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Far North of South Africa Birding Tour

13 DAY/ 12 NIGHT TOUR

OVERVIEW

South Africa is known throughout the world as the "rainbow nation". This is not only true for its incredible cultural diversity, but the term could also be applied to its rich fauna and flora. From its crystal clear open oceans and lush, almost tropics-like forests to the dry desert areas in the western parts of the country, the savannahs and grasslands in the eastern areas and the high peaks of the mighty Drakensberg mountain range, it is indeed a special place.

All of these distinctly different ecosystems in South Africa allow birders to explore a diverse range of bird-rich habitats. A remarkable 840 bird species are found in South Africa, about eight percent of the world's total bird species.

This Nature Travel Birding tour takes place in the far North of the country, and includes several days in the famous Kruger and Mapungubwe National Parks. Most of the tour takes place in the Limpopo province of South Africa, with its vast unexplored areas and diverse habitats, ranging from tracts of montane grassland to forests, bushveld and even wetlands. It offers one of the most exciting birding destinations in southern Africa, and the region is peppered with prime birding sites.

Many species from east and central Africa reach their southern limit here, and this region therefore offers an entire suite of exciting and range-restricted birds. There are a number of special species that are easier to find in the Limpopo province than in the rest of the country, including Short-clawed Lark, Shelley's Francolin, Grey-headed Parrot, African Broadbill and Crested Guineafowl. The area boasts 35 Southern African endemics and 48 Southern African near endemics. Over 600 bird species have been recorded in the province, of which 420 are resident.

DAILY SUMMARY

DAY 1	Johannesburg to Polokwane
DAY 2	Polokwane NR and drive to Mapungubwe National Park
DAY 3	Mapungubwe National Park
DAY 4	Drive to Makhado
DAY 5	Makhado
DAY 6	Drive to Pafuri Camp in Kruger National Park
DAY 7	Pafuri Camp in Kruger National Park
DAY 8	Drive to Shingwedzi Camp in Kruger National Park
DAY 9	Drive to Letaba Camp in Kruger National Park
DAY 10	Letaba Camp in Kruger National Park
DAY 11	Drive to Magoebaskloof
DAY 12	Magoebaskloof
DAY 13	Drive to Johannesburg and Departure

DETAILED DAILY ITINERARY

DAY 1: Johannesburg to Polokwane

The tour begins early this morning, and we suggest that participants spend the night before the tour starts in Johannesburg to allow for an early start. Nature Travel Birding can book the accommodation for you. We will also arrange a pick-up point for the tour; this is normally the O.R. Tambo International Airport.

The tour starts with a journey northwards along the N1 highway to the Zaagkuildrift area along the Pienaarsrivier for our first taste of western bushveld and water-associated birds. We will be looking for Southern Pied Babbler, Northern Black Korhaan, Barred Wren-Warbler, Common Whitethroat, Great Sparrow, Acacia Pied Barbet and long-tailed Paradise Whydah. The number of water-associated species will vary according to how much water there is in the river system, but we could see Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, African Crake, Greater Painted Snipe, Allen's Gallinule and even Lesser Moorhen.

We'll have a packed lunch in the shade of a tree somewhere along the road and will hopefully make it as far as the Kgomo-Kgomo floodplain before turning back to the N1 highway and heading further north to our first night's stop in the town of Polokwane.

We'll arrive in the late afternoon and have time to settle in before dinner and a good night's rest at our comfortable guesthouse.

🏠 **Accommodation: Mavuta Manor Guesthouse**

DAY 2: Polokwane NR and drive to Mapungubwe NP

After an early morning breakfast we'll head through to Polokwane Nature Reserve on the edge of town to look for Short-clawed Lark specifically. We will also search for a wide range of other bushveld birds such as Crimson-breasted Shrike, Marico Flycatcher, Ashy Tit, Kalahari Scrub Robin, Burnt-necked Eremomela, Common Scimitarbill, Green Wood Hoopoe, Secretarybird and others.

The reserve is one of the biggest municipal-owned game reserves in South Africa, and one of the most important aspects of it is that the reserve conserves the Pietersburg Plateau false grassland, one of the only remaining examples of an extremely localised vegetation type that is home to important indigenous birds like the ones we will be looking for. This habitat is characterised by open savannah and almost entirely dominated by Themeda grass with the odd smattering of Acacia trees.

Mammal species we may see include a superb array of antelope, from the diminutive Common Duiker to the massive Eland, Africa's largest antelope.

We'll have a few hours' drive before we enter Mapungubwe National Park. This World Heritage Site is as rich in history as it is in wildlife and flora. It is located where the mighty Shashe and Limpopo rivers join, and is filled with numerous patches of land that possess traces and artefacts of ancient civilisations and cultures. The park protects the historical site of Mapungubwe Hill, which was the capital of the Kingdom of Mapungubwe, a community dating back to the Iron Age.

This is a world of orange sandstone outcrops, ancient Baobab trees, big game (including the famed Big Five), as well as a host of exciting bird species such as Temminck's Courser, Thick-billed Cuckoo, Meyer's Parrot, Grey Tit-Flycatcher and both White-Crested and Retz's Helmet-shrikes and maybe even the highly elusive Three-banded Courser.

Mammals to be seen include the majestic Gemsbok, Southern Giraffe, African Elephant, Rock Hyrax, Lion and other species.

We will arrive at the park in the late afternoon, and if time permits we will enjoy our first afternoon game drive in the park itself. Our comfortable lodge is on the outskirts of the park and here we will have dinner and enjoy a good night's rest.

🏠 **Accommodation: Halcyon Game Lodge**

DAY 3: Mapungubwe National Park

Today we will enjoy a full day of birding in the park. This will include a morning and afternoon game drive and breakfast and lunch will be arranged according to our specific birding needs for the day.

Mapungubwe NP is one of South Africa's newest national parks, having been established in 1995. It covers an area of over 28,000 hectares (69,000 acres) and boasts a variety of habitats, including excellent riverine forest and mixed woodland. Access to the riverine forest is made easy by a wooden canopy walkway, providing stunning views of the distant arid plains and granite outcrops, as well as making birdwatching comfortable.

Along with birding from the canopy walkways, we will drive around in the park and look for Pel's Fishing Owl, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Harlequin Quail, White-crowned Lapwing, Black-winged Pratincole, Burchell's Sandgrouse, Brubru, Senegal Coucal, Caspian Plover, Kori Bustard, Monotonous Lark, Goliath Heron, Dwarf Bittern, Saddle-billed Stork, Western Osprey and even African Pygmy Goose.

We will return to our lodge after a great day's birding for dinner and our overnight stay.

 **Accommodation: Halcyon Game Lodge**

DAY 4: Drive to Makhado

After a last morning drive in Mapungubwe National Park and breakfast at our lodge we'll make our way south-eastwards to hilly country and the town of Makhado.

Makhado or Louis Trichardt (formerly Trichardtsdorp) is a town at the foot of the peak of Songozwi, in the Soutpansberg mountain range, in a highly fertile region where litchis, bananas, mangoes and nuts are produced in huge amounts. It is situated in the Lowveld and has a subtropical climate.

Timber plantations, nut orchards and avocado orchards dominate the land use in the area, yet nestled in between the agricultural lands are some of the best birdwatching sites in the region.

After arriving and settling in at our accommodation we'll have a boat trip on the Albasini Dam as a great way to do some birding and relaxing at the same time. It is the largest body of water in the area and a boat trip and walk around the dam edges provide excellent birding opportunities. Here we will keep an eye out for species such as Malachite, Giant and Half-collared Kingfishers, African Pied Wagtail, African Fish Eagle, Woolly-necked Stork, African Darter and, with a bit of luck, African Finfoot and White-backed Night Heron.

A pair of African Skimmers even appeared here for a while some years ago! The dam edges could produce Gorgeous and Olive Bushshrikes, Cape Batis, Bar-throated and Yellow-breasted Apalis, Sombre Greenbul, Yellow-throated Longclaw and Croaking Cisticola.

We will relax and have dinner at our lakeside lodge, and settle in for a good night's sleep.

🏠 **Accommodation: Shiluvuri Lakeside Lodge**

DAY 5: Makhado

Today we'll have a very early departure on a day trip to some of the main birding spots in the area around town. Depending on what we see and the weather, we could change our plans around, but we will try to visit at least three hotspots in the area.

Hanglip Forest Reserve is an easily accessible Afro-temperate mist-belt forest with many short trails. It is flanked by pine plantations and overlooks the town. This is the best place to find White-starred Robin and Yellow-streaked Greenbul, as well as Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Lemon Dove and Crested Guineafowl. A lovely picnic site has been established under some large trees, and we could enjoy our packed breakfast and coffee here.

Entabeni Forest is a great example of Soutpansberg Afromontane forest with a canopy height of 20 to 30 metres. It is situated in the Entabeni pine plantation. The forest boast good specials such as Orange Ground Thrush, Black-fronted Bushshrike, Green Twinspot, Knysna Turaco, Sweet Waxbill, Olive Woodpecker, Grey Cuckooshrike, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Collared Sunbird and Brown Scrub-Robin. It is probably the best place in the country to find the uncommon, elusive and shy Blue-spotted Wood Dove. It has also recently been a reliable spot to see a pair of Bat Hawk and a large flock of Brown-necked Parrots.

Roodewal Nature Reserve, just to the east of town, has a mix of woodland, riverine and Afro-montane tree species, and is the most reliable site in the area for African Broadbill. Other species often seen here are Eastern Nicator, White-throated Robin-Chat, Narina Trogon, Gorgeous Bushshrike and Red-faced Cisticola. There is also a picnic site in the reserve, and this might be a good place to enjoy our packed lunches. Crowned Eagles have been known to circle overhead at the picnic site!

We will return in the late afternoon for some time to relax and do some birding in the lodge grounds before dinner in the evening.

🏠 **Accommodation: Shiluvuri Lakeside Lodge**

DAY 6: Drive to Pafuri Camp, Kruger NP

After an early start and breakfast we'll head eastwards on our 3 to 4 hour drive as we make our way into the famous Kruger National Park.

Everything that can be said about the Kruger National Park has probably already been said, but suffice to say that it is undoubtedly one of the greatest game parks on the planet. It covers a vast area of 19485 square kilometres (7523 sq miles) and extends 360 kilometres (220 mi) from north to south and 65 kilometres (40 mi) from east to west. Areas of the park were first protected by the government of South Africa in 1898, and it became South Africa's first national park in 1926. It is now part of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, a peace park that links Kruger National Park with the Gonarezhou National Park in Zimbabwe and the Limpopo National Park in Mozambique. It welcomes more than 1.5 million visitors every year.

All the Big Five game animals are found in Kruger National Park, which has more species of large mammals than any other African game reserve (at 147 species). Over 520 species of birds have been seen in "Kruger", as it is affectionately known.

One of the most exciting areas in which to bird is up in the north, with impressive Fever tree forests along the Luvuvu and Limpopo rivers. We'll explore the private Makuleke concession in open-vehicle game drives and by doing birding walks. We'll be searching for species such as African Yellow White-eye, Meves's Starling, Crowned Eagle, Green-capped Eremomela, Lemon-breasted Canary, Black-throated Wattle-eye, Böhm's and Mottled Spinetail, African Cuckoo Hawk and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, while the elusive Pel's Fishing Owl is a possibility. This is also the best area to find Dickinson's Kestrel, Broad-billed Roller and even Three-banded Courser. Scarce species found in the past here include Sooty Falcon and River Warbler.

Game species to be seen includes large herds of Buffalo and Elephant, as well as Lion, Leopard and a host of herbivore species. Our afternoon drive will include an after dark portion during which we may see nocturnal species such as Fiery-necked and Square-tailed Nightjars (and Pennant-winged Nightjar if we're lucky), Spotted Thick-Knee, Spotted Eagle-Owl and mammals such as Serval, African Civet and Genet (Small- and Large-Spotted).

We will stay at Pafuri Camp tonight. It lies within the community owned Makuleke Concession, which consists of 24,000 ha of land in an area has long been recognized as the most diverse within the entire Kruger, containing approximately 75% of its bio-diversity. The camp consists of 20 luxury tents (en-suite with indoor and outdoor showers) located in dense riverine forest overlooking the Luvuvhu River.

Accommodation: Pafuri Camp

DAY 7: Pafuri Camp, Kruger National Park

Activities in the Makuleke concession include twice daily game drives or walks to legendary sites such as Crooks' Corner, Lanner Gorge and the Fever tree forests. There is also the opportunity to explore rock art, Stone Age and Iron Age sites. We will determine today's full day birding program according to what we have seen and which species we may still need for our lists. Breakfast and lunch plans will also be made according to our specific birding needs.

Habitats in this northern section of Kruger are surprisingly diverse. The low-lying hills around Punda Maria to the south of our concession are home to Crowned Hornbill, Mosque Swallow and Eastern Nicator. Tall Mopane and broad-leaved woodland expanding out from the base of these hills holds specials like White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Arnot's Chat and Racket-tailed Roller. In damp, low-lying areas Senegal Coucal, Black Coucal and Little Bittern can also be seen.

Game viewing is very good with regular sightings of high profile species like Elephant, Buffalo, Rhino, Lion and Leopard. Regional specials such as Eland, Nyala, Tsessebe, Sharpe's Grysbok and Yellow-spotted Rock Hyrax are also present.

After a long day of ticking specials and lifers we will return to Pafuri Camp for rest, dinner and a good night's rest.

 **Accommodation: Pafuri Camp**

DAY 8: Drive to Shingwedzi Camp, Kruger National Park

Leaving the Pafuri area after a morning activity and breakfast we'll make our way into the public part of the Kruger National Park and southward onto Shingwedzi Rest Camp, roughly 100 kilometres away. We will drive past Punda Maria Camp and the Babalala picnic site on our way to the camp.

Shingwedzi is a lovely, tranquil rest camp situated on the Shingwedzi River. We'll concentrate our efforts on the river drives, where mature riparian vegetation growing on the alluvial soils provides a welcome respite from the endless Mopane woodland stretching out in all directions. The area is well known as the haunt of big tusker Elephant bulls, and we'll be on the lookout for some impressive specimens.

Birds we'll be looking out for include Goliath Heron, Saddle-billed Stork, Yellow-billed Oxpecker, Water Thick-knee, Bennett's Woodpecker, Brown-headed Parrot, Green-backed Camaroptera, Cut-throat Finch, Mosque Swallow, Red-headed Weaver and others. Collared Palm Thrush was even resident in the palm trees around hut number 25 for a while a few years ago!

Back at camp we'll enjoy dinner and a good night's rest.

 **Accommodation: Shingwedzi Camp**

DAY 9: Drive to Letaba Camp, Kruger National Park

After an early breakfast we'll leave Shingwedzi Camp and make our way southwards to Letaba Rest Camp, about 110km away.

Situated on a bend in the Letaba River, this camp has an incredibly scenic setting overlooking a dam. It is a haven for woodland birds and the parklike gardens are particularly pretty and productive.

The camp is well spread out with the highlight being a paved footpath which runs along the northern perimeter through broad leaved riparian vegetation and then back along roads skirting the southern perimeter of the camp offering the chance to see a number of species within the confines of the camp as well as out on the Letaba River floodplain. We will walk these pathways and look for Gabar Goshawk along the riverside, as well as a number of camp residents such as Red-headed Weaver, African Palm Swift, Barred Owlet, Verreaux's Eagle-Owl, Bearded Scrub Robin and Grey-headed Bushshrike.

We will definitely be spending time enjoying the view of the river and watching animals come down to bathe and drink. We will be hoping for sightings of Lion, Leopard, Elephant and other big game.

There is an opportunity for participants to book on the park sunset or night drive (at own cost) where anything from big cats to Porcupine and Serval is a possibility.

We will have dinner and overnight in Letaba Camp.

 **Accommodation: Letaba Camp**

DAY 10: Letaba Camp, Kruger National Park

We will spend a full day in the vicinity of Letaba Camp in the middle-northern section of Kruger. We will embark on a morning and afternoon drive and spend lunchtime and the hottest part of the day back in camp.

The floodplain of the Letaba River hosts a high number of water birds whilst a number of roads emanating from the camp run alongside the Letaba River and through riparian vegetation offering first class birding. We will also visit two dams in the area in order to boost our waterbird count. Birds to look out for today include Grey-rumped and Pearl-breasted Swallow, Dusky Lark, Collared Pratincole, African Spoonbill, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Green-capped Eremomela, Bennett's and Bearded Woodpecker, Orange-breasted Bushshrike, Greater Flamingo, White-crowned Lapwing and African Openbill, along with a host of other typical Kruger birds like the loud but beautiful Purple-crested Turaco. There is again an opportunity for participants to book the park sunset or night drive (at own cost). In summer European Nightjar is almost a guarantee on these drives!

We will have dinner and a good night's rest in Letaba Camp again.

 **Accommodation: Letaba Camp**

DAY 11: Drive to Magoebaskloof

This morning we will saying goodbye to Kruger, as we head west onto the Escarpment for a radical change in habitat over a relatively short distance.

We will exit Kruger at the Phalaborwa gate and make our way over the next 160km to the famous Magoebaskloof, passing Hans Merensky Nature Reserve and the Wolkberg Wilderness Area.

The Magoebaskloof area is located in the north-eastern escarpment section of the Drakensberg mountain range, originally made up of grasslands and mist belt forest. The patches of forest have largely remained but the grasslands have been almost entirely planted to gum and pine trees and more recently avocado orchards.

Good birding can be found in areas in which the grassland or forest is largely intact. Depending on our arrival time in the area, we could do some forest birding in the afternoon already. Our main targets are Black-fronted Bushshrike, Bat Hawk and Cape Parrot. Other birds we could expect to see include Square-tailed Drongo, Barratt's Warbler, Orange Ground Thrush, Purple-crested Turaco, long-crested Eagle, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, White-starred Robin, Cape Batis, African Emerald Cuckoo and many more.

We will overnight at the legendary Kurisa Moya Lodge. It is a beautiful nature lodge positioned in the heart of an indigenous forest overlooking the breathtaking Kudu's River Valley. The Kurisa Moya farm measures 422 hectares of extraordinary landscape. Because the farm is situated between the lowveld and the highveld, it enjoys the benefits of both climates and environments. Kurisa Moya boasts excellent birding on site, including seven species of Robin, including White-starred Robin and Chorister Robin-Chat. Five Bushshrikes are on offer, with Black-fronted Bush-shrike heading up the list. Other specials include Narina Trogon, Buff-spotted Flufftail, Lemon Dove, Green Twinspot and Knysna Turaco, to name but a few.

 **Accommodation: Kurisa Moya**

DAY 12: Magoebaskloof

We have a full day of birding in the area. We will only return to the lodge late in the afternoon, as we will have lunch at a local birder-friendly establishment.

We will concentrate our efforts on the famous Woodbush Forest Drive. This 14km dirt road is the best forest birding area in the entire Limpopo province, if not the country. The Woodbush Forest Drive winds through pristine afro-montane forests, down into semi-deciduous mixed forest along the lower sections of the drive. Cape Parrot, Black-fronted Bushshrike, Orange Ground Thrush, Brown Scrub Robin, Tambourine Dove, Grey Cuckooshrike, Yellow-streaked Greenbul and Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher are simply

a few of the specials to be seen on this road. We will stop regularly to listen for sounds and scan the breaks in the forests, looking for African Cuckoo Hawk, Crowned Eagle and African Goshawk. Towards the bottom of the Forest Drive, we will look out for Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon, which has been sighted there on a few occasions.

We will also visit the nearby Debengeni Falls may give us Mountain Wagtail, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, African Dusky Flycatcher and Red-backed Mannikin, and if we are lucky, Grey Wagtail, a national rarity that has been returning to this site regularly.

If time allows we could also visit the Dap Naude Dam (good for Cape Grassbird, Olive Woodpecker, Lazy Cisticola and Double-collared Sunbird), and the Swartbos Forest Reserve (good for Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Square-tailed Drongo, Chorister Robin-Chat and Crowned Eagle).

Today we will probably use the services of David Letsoalo, a qualified BirdLife South Africa guide with intimate knowledge of the Woodbush forest area.

We will return to Kurisa Moya for our last dinner together before heading to bed.

 **Accommodation: Kurisa Moya**

DAY 13: Drive to Johannesburg and Departure

Depending on departure flight times, we may have a morning activity followed by breakfast and departure for Johannesburg, where the tour will come to an end. It is a 4 hour drive south to Johannesburg.

Thank you for choosing Nature Travel Birding.