

Birding in South Africa

South Africa is a country I've long wanted to visit. It's a land of great contrasts with an incredible diversity of natural habitats, ranging from arid deserts to moist forests; rugged mountains encircling open grasslands; woodland of various types; wetlands; and the unique Cape floral kingdom. It's a country of excellent roads and a great number of national and provincial parks and private game reserves. Accommodation is of a high standard and there are many fine restaurants. It has an impressive list of endemic birds and a wealth of interesting mammals including the so-called Big Five of elephant, lion, leopard, buffalo and rhino.

The tour was undertaken in November 2015 with Paul Willoughby of Bird Holidays in collaboration with Patrick Caldwell of Avian Leisure, based in Cape Town. It was to this area we journeyed via Amsterdam and after a long flight, based ourselves for three nights on Cape Peninsula south of Simon's Town. Our first day in this exciting country was spent around False Bay, visiting various coastal sites including Stony Point where 2,000 pairs of Jackass Penguins breed. We had superb views, watching them on the beach and on rocks where Hyrax roamed and Cape Cormorants raised their brood. At Harold Porter Botanical Gardens, where the spectacular protea flowers bloom, Cape Sugar Birds, Orange-breasted Sunbirds and surprisingly an Amethyst Sunbird probed for nectar and at nearby Rooi Els a pair of scarce Cape Rockjumpers appeared amongst boulders. More sunbirds, Cape Batis, Olive Thrush, Southern Brubru and Sombre Greenbul were watched in Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens before we ascended the tourist route to the top of Table Mountain, from where we watched Alpine Swifts, African Black Swifts and Peregrine.



Cape Sugarbird

A pre-breakfast trip to the Cape of Good Hope at the end of Cape Point proved enormously successful. In an early morning drizzle an astonishing flow of seabirds which included four Northern Giant Petrel, up to 200 Sooty Shearwater and surrounding fishing boats were good numbers of White-chinned Petrel. An Arctic Skua was watched chasing terns and it was a surprise to see a sub-antarctic Skua flying away to the north.



Cape Gannets at Lambert's Bay

Later in the day at Intaka Island, an isolated oasis of vegetation amongst sprawling development, a delightful hour was spent watching various passerines, ducks, egrets and a breeding colony of Scared Ibis. Then it was north to a new venue at Langbaan and the West Coast National Park on the Atlantic Coast. Amongst some of the familiar wader species watched from the large hide were ten Grey Plovers reinforcing the knowledge that these birds are truly global travellers. About 60 of the scarce and localised Chestnut-banded Plovers fed in the Berg River Salt Pans whilst a Caspian Tern rested amongst a hundred Little Stints and a couple of Red-necked Phalaropes glided by.

The northern limit of the West Coast leg of the tour was reached at Lambert's Bay where we headed for Bird Island and the Gannet Colony the most accessible of only six breeding colonies in the world. Some 14,000 pairs of this spectacular bird assemble here and we were treated to a superb display at the start of the breeding season. Although a long drive it was not without many excellent birding moments. These included a visit to a Verreaux's Eagle nest where two adults perched, and a roost of three Spotted Eagle Owls. A little later one of the highlights of the trip was the excellent views of the spectacular and highly distinctive Black Harrier. As we journeyed back to our accommodation at Langbaan, a pair of Blue Cranes with two juveniles, caught our attention and shortly afterwards we stopped to watch a male Southern Black Korhaan in the roadside scrub.

The second part of the South African adventure commenced with a flight into the Kruger National Park and, once on the ground and settled in to the Skukuza Camp, no time was lost in taking an immediate game drive and making contact with the wildlife. The mighty Kruger National Park is the size of Wales and has the greatest diversity of animal life of any national park in the world. Over the next four days we indulged ourselves in a surfeit of experiences at this amazing place as we journeyed out from our bases at Skukuza and later at the private Notten's Bush Camp on the edge of the National Park. Early morning drives, just as the sun was about to break the eastern horizon, followed later by a morning, and then a late afternoon outing was the pattern of the day. From a long list of species favourites included: Purple-crested Lourie, Brown-headed Parrot, Magpie Shrike, Giant Hornbill, Arrow-marked Babbler, Greater Blue-eared Starling and Lilac-breasted Roller. In addition there were seven different Cuckoo species, seven different Kingfishers, four species of woodpecker, various types of robins, flycatchers and hirundines which were best watched as they swept along the Sabie River. Overhead, raptors circled in the form of Wahlburg's Eagle, tumbling Bateleur, various vultures and the occasional Brown Snake-eagle. A Martial Eagle was seen perched near Skukuza, a couple of pairs of African Hawk-eagles performed near Notten's Bush Camp where Lizard Buzzards were also present.

There were many highlights amongst the birdlife on this spectacular trip, but the views we were fortunate to have of mammals will probably stay with me forever. We watched with awe as a large male White Rhinoceros crossed the road within feet of the vehicle. Later, taking advantage of the knowledge and skill of the local guides we watched three of these primeval beasts graze peaceably around a waterhole. Hippos were common in the wetlands, giraffes, buffalos, warthogs were often seen and antelopes grazed on what little grass remained during these times of extreme drought. Three vehicles surrounded a patch of grassland where five sleepy female lions were spending their day, but as dusk approached, a female leopard, intent on stalking a duiker, was interrupted by a spotted hyena. This beautiful creature climbed a tree to avoid a confrontation and our three vehicles took advantage and closed in to gain a point blank view.

Reluctantly we left the spectacular Kruger and headed for our final location, that of Mount Sheba in the Northern Drakensberg mountains. Here we explored the gardens, woodlands, and scrub around the resort and made longer journeys through the rolling hillsides to the Blyde River Canyon. Pre breakfast walks were once more the order of the day and patient watching and listening paid off for target birds such as Chorister Robin-chat, White-starred Robin, Orange Ground-thrush, Narina Trogon, Knysna Turaco and Lemon Dove. Our drives produced excellent views of the magnificent male whydah birds resplendent in their breeding plumage as they displayed their long flowing tail feathers to rather plain females. Over the Blyde River Canyon, from the awesome viewpoint at the Three Rondavels a pair of Verreaux's Eagles dominated the skyline and lower down on the riverside a pair of Crowned Eagles gave spectacular views. Along the riverbank Mountain Wagtails were tracked down, Amythyst Starlings called and an adult Finfoot with two juveniles in tow was watched from the bridge north of the canyon.



Lilac-breasted Roller



Leopard in Kruger National Park

As the tour drew to a close we meandered through the dry upland areas around Dullstroom where we were rewarded with sightings of grassland birds including the scarce Yellow-breasted Pipit and exciting views of a herd of blesbok racing over the high plains. There was then little left to do except head to the airport in Johannesburg, take the late evening plane to Amsterdam and endure as best as one can, an eleven hour flight. South Africa is a beautiful, diversely rich country perfect for those wishing to see a very wide range of flora and fauna, I hope this report has given an insight into what awaits the visitor, particularly on such an organised trip.

Article and photographs by Paul King