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South Africa Birding Safari

16 DAY/ 15 NIGHT SAFARI

OVERVIEW

The Eastern Seaboard of South Africa offers some of the best birding in all of Africa and on this tour we will sample some of the diversity that makes this part of the country essential to any birder's travels. With over 750 species on offer who can argue, couple this with magnificent landscapes, modern infrastructure and the full big game experience and you have a winning recipe. Typically we could expect a birdlist in the region of 400 birds, sprinkled with a good number of endemics and unbelievable game viewing.

DAILY SUMMARY

DAY 1	Zaagkuilsdrift and Kgomo-Kgomo Floodplain
DAY 2	Polokwane Nature Reserve and Magoebaskloof
DAY 3	Magoebaskloof to Pilgrim's Rest
DAY 4-6	Kruger National Park
DAY 7	Kruger National Park to Wakkerstroom
DAY 8	Wakkerstroom area
DAY 9	Wakkerstroom to Mkuze area
DAY 10	Mkuze
DAY 11	Mkuze to St Lucia
DAY 12	St Lucia and Isimangaliso Wetland Park
DAY 13	Mtunzini and Amatikulu Nature Reserve
DAY 14	Ongoye Forest and Eshowe
DAY 15	Dlinza Forest to Umhlanga
DAY 16	Departure or Extension to Cape Town/Drakensberg

DETAILED DAILY ITINERARY

DAY 1: Johannesburg to Zaagkuilsdrift

Our first day starts in Johannesburg (arriving the previous day from various destinations). After a short meet and greet we'll get all the luggage in the vehicle and head straight to our first destination, the Rust-de-Winter area and more specifically Zaagkuilsdrift road, an area very popular with local birders. Here we can expect a good selection of typical bushveld species but the real drawcard here is a whole host of species more typical of the dry west, here pretty much at the edge of their range. Highlights to look out for include the spectacular Crimson-breasted Shrike, as well as species like Violet-eared Waxbill, Kalahari Scrub-Robin, White-throated Robin-Chat, Marico Flycatcher, Southern Pied Babbler, Great Sparrow, Ashy Tit and many more. Further along this road we'll come to another top birding spot, Kgomo-Kgomo Floodplain, for a couple of weeks in years of good rainfall this place comes alive and arguably offers some of the most spectacular birding in the country. Even when there is not much water around there is always some rewarding birding to be had, during these drier spells there is usually quite a spectacle with hundreds of Black-winged Pratincoles filling the sky, Temminck's Courser can be plentiful at times and an added cast made up of Chestnut-backed Sparrowlarks, Shaft-tailed Whydahs and even a Harrier or two complete the picture.

DAY 2: Polokwane Nature Reserve and Magoebaskloof

After some early morning birding we head further north, arriving in the town of Polokwane around lunch. A short stop at the Polokwane Game Reserve should hopefully net us the Southern African endemic, Short-clawed Lark. From here we will make a quick stop in Tzaneen for Pied Mannikin and time permitting even a short visit to a possible nearby stakeout for Bat Hawk. We continue to our destination in the Magoebaskloof where we will have our first taste of forest birding, species to look out for include Knysna Turaco, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, White-starred Robin, Gorgeous and Black-fronted Bush-Shrikes, Sweet Waxbill and with luck we could even find African Wood-Owl after dinner.

DAY 3: Magoebaskloof to Pilgrim's Rest

We'll start the day with some more forest birding and if we missed Short-clawed Lark the previous day we might even pop in at another stakeout nearby where we also have a good chance of finding the elusive Shelley's Francolin. We continue our journey towards the historic mining village of Pilgrim's Rest, where we will stay at Mount Sheba, a superb spot that will offer us some more Afromontane forest to bird, this is one of the best sites in the country for Orange Ground-Thrush. Forest birding can be hard work but often the reward is worth its weight in gold, with tantalizing species such as Cape Batis, Yellow-

throated Woodland-Warbler, Olive Bush-Shrike, Lemon Dove and African Emerald Cuckoo waiting to be found. Birding the surrounding grasslands can be equally rewarding and here we'll hope to find Wing-snapping Cisticola, Denham's Bustard and possibly even Secretarybird, whilst in the scrub and Protea dotted slopes hold Gurney's Sugarbird, Wailing Cisticola and Buff-streaked Chat.

DAY 4: Kruger National Park

After some more birding around the magnificent Mount Sheba we head for the savannahs of the famous Kruger National Park with the odd birding stops and lunch break en-route. We could possibly also make a slight detour to a rugged cliff face on the side of the escarpment that used to be the best spot in Africa to see the rare Taita Falcon, a pair used to breed here annually but it seems that one of the pair might have perished and sightings are now far more irregular, Cape Vulture is also common here. Another option is a quick drive into the Blyde Canyon where we often find Half-collared Kingfisher, African Finfoot and if we are very lucky even Thick-billed Cuckoo. Once we enter the park proper our focus, while still on birds, will also divert a bit to the possibility of sightings of any of the Big 5.

DAY 5: Kruger National Park

The rich bushveld of the Kruger National Park offers very rewarding birding and we will use every opportunity today to explore as much of the area as possible. The possibility of the 'Big 5' (Lion, Leopard, African Buffalo, African Elephant and Rhinoceros) ever present, of course we'll also encounter a whole host of other exciting mammals which may include the likes of Cheetah, African Wild Dog, Hippopotamus, Giraffe, Warthog, Greater Kudu and many more. Of special interest here is some of the larger terrestrial birds as well as birds of prey that are difficult or near impossible to find reliably outside protected areas such as Kruger, these include Kori Bustard, Southern Ground Hornbill, Martial Eagle, Bateleur, Lappet-faced Vulture, Secretarybird and Saddle-billed Stork. Other typical bushveld birds that we will encounter are Southern Yellow-billed and Southern Red-billed Hornbills, Southern White-crowned Shrike, Red-billed and Yellow-billed Oxpeckers, Brown-headed Parrot, Purple-crested Turaco, Crested and Swainson's Francolin, White-crowned Lapwing, Grey-headed Bushshrike and African Mourning Dove. At our camp for the night there is the possibility of an optional night drive and we highly recommend taking at least one of these during the trip, several nocturnal mammals such as Serval, African Civet, Aardvark, Small and Large Spotted Genets and African Wild Cat is possible and not forgetting birds such as Spotted and Verreaux's Eagle Owl, Square-tailed Nightjar and Bronze-winged Courser.

DAY 6: Kruger National Park

Our final full day in Kruger would have arrived all too soon for some but we intend to make the best of the time we have left and will concentrate on slightly different habitats today with the focus on areas of open grassland, waterholes and broad-leaved woodland hosting species such as African Cuckoo-Hawk, Dark Chanting Goshawk, Green-capped Eremomela, Bennet's Woodpecker and even Bushveld Pipit. The damp depressions around streams sometimes yield Black Coucal and in season the odd Corncrake. This area is particularly good for the elusive Black Rhino and Lichtenstein's Hartebeest.

DAY 7: Kruger National Park to Wakkerstroom

We have a fairly long but scenic drive from the Kruger National Park, where we will do a last bit of birding before breakfast, to the small hamlet of Wakkerstroom, which stands in stark contrast to the habitats we've visited thus far. Wakkerstroom is situated on the Highveld plateau dominated by rolling hills and upland grassland. Several special birds occur here, with a good number of them being endemic and many are difficult to find elsewhere. We should arrive in time for some afternoon birding and usually our first port of call is the marsh just on the outskirts of town, here we have a good chance of finding skulkers like Little Rush Warbler, African Rail and who knows even a Red-chested Flufftail if we are very lucky. Commoner species include African Purple Swamphen, Purple Heron, Cape Shoveller, Cape Weaver and we often find Grey-crowned Cranes roosting here in the late afternoons.

DAY 8: Wakkerstroom area

After an early morning coffee we head out in search of Wakkerstroom's to very special and endemic Larks, Rudd's and Botha's, the former critically endangered. In our search for these two dowdy denizens of the grasslands we'll also be on the lookout for their more common cousins, Eastern Clapper, Eastern Long-billed, Pink-billed and Red-capped Larks. Wakkerstroom isn't just about LBJ's though Yellow-breasted Pipit, Blue Korhaan and Cape Canary will add a subtle touch of colour and in the village the striking Bokmakierie is usually an easy find alongside the peculiar Red-throated Wryneck. We'll also visit a local sit in search of White-bellied Korhaan, Denham's Bustard and at another spot we'll look for the enigmatic African Rock Pipit and Buff-streaked Chat. Some of the other birds that we might encounter include Bald Ibis, Jackal Buzzard, African Pied Starling, Cape Crow, Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Grey-winged and Red-winged Francolins and the 'often-heard-but-rarely-seen' African Quail-Finch

DAY 9: Wakkerstroom to Mkuze area

A quick spot of birding in the morning, for birds we might have dipped on the previous day before we pack the vans and continue our journey south, this time to one of Kwazulu-Natal's premier birding spots, Mkuze Game Reserve. We should arrive in the park mid- to late afternoon and after checking in we'll waste no time finding some of the spectacular birds that call this remarkable area home. A drive down to the Sand Forest, a dry and localized type of forest that is home to several spectacular species such as a Pink-throated Twinspot, Four-coloured Bushshrike, Neergaard's Sunbird, Crested Guinea fowl and Rudd's Apalis, before we head back to camp.

DAY 10: Mkuze Area

We have a full day ahead to explore the incredible diversity of Mkuze, not just birds but also a whole host of fascinating mammals, from one of Africa's smallest antelope the Suni to the largest mammals, the African Elephant. African Wild Dog sighting is a very real possibility as is sighting of Cheetah and even Serval. Birding wise we'll keep an eye out for Black-bellied Bustard, Senegal Lapwing, several Vulture species, Martial Eagle, White-crested Helmetshrike, Grey Penduline Tit and at one of the large wetlands, species such as Pink-backed and Great White Pelican, African Openbill, Yellow-billed Stork, Goliath Heron and Whiskered Tern. Several good hides are situated in the park, mostly overlooking waterholes and these can be worth a visit, sometimes producing memorable moments.

DAY 11: Mkuze to St Lucia

We'll spend the morning birding in camp where birding can be top-notch, we often find birds such as Red-fronted Tinkerbird, Eastern Bearded Scrub-Robin, Green Twinspot, Eastern Nicator and Purple-crested Turaco in camp. After breakfast we'll head out and exit the park's eastern gate which will enable us to stop at several pans (natural, shallow and often ephemeral water bodies, usually with no in- or out flow) en route, here we will search for African Pygmy Goose, Lesser Jacana and Black Heron. Lizard Buzzard and several other species of raptor are often encountered on this road. We'll arrive in St. Lucia mid afternoon and in time to head down to the estuary mouth for a rare taste of shore birding. Several Tern species should be present and for the last few seasons a Sooty Tern has been regular at the Tern roost.

DAY 12: St Lucia and Isimangaliso Wetland Park

An early morning departure will see us at the gates of the Isimangaliso Wetland Park (Eastern Shores section) in time for a truly magnificent day's birding. Various habitats straddle this section of the park, from coastal dune forest, wetlands and moist coastal grasslands to exotic plantations at Cape Vidal. Several good hides have been built over

the last few years and we'll spend some time at these, ticking of several wader species as well as possible African Pygmy Kingfisher, Rufous-bellied Heron and a number of Duck species. At Mission Rocks we'll search for Woodward's Batis, Brown Scrub-Robin and Livingstone's Turaco and sometimes we encounter Southern Banded Snake-Eagle here. Cape Vidal itself is usually good for Green Twinspot, Grey Waxbill, Green Malkoha, Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher and Black-throated Wattle-eye. We also have the chance of encountering Samango Monkeys here alongside their more common cousins the Vervet Monkeys, just watch them closely while we enjoy our packed picnic lunch here. The drive back to town will have slightly fewer birding stops but we'll keep our eyes peeled for specials such as African Crowned Eagle, Yellow-throated Longclaw, African Cuckoo-Hawk, Collared Pratincole and Croaking Cisticola.

DAY 13: Mtunzini and Amatikulu Nature Reserve

We'll bird the well known Gwala Gwala trail at the edge of town before breakfast, here we often encounter birds such as Lemon Dove, Livingstone's Turaco, Olive Bushshrike, African Emerald Cuckoo, Trumpeter Hornbill, African Green Pigeon and Brown Scrub-Robin. After breakfast we'll stop at the bridge over the estuary for some Weaver action and we could tick Yellow, Golden and Southern Brown-throated Weavers here. En route to Mtunzini we'll stop at several wetlands near Mtubatuba where we might add the likes of Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Red-headed Quelia and many more. We'll arrive in Mtunzini around lunch and head out shortly afterwards in the hope of finding Palmnut Vulture, usually a good spot for them. From Mtunzini we'll head to Amatikulu Nature Reserve where we'll look for Swamp Nightjar, Broad-tailed Warbler, Croaking Cisticola and Brown-backed Honeybird. We'll arrive back at our lodge in the town later that evening.

DAY 14: Ongoye Forest and Eshowe

Our first stop today will be at Ongoye forest, a remnant patch of coastal scarp forest which straddles the hills for about 20km between Eshowe and Empangeni. This is the only spot in Southern Africa where Green Barbet can be found. The forest here is also good for Green Twinspot, Narina Trogon, Chorister Robin-Chat, Grey Cuckoo-Shrike, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, African Crowned Eagle and Striped Pipit. We'll use a different route back to Eshowe, travelling through rural Zululand, giving us an exciting and eye-opening perspective on the everyday life of the Zulu people. Back in Eshowe we'll enjoy lunch before heading out of town to a good stakeout for Southern Tchagra and we'll also enjoy more forest birding at another nearby forest.

DAY 15: Dlinza Forest to Umhlanga

Dlinza forest with its aerial boardwalk will be our birding spot of choice this morning and we'll try to be in position at the top of the canopy tower as early as possible to afford us the best chance of seeing Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon as they sun themselves before

heading off to feed. Our other target here is Spotted Ground Thrush, a bird of the shady forest floor. The calls of Scaly-throated Honeyguide can usually be heard while walking through the forest but getting to see this skulker is easier said than done. We'll make the most of all possible birding spots en –route, arriving in Umhlanga just north of Durban in the late afternoon.

DAY 16: Departure or Extension to Cape Town/Drakensberg

Early morning birding in the gardens and time permitting also at the Umhlanga NR, here we'll have another shot at Barrat's Warbler, Rufous-winged Cisticola and several species of Weaver. Birding today will depend on the timing of your international flights out or we will continue to one of our extension trips to Cape Town or Drakensberg.

Thank you for choosing Nature Travel Birding.