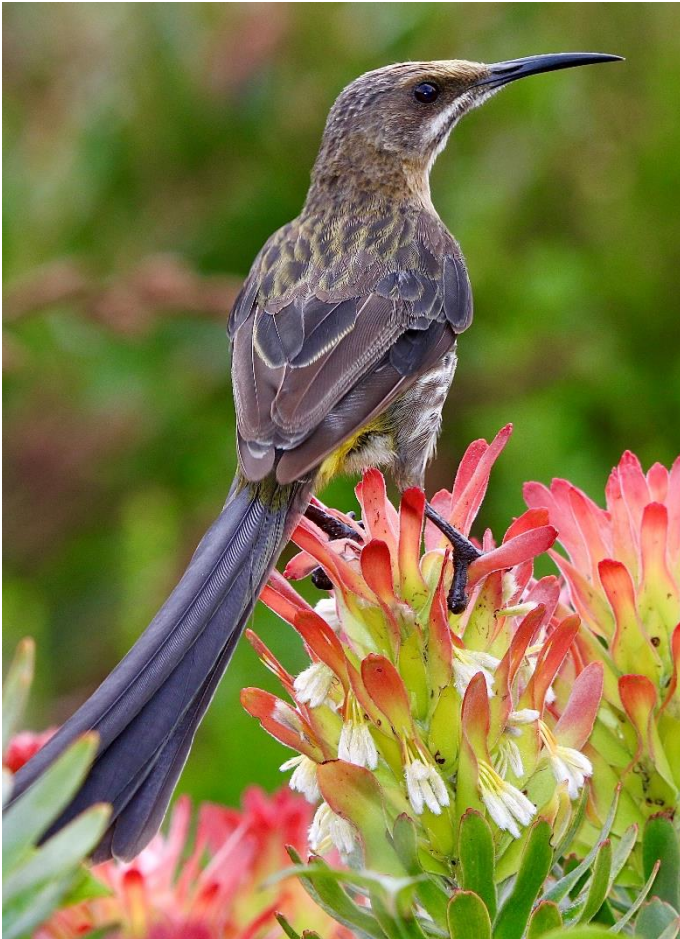


Comprising over 1,300 acres, both botanists and birders are drawn here for obvious reasons, with enough to do and explore to keep you occupied for days. We arrived shortly after breakfast with a slight drizzle underway, our first measurable rain of the tour. Fortunately, our group came prepared for the Southern Hemisphere winter, and we were soon decked out in our parkas and headed out.

We soon spotted Cape Robin-Chats singing from the brush, and the birding was underway. We had by now seen many of the more common birds in the Cape Town area, but we were pleasantly surprised to still quickly pick up several new species, and also enjoyed some nice photo ops as the skies cleared. Several large birds overhead turned out to be Rameron Pigeons, and a small flock foraging in the shadows were the less common Lemon Doves. We also saw several species well that we'd only had fleeting or otherwise unsatisfactory views of before, including Sombre Greenbul, Cape Spurfowl, African Dusky Flycatcher, White-backed Mousebird, Malachite and Orange-breasted Sunbirds, and Brimstone Canary. And then there



were several (in particular Cape Bulbil, White-backed Mousebird, and Cape Sugarbird) that, although we'd seen them well before, they seemed to be at their best (from a photographic standpoint) here at Kirstenbosch. If you had a camera, it was hard to pass up the opportunity!



And being near Table Mountain there were raptors, and we were happy to spot African Harrier-Hawk, Forest Buzzard, and both African and Black Goshawks, all for the first time. Europe's Common Chaffinch was present here as an introduction, and other new birds for the list included Forest Canary and the beautiful Amethyst Sunbird.

After a picnic lunch at Kirstenbosch, we loaded up and went across town to a favorite destination for all birders, the local water treatment plant (aka the sewage ponds). The Strandfontein facility consisted of large ponds surrounded by considerable vegetation, providing habitat for aquatic as well as terrestrial species. One of our targets here was the rare Maccoa Duck, an endangered African relative of North America's Ruddy Duck, and we spotted four along the shoreline of one pond!

Overall, this site was very productive, and we recorded 50 species in two hours. New species highlights here included (in addition to the Maccoa Duck) Red-billed Duck, Intermediate Egret, Common Waxbill, and a beautiful Orange-throated Longclaw in the grass. After some debate and peering through the scope, we also confirmed some Lesser Flamingos among an enormous flock (1,000+) of Greater Flamingos.

Late this afternoon the group was surprised when we left Greenwood Villa for an apparent impromptu visit to Rondevlei Nature Reserve in Cape Town (the same location where Bob and Mason met Dalton before the tour started, to get acquainted). Upon arrival, we took a boat across the shallow lake at dusk, birding as we went, to the home of a friend of Dalton's to enjoy a Braai, the local name for a classic South African

Naturalist Journeys, LLC PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632 PH: 520.558.1146 | 866.900.1146

[naturalistjourneys.com](http://naturalistjourneys.com) | [travel@naturalistjourneys.com](mailto:travel@naturalistjourneys.com)

barbeque. The evening was coolish, but the barbeque pit was sizzling, and we had a very enjoyable evening with Dalton and his conservation-minded friends as the fire blazed along the lake shore.



## **Tuesday, Oct. 4: Cape Town | Simonstown Harbour | Pelagic Trip to Trawling Grounds South of the Cape of Good Hope**

Other than incidental birding around Greenwood Villa at breakfast, and then later in late afternoon, we were entirely occupied today with a pelagic birding cruise that departed from Simonstown Harbour (a short way east of Cape Town). We had scheduled this for the day before, but the seas were just too rough, so we postponed and hoped for better weather today. And while no one



would say we had smooth sailing, the conditions were considered quite safe, and we boarded our two boats and departed around 7:30 AM. While under way, the boat bounced too much to even hold binoculars steady, much less your camera, but we waited patiently as our spotter loudly called out the names of various marine birds that skittered past.

The ride out to the trawling grounds (well past Cape Point), where huge factory ships processing hake are usually located (and where concentrations of seabirds are often seen), took nearly two hours. So out and back required almost four hours of sailing, giving us two to three hours for serious birding. On the way, the pelagic guide on one of the boats had a Wilson's Storm Petrel in a box, which had been found on the beach earlier and cared for until it was well enough to be released. Holding the bird between his cupped hands, it perked up when it heard the calls of its companions flying nearby, and once given the chance was off like a shot to rejoin them. A happy ending that beached pelagic birds seldom experience.



Once on site near the trawlers, our boat pilots skillfully maneuvered us into position for good looks at the species being seen, while also giving us the chance to try and take some pictures. Although that was easier said than done! You had to just fire away and hope that every now and then one or two shots might be keepers! But all in all, it was a fascinating experience, and well worth the time (and bumps) it took to get so far offshore.

All told we recorded 23 species while on the water. Several we'd already seen, and these were spotted when we weren't far from shore, including Cape, Bank, and Great Cormorants, Cape Gannet, African Oystercatcher, African Penguin, and Hartlaub's and Kelp Gulls.

But 14 species were new to the trip list, and all of these were found well offshore. These were Brown Skua, Parasitic Jaeger, Yellow-nosed, White-capped, and Black-browed Albatrosses,

Arctic Tern, Wilson's and Black-bellied Storm Petrels, both Southern and Northern Giant Petrels, Cape and White-chinned Petrels, and Great and Sooty Shearwaters.



Returning home for our last evening in Cape Town, we enjoyed dinner and toasted our stay in the Western Cape Province, and then were off to pack up for our flight the following morning.

## **Wednesday-Thursday, Oct. 5-6: Arrive Johannesburg International Airport | Drive to Dullstroom | Dullstroom Nature Preserve | Arrive Mount Sheba**

After a farewell breakfast, and many thanks to Cathy and her staff at Greenwood Villa for all they'd done, we left for the Cape Town Airport to catch our morning flight to Johannesburg. Today would be mostly a travel day. We arrived in Johannesburg about noon, and after quickly collecting our luggage (being a domestic flight, we were happy to skip the immigration queue!) we decided it would be easier to simply eat



lunch at the airport. Sandwiches from a little café were perfect, with plenty of milkshakes, and we were soon tucked into our vans and heading east out of the city.

After about three hours we arrived in the small town of Dullstroom (population under 1,000), located in Mpumalanga Province on the Highveld, a huge plateau with a long history of gold mining and ranching. At well over 6,000 feet, Dullstroom is actually the highest town in South Africa, and we hoped this would offer us a wide range of new and interesting species to see. And the first was Common Bulbul (but the Dark-Capped form), in the trees around town.

Our lodgings were reserved through Rose Cottage, which actually consisted of multiple small cottages scattered

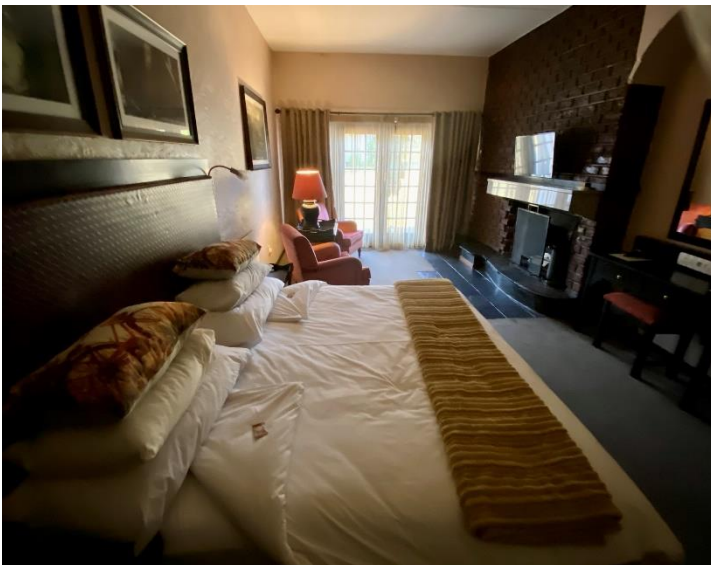
around town, so our group ended up in different places for the evening. But Dullstroom is tiny, and this wasn't an inconvenience. We eventually checked in, and with time before dinner, we drove out east of town and took a gravel road into the Dullstroom Nature Reserve for an hour or so of birding to finish the day. Despite the failing light and our limited time, we still managed to locate 48 species, with the highlights being Collared Sunbird, Natal Spurfowl, and a fantastic view of a Long-crested Eagle silhouetted against the sky.

After a single night in Dullstroom we were off early on October 6<sup>th</sup>, for a slow drive through the grasslands and ridges of the Dullstroom Nature Reserve, which we'd only briefly visited the evening before. Our goal was to reach the Drakensburg Escarpment and our lodge at Mount Sheba by mid-afternoon. As we drove deeper into the reserve we stopped repeatedly, studying the larks, prinias, wheatears, cisticolas, and other small species (LBJs!) flitting among the boulders and grassy scrub.

This was pretty challenging birding, but worth the effort as we added many species to our list, including our first Wattled Lapwing, Southern Bald Ibis, White-backed Vulture, Eastern Long-billed Lark, Black-chested



and Drakensburg Prinias, Rock-loving, Wailing, and Wing-snapping Cisticolas, Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Mountain Wheatear, and an unexpected encounter with the rare, near threatened Gurney's Sugarbird. We also spotted herds of Burchell's Zebra and Mountain Reedbuck on the slopes.



We were eventually on our way to Mount Sheba in the Drakensburg Mountains, arriving a couple hours before dinner. Our home the next two nights would be the Mount Sheba Rainforest Hotel, so named because of its location within one of the few expanses of largely undisturbed Afromontane Forest in South Africa. The rooms were beautiful and very comfortable, and were located close to the main lodge, with its spacious dining room, pub, and various spaces for meeting and socializing.

A quick walk around the lodge compound upon arrival revealed a number of birds of interest, including African Palm Swift, Lesser Striped Swallow, and Greater Double-collared Sunbird, among others. But we soon convened in the

Owl and the Trout (the charming hotel pub), the perfect spot to review our species list before we were off to dinner. A few of the group opted for some owling afterwards, while the rest of us headed to our rooms.

Naturalist Journeys, LLC PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632 PH: 520.558.1146 | 866.900.1146

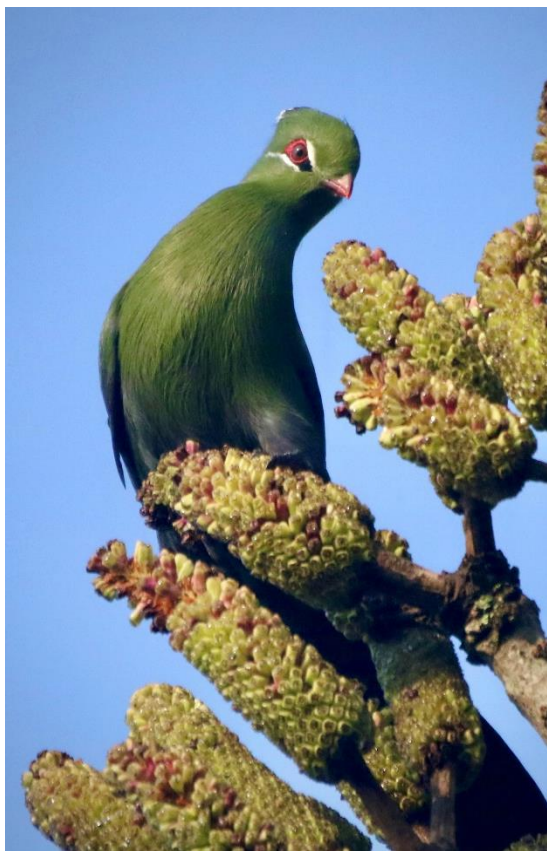
[naturalistjourneys.com](http://naturalistjourneys.com) | [travel@naturalistjourneys.com](mailto:travel@naturalistjourneys.com)



## Friday, Oct. 7: Birding the Afromontane Forest of Mount Sheba

We would spend all day today exploring a series of forest trails in Mount Sheba's unique Afromontane Forest, which were easily accessible from the hotel grounds, and packed with interesting birds as well as the occasional Blue Monkey (not common in South Africa). Many of us were already out this morning, birding ahead of breakfast (when a rare, Red-chested Cuckoo was found), after which we then went out again as a group with our guides.

The trails were shady, and at over 5,000 feet, they were cool and comfortable, with terrestrial as well as epiphytic orchids, ferns, and mosses in abundance. After the travel of the previous days, the chance to bird slowly on foot, without involving the vans was a welcome change.



Although it would be hard to select a single target bird for an area with so much to offer, the spectacular Knysna

Turaco was a species we all wanted to see, and we did! Large birds, with brilliant green plumage and bright red underwings in flight, they were hard to miss. Everyone had good looks at several of them feeding in the treetops, so close, in fact, that a scope was scarcely needed.

After that we meandered through the forest and its edges, picking up quite a few additional species, including Red-necked Spurfowl, Horus swift, Common House Martin, Gray Cuckooshrike, Olive Bushshrike, Yellow-throated Woodland

Warbler, White-starred Robin, Verreaux's Eagle (spotted high above the ridgeline), Olive Woodpecker, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, and a stunning Narina Trogon. There are so many trogon species in the Americas, yet many U.S. birders don't realize they are also well-represented in the Old World.

This was a day we really enjoyed, with splendid scenery, perfect weather, a quiet, comfortable mountain resort with all the amenities, and many amazing birds (including several endemics). It was a very peaceful setting. We had busy days ahead of us and, due to the nature of Africa's game reserves, a lot of time would be spent in safari vehicles. Mount Sheba was just what we needed to recharge ahead of Kruger National Park.



## Saturday, Oct. 8: Depart Mount Sheba | Abel Erasmus Pass | Kruger National Park–Satara Camp

We were again up early for our final morning at Mount Sheba, finding a few additional birds most of us had missed on our previous walks. Of particular note were Sweet Waxbill, Chorister Robin-Chat, and a stunning African Emerald Cuckoo.

But we were soon on our way east to Kruger National Park, descending from the Drakensberg Escarpment into the savannah lowlands via the Abel Erasmus Pass and the Blyde River Canyon. We planned to stop at the pass on the way, hoping to spot a Lanner Falcon. This species had been recorded here in the past, and although it hadn't been reported recently, the thought was nothing ventured, nothing gained.



As expected, the Lanner Falcon didn't show, but we stayed long enough to explore the cliffs and streamside vegetation, and came away with quite a few other species of interest. Mocking Cliff-Chats were (not surprisingly) on the cliffs, and we also spotted our first White-breasted Sunbird near the road.

And in the forested underbrush lining a rushing creek, we located a gorgeous Black-collared Barbet, African Black-headed Oriole, Southern Black-Tit, White-throated Robin-Chat, and Yellow-fronted Canary. The falcon notwithstanding, it was still a very productive stop. Continuing on, our stops became less frequent, as we needed to arrive at our rest camp within the national park before the gates closed in the evening.

While our Birding Africa guides would be continuing with us, regulations required that we have a Kruger Park guide with us in each vehicle, as well.

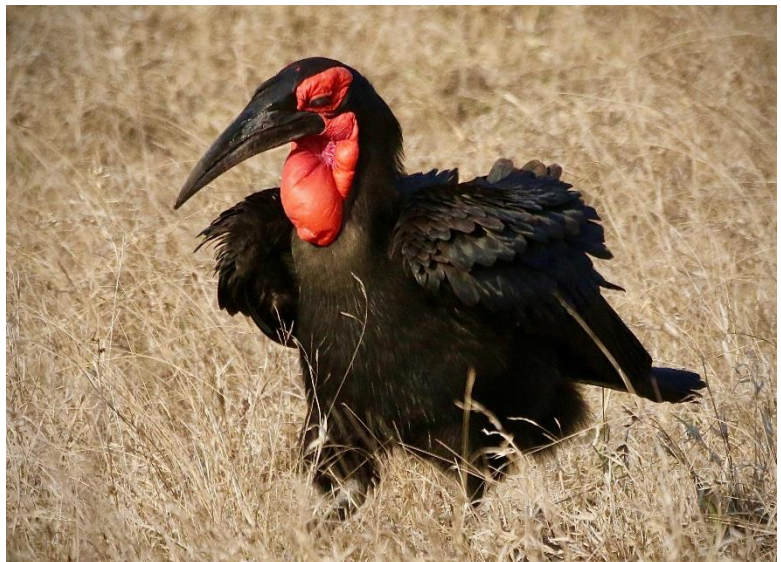
So our first stop at the Kruger entrance involved picking up those guides, and then transferring ourselves to their open safari vehicles. Our Birding Africa guides in turn ferried our vans (and our luggage) on to our overnight camp within the park (i.e., Satara Camp, in this case) We slowly followed along behind in the safari rigs with our Kruger guides, taking in the scenery. Sounds complicated, but it really wasn't.

Once inside the park, you are not permitted to leave your vehicle for safety reasons (there are fenced, authorized bathroom locations in the bush, but this is the only exception), so you must be content with seeing birds and wildlife from the vehicle.

That said, the vehicles are open and we had excellent views. (And in any case, you really don't want to go wandering about on your own in Kruger, considering the number of large predators found here.) Of course, once you are inside your fenced and gated camp compound (where your lodging is), you can walk about freely, which we did.



We were soon generating an amazing list of birds as we traveled along towards Satura Camp, including multiple, rainbow-hued Lilac-breasted Rollers, the related Rufous-crowned Roller, Crested Francolin, Swainson's Spurfowl, Green Woodhoopoe, Bateleur, Magpie Shrike, White-browed Coucal, Arrow-marked Babbler, Rattling Cisticola, Red-billed Oxpecker, Burchell's and Cape Starlings, a displaying Red-crested Bustard (chasing his mate with hopeful intentions), and the remarkable Gray Go-away Bird, to name just a few. It was all overwhelming at first, but we soon got used to it!



And as expected, the megafauna was in abundance, as well—within the first thirty minutes we saw Giraffe, Elephant, Hyena, Common Warthog, Bushbuck, Steenbok, Impala, and Blue Wildebeest.

We were also fortunate to have great views of Southern Ground-Hornbill, the largest

Naturalist Journeys, LLC PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632 PH: 520.558.1146 | 866.900.1146

[naturalistjourneys.com](http://naturalistjourneys.com) | [travel@naturalistjourneys.com](mailto:travel@naturalistjourneys.com)

and heaviest of the hornbill species, and a rarity now in much of South Africa. Typically seen in small, marauding groups, we watched as they scavenged or tracked down and attacked prey, which can consist of anything from large insects and snakes to small mammals and ground-nesting birds. An estimated 70% of the range of this unique species in southern Africa has been lost due to habitat conversion.



With dusk approaching, we were ready to call it a day and head for our rest camp. But then, we spotted the Cheetah. The least common of the big cats in Kruger, it was an unexpected sight and very conveniently near the road. And we knew we might not see one again. We took the time to watch as it moved slowly through brush, giving us the chance for a few photos. We couldn't have asked for a better end to the day! Then we hightailed it to the Satara Camp gate before it closed for the night—*and just made it!*



We checked into our rooms, and then after a lengthy review of our species list (there had been so much new to account for today), we moved (with drinks in hand) to our dinner table, which was set up for us outside at the Satara Restaurant. Serenaded by a nearby African Scops Owl, we had a delicious meal and a lot to chat about. Our rooms were spacious and comfortable, too, not what one might expect at a “camp” deep inside the bush at Kruger National Park. We were soon walking back for a well-deserved rest, in anticipation of the following day.

### **Sunday, Oct. 9: Kruger National Park–Satara Camp and Surrounding Areas**

The Satara Camp gate opens at sunrise, and we were out and gone shortly after. Our destination was the Nsemani Dam hotspot, with its expected abundance of wildlife. Scattered groups of Ostrich were common along the way, as well as Burchell’s Zebra, several species of antelope, Elephant, African Buffalo, and



Giraffe. Other birds seen as we slowly drove the road included Little Swift, African Green Pigeon, Natal and Swainson's Spurfowl, Sulphur-breasted Bushshrike, both Black-crowned and Brown-crowned Tchagras, Sabota Lark, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Mariqua Sunbird, Common Waxbill, African Firefinch, African Pied Wagtail, Lesser Honeyguide, Yellow-throated Longclaw, and Chinspot Batis.

Arriving at the dam area we spotted some large Hippopotamus, then immediately began ticking off a number of waders and shorebirds, such as Black Crake, Crowned Lapwing, African Jacana, African Openbill, and Three-banded Plover, while overhead Wahlberg's Eagle, White-backed and Lappet-faced Vultures, and Bataleurs soared. We spent the morning on the road and at the dam site, before heading back for lunch at the outdoors tables at Satura Camp.



Settling in for lunch, we spied an African Scop's Owl in a nearby tree,



possibly the one that was calling the night before at dinner. A Slender Mongoose was also spotted nearby, as well as Smith's Bush Squirrels.

And directly over one of our tables was an Epauletted Fruit Bat, hanging just a few feet above our heads! For those of us who had traveled in the South Pacific, the resemblance to the fruit bats (aka flying foxes) of that region was apparent, although thankfully this species is somewhat smaller.



A final bit of lunch-time excitement was generated when a small Mozambique Spitting Cobra was spotted near the outdoor tables, but it was quickly escorted off the premises by one of the guides!

After lunch some of the group relaxed, while others stretched their legs and accompanied our guides on a birding foray around the camp, where we spotted Banded Mongoose, as well as a number of birds, including Crested Barbet, Green-backed Camaroptera, Brubru, Brown-headed Parrot, Red-billed Buffalo-Weaver, Pearl-spotted Owlet, and three hornbill species (Gray, Southern Red-Billed, and Southern Yellow-billed). We also ran across a (perhaps too) friendly troop of Vervet Monkeys, a ubiquitous presence inside most of the Kruger rest camps.



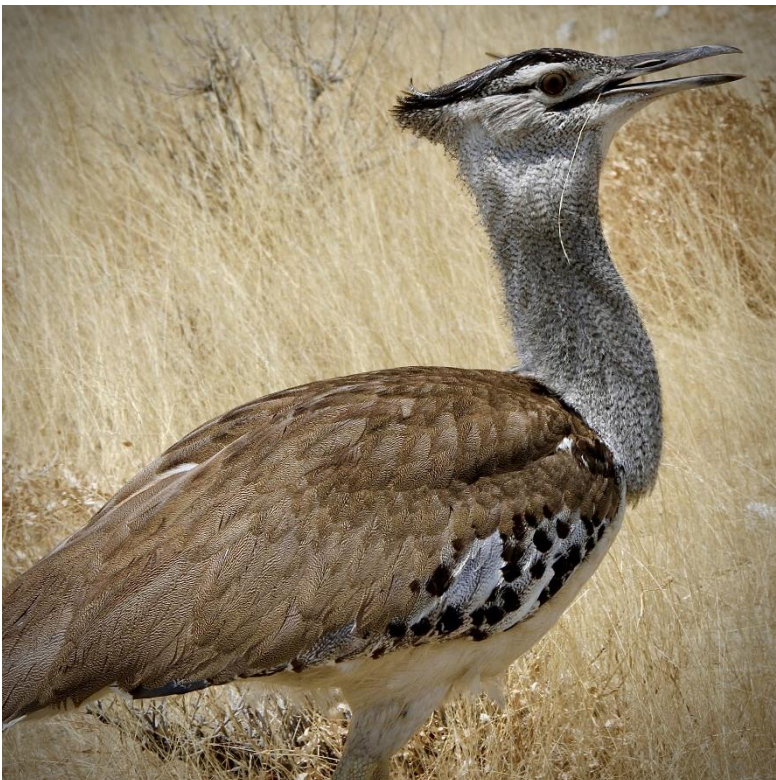
We then left later this afternoon for a drive down Sweni Road, for some additional birding in the dry savannah and at an open marshy site. We spotted numerous raptors, including four vultures (White-headed, Lappet-faced, Hooded, and the critically endangered White-backed), Tawny Eagle, African Fish-Eagle, and Bateleur, as well as Little Bee-Eater, Black-backed Puffback, Southern Black-Flycatcher, Spectacled Weaver, and Malachite Kingfisher to name just a few.

After dinner this evening at Satura, our group and all of our guides joined yet another guide (a specialist for nocturnal outings, based at the camp) for an after-dark exploration of nearby roads. This sanctioned drive,

in a large, open safari vehicle, is the only way you can get outside the camp fences at night, and allowed us to see a wide range of wildlife species that for the most part would be otherwise impossible to spot.

As far as birds go, our only species were Square-tailed Nightjar and Three-banded Courser, both new to the trip list. But the mammal spotting was fantastic! Included were Spotted Hyena, Small-spotted and Large-spotted Genets, Black-backed Jackal, African Civet, a difficult-to-spot African Wild Cat, a large, grumbling male Lion (with a pride nearby) that strolled alongside us, and a young bull Elephant that trumpeted loudly and then mock-charged the vehicle (to within a few feet!), which definitely got our attention!

## **Monday, Oct. 10: Morning Birding at Satara Camp | Departing Satara via Tshokwane Road | Arrive Kruger National Park–Skukuza Camp**



Most of us were up at sunrise once again, to get in a final early morning of birding before departing Satara Camp. By this point, having birded the camp compound several times, we figured there wouldn't be that many new birds to see. Not so! We quickly spotted an enormous Martial Eagle over the camp, carrying a prey item (looked like a snake), as well as Cardinal and Golden-tailed Woodpeckers, Wattled and Greater Blue-eared Starlings, White-browed Robin-Chat, and Lesser-masked Weaver, all new to our list! After a quick breakfast we were packed and on our way.

We drove past the Nsemani Dam area again, spotting some additional bird species, including Marabou Stork and Brown-hooded Kingfisher, and along nearby Sweni Road we also saw Brown Snake-Eagle and Gabar Goshawk, among a large number of species we had seen previously.





We also spotted several antelope species, including many Impala, Greater Kudu, Nyala, Bushbuck, Steenbok, and Common Waterbuck (looking like they just sat on freshly painted toilet seats).

We continued to see many species that by now we were able to quickly identify, having seen them before, yet new birds were always cropping up. Included among them were magnificent Kori Bustards, Pied Kingfisher, Gray-headed Bushshrike, White-crowned Shrike, and Groundscraper Thrush.



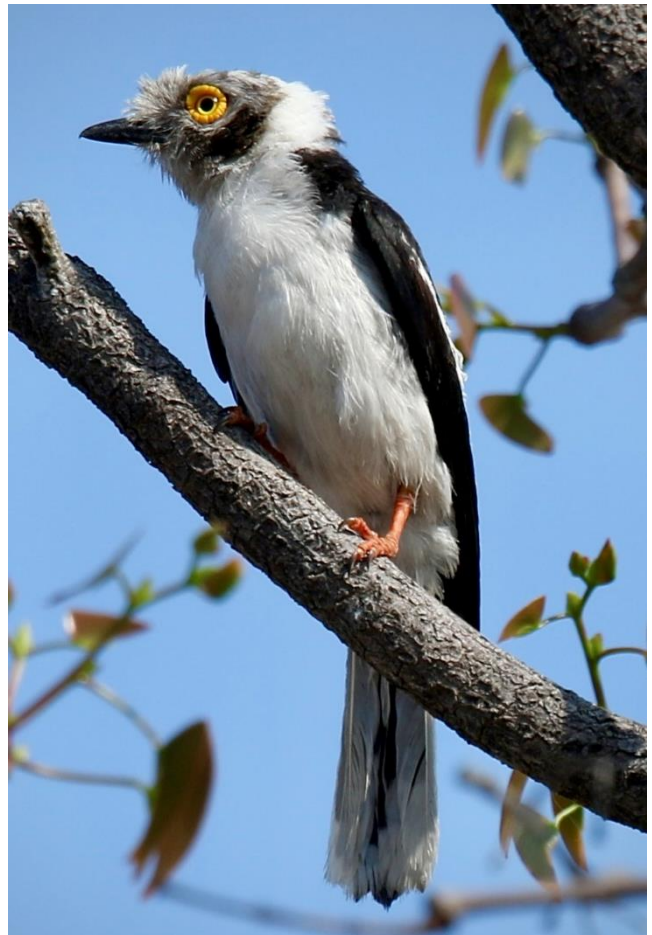
During a snack break as we drove south, Mason spotted a Greater Painted-Snipe at Tshokwane, and we picked up an African Wolly-necked Stork along the water at Leeupan, together with Saddle-billed Stork. This site also had a nice colony of Red-billed Buffalo Weavers.

Soon after we had a couple of our better wildlife sightings, of two species not always easy to spot, the first being a female Leopard with a half-grown

cub, which we watched for some time as they both moved in and out of cover along a wash. This was followed not long after by a large group of uncommon African Wild Dogs, with adults and pups. The youngsters had found a plastic jug and were engaged in a fierce tug-of-war. That was something to watch!

Continuing along Tshokwane Road in late afternoon, we pulled off at a waterhole and spotted several beautiful Emerald-spotted Wood Doves, several vulture species, Common Sandpiper, Striped Kingfisher, White Helmetshrike, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, and a stunning Scarlet-chested Sunbird.

We finally pulled into Skukuza Camp close to sunset, and if we thought Satara Camp was a bustling mini-city, Skukuza took it to another level, with cafés, a steakhouse, ATMs, etc. And even a milkshake kiosk! Even so, we were still inside the park boundaries, with fantastic birding all around us. And as at Satara camp, the lodgings were very comfortable, including shaded porches for each unit, which were great for a morning coffee and a little sunrise birding right from your cottage!



## Tuesday, Oct. 11: Morning Birding at Skukuza Camp | Lake Panic Bird Hide | N'watimhiri Bridge and Lower Sabie-Nkuhlu Road

At sunrise several of us spotted White-backed Ducks and Goliath Heron in flyovers, as well as several new birds, including Lizard Buzzard, Black Cuckooshrike, and Retz's Helmetshrike. This would be our last full day of birding in Kruger National Park, and we had several destinations in mind.



After breakfast (which featured outstanding baked goods and Mosque Swallows flying overhead), we loaded up and headed for nearby Lake Panic and its well-known bird hide.

On the way in the road was temporarily blocked by a Spotted Hyena (presumably tired after a long night of carousing), but our group eventually made its way past him to the edge of the lake, where we spotted Egyptian Geese, Pied Flycatcher, Black Crake, Striated Heron, Violet-backed Starling, and Kurrichane Thrush, as well as colonies of Lesser Masked, Southern Masked, and Village Weavers building nests, along with many other species.



There was also a Hamerkop building a nest, and as they are known to do, it was outfitting it with all kinds of debris, including many rocks. And that's comfortable?

We then moved on to the N'watimhiri Bridge and Lower Sabie-Nkuhlu Road area, where we picked up White-fronted Bee-Eater, Giant Kingfisher, Yellow-billed Stork, African Barred Owlet, Wire-tailed Swallow, White-headed Lapwing, Red-faced Cisticola, and Lesser Striped Swallow, among others.

We headed back early today, to give plenty of time to get packed for the drive back to Johannesburg and tomorrow's flights home.

We met for a farewell pizza dinner at the Skukuza Camp, and some of us lingered afterwards to chat about the tour and enjoy a nightcap.

## Wednesday, Oct. 12: Morning Birding at Skukuza Camp | Lunch at Lower Sabie Rest Camp | Depart Kruger National Park for Flights Home from Johannesburg

Our last morning in South Africa, and many of us still couldn't resist a final bout of early birding at Kruger. One of the guides spotted a Shikra, a beautiful *Accipiter* species hunting right outside our cottage doors! And the landscaping at the camp was full of birds, including Red-billed Firefinch and Southern Cordonbleu,

Black-backed Puffback, and Golden-breasted Bunting, topped off by a stunning Four-colored Bushshrike seen by a few of us.

At breakfast we spotted an African Black Duck in the Sabie River below our tables, and as we drove out from Skukuza Camp along the Lower Sabie-Nkuhlu Road we picked up a Collared Pratincole, Ashy



Flycatcher, and Crowned Hornbill. We stopped for lunch at the Lower Sabie Rest Camp, where we saw additional firefinches, many starlings, and a gorgeous Green-winged Pytilia, spotted along the side of a building and seen by most of us.

We were then on our way out with a quick stop for gas at a truck stop halfway to Johannesburg, and picked up three final species, i.e., the super abundant Red Quelea (curious we hadn't spotted it before), South African Swallow, and Yellow-crowned Bishop. We were then on to Johannesburg International Airport, and our evening flights home. After a thoroughly enjoyable 15 days spent in a remarkable country, it was time to plan our next trip!



**Photographs** (all by Bob Meinke)

*Cover Page* (clockwise from upper left corner): Four-colored Bushshrike; King Protea; Red-billed Oxpeckers; Karoo Prinia; Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill; Cheetah; Village Weaver; Giraffe. *Main Text* (beginning with first page): United Airlines screenshot; Cape Town from above; Greenwood Villa (GV) guest house; GV guest house interior; GV outside seating area; Cape White-Eye; Long-tailed Cormorant; Hartlaub's Gull; Dalton Gibbs tour presentation; African Oystercatcher; birding at Hol Bay; Gray-winged Francolin; Black Bustard; Puff Adder; White-throated Swallow; Cape Wagtail getting fed; birding at Rooi-Els; Southern Fiscal; Dalton Gibbs, being a botanist; African Penguin; Cape Cormorant and young; Rock Hyrax; Cape Mountain Zebra; Southern Boubou; Southern Tchagra; Large-billed Lark singing; mussel chowder; Black-winged Kite; Cape Batis; walking at Kirstenbosch; Cape Robin-Chat; Cape Spurfowl; Cape Bulbil (2 photos);

Cape Sugarbird; White-backed Mousebird; Braai party at Rondevlei Nature Reserve; hake trawler in the Southern Ocean; Wilson's Storm Petrel release; White-capped Albatross; Common Bulbul (Dark-Capped); Burchell's Zebra; Gurney's Sugarbird; Mt. Sheba Rainforest Hotel room; Red-chested Cuckoo; Knysna Turaco; Afromontane Forest birding; Black-collared Barbet; Lilac-breasted Roller; Giraffe; Rattling Cisticola; Southern Ground-Hornbill; Blue Wildebeest; Steenbok; African Elephants; Cheetah; herd of Burchell's Zebra; African Green Pigeon; African Scops Owl; Epauletted Fruit Bat; Southern Red-billed Hornbill; Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill; Vervet Monkey; Malachite Kingfisher; Common Waterbuck; Greater Blue-eared Starling; Kori Bustard; juvenile Leopard; African Wild Dog; White Helmetshrike; Spotted Hyena; Hamerkop with rock; Green-winged Pytilia; Black-backed Puffback; Southern-masked Weaver, inspecting nest

Naturalist Journeys, LLC PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632 PH: 520.558.1146 | 866.900.1146

[naturalistjourneys.com](http://naturalistjourneys.com) | [travel@naturalistjourneys.com](mailto:travel@naturalistjourneys.com)