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North East South Africa Birding Tour

9 DAY/ 8 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 Northeast of the country, and includes several days in the world-renowned Kruger National Park. The Northeast 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. Most of the tour takes place in the Mpumalanga province of South Africa, with its winning recipe of magnificent landscapes, modern infrastructure and the full big game experience.

Mpumalanga means "the place of the rising sun" and the climate and topography vary from cool highveld grasslands through the escarpment to the sub-tropical lowveld plains of the Kruger National Park; all in one province!

Typically we could expect a birdlist in the region of 400 birds (including many of South Africa's 39 endemic species) and unbelievable game viewing, including the Big Five.

DAILY SUMMARY

DAY 1	Drive to Dullstroom via Rietvlei Nature Reserve
DAY 2	Dullstroom including Mount Sheba
DAY 3	Drive to The Blyde River Canyon
DAY 4	Drive to Satara Camp in Kruger National Park

DAY 5	Satara Camp in Kruger National Park
DAY 6	Drive to Skukuza Camp in Kruger National Park
DAY 7	Skukuza Camp, Kruger National Park
DAY 8	Drive to Pretoriuskop Camp in Kruger National Park
DAY 9	Drive to Johannesburg and Departure

DETAILED DAILY ITINERARY

DAY 1: Drive to Dullstroom via Rietvlei Nature Reserve

After arriving in Johannesburg from your International flight, your Nature Travel guide will meet you at the O.R. Tambo International Airport early in the morning and the trip will start.

We will drive northwards, a short distance to Rietvlei Nature Reserve on the outskirts of the country's capital, Pretoria. This 4,000 hectares (40 km²) reserve is a favourite birding spot for many birders due not only to the interesting variety of birds that can be found here, but also because of the excellent facilities and three well maintained bird hides. The reserve also has a number of mammal species including Rhino, Buffalo and Hippopotamus. This small reserve conserves some Highveld grassland habitat and holds a few bird species which we will not have a chance of seeing on the rest of the itinerary. These include South African Shelduck, Northern Black Korhaan, Greater Kestrel and Chestnut-vented Warbler, among others. We will also test our LBJ identification skills and look for Plain-backed Pipit, African Pipit, Spike-heeled Lark, and Rufous-naped Lark.

From here we head for the Mpumalanga Province and the town of Dullstroom, about 250 kilometres away. We will have a few stops along the way to add some water birds to our list. Not far off the N4 highway there are some pans and wetlands where we will look for species such as Greater Flamingo, Cape Shoveler, Hottentot and Red-billed Teals, Yellow-billed, White-backed and Maccoa Ducks, Southern Pochard, Black-necked Grebe, Southern Red Bishop and others.

Further on we may deviate slightly to check out a South African Cliff Swallow colony before heading on for a late lunch in Dullstroom, our base for the next two days. Dullstroom is one of South Africa's premier flyfishing destinations, while its relatively cool and temperate climate has made it the only place in South Africa where both beech and elm trees grow. Furthermore it boasts many restaurants, curio shops and South Africa's biggest whisky bar!

The altitudes around Dullstroom vary from 2000 – 2250 metres (6500 feet) above sea level, and the habitat comprises open grasslands and rocky hillside. If time allows we may have a short afternoon drive in the area before getting ready for dinner. Species

we will be on the lookout for include the endemic Southern Bald Ibis, Cape Longclaw, Ant-eating Chat, Rufous-breasted Sparrowhawk, Buff-streaked Chat, Mountain Wheatear, Pied Starling, Steppe Buzzard, Cape Crow, Common Fiscal, Bokmakierie and many others.

The Dullstroom area does not hold too many large mammals, though Black Wildebeest, Blesbok, Springbok and other antelope can be seen on farms, having been re-introduced by many landowners. Grey Rhebok, Mountain Reedbuck, Yellow Mongoose, Meerkat and Natal Red Rock Rabbit live under free-ranging conditions and can be seen in the area.

We'll then have some time to freshen up before dinner in the hotel and our first night's sleep of the trip.

🏠 **Accommodation: The Highlander Hotel**

DAY 2: Dullstroom, including Mount Sheba

We will start the day with coffee/tea and rusks (traditional South African dunking biscuits) and then head into the Verloren Vallei (Lost Valley) Nature Reserve, a Ramsar Site high up in the Steenkampsberg mountain range, a short drive from town.

With a range of wetland types including permanent and seasonal marshes and streams, peatlands and springs situated in an area of high altitude grassland close to Dullstroom, the reserve contains more than thirty wetlands in near-pristine state. Specials we will be looking for include the endemic Grey-winged Francolin, Wattled Crane, the endemic Yellow-breasted Pipit, Gurney's Sugarbird, the endemic Eastern Long-billed Lark, Pale-crowned Cisticola, the endemic Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Denham's Bustard, and the endemic Ground Woodpecker. During summer Long-tailed Widowbird, Southern Red Bishop, Yellow-crowned Bishop and Yellow Bishop can be seen in their spectacular breeding dress. Raptors such as Jackal Buzzard and African Marsh Harrier can be seen over the grasslands.

After our adventurous morning we will have brunch back in Dullstroom, after which we will make our way to Mount Sheba, a hotel situated around two hours' drive away on the edge of the escarpment. Here the warm air rising up from the Lowveld (low-lying plain) to the east brings a lot of moisture and large stands of indigenous forest grow on the mountain slopes. Mount Sheba is situated close to one of the largest remaining forest patches, and this is where our birding will take place. There are some great species to be seen here, and we will search for Narina Trogon, the endemic Knysna Turaco, White-starred Robin, the endemic Chorister Robin-Chat, Cape Batis, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Olive Woodpecker, Orange Ground Thrush, Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher, Southern Double-collared Sunbird, Crowned Eagle and Southern Tchagra amongst many others. It is one of the best spots in the country for Orange Ground Thrush.

We return to Dullstroom where we may have time for a brief birding session during the afternoon, after which we'll have time to freshen up before dinner in the hotel restaurant, followed by a good night's rest.

🏠 **Accommodation: The Highlander Hotel**

DAY 3: Drive to The Blyde River Canyon

Today an early morning start will be best in order for us to get into the surrounding forest areas for some birding before breakfast, though as the region is often shrouded in mist we'll have to play it according to ear based on the current weather conditions. We'll put in quite a bit of effort to try and rack up a decent list of forest birds before breakfast, and if we still have some key species to see we'll have another bash in the forest before packing and departing for the Blyde River Canyon, a 3 to 4 hour drive away.

The Blyde River Canyon is one of the largest canyons on Earth, and it may be the largest "green canyon" due to its lush subtropical foliage. It has some of the deepest cliffs of any canyon on the planet. It is the second largest canyon in Africa and is known as one of the great wonders of nature on the continent. The canyon offers spectacular scenery with viewsites and rock formations overlooking the Lowveld along with dramatic towering cliffs, plateau grasslands, broadleaved woodland, riverine thicket and Afromontane forest.

The canyon supports large diversity of life, including numerous fish and antelope species as well as Hippopotamuses and Nile Crocodiles, and every primate species that may be seen in South Africa. The Three Rondavels lookout site is dominated by montane grassland which hosts a number of high altitude species. We will stop at quite a few spots in the canyon en route to our lodge and look for Wing-snapping, Wailing, Levillant's and Croaking Cisticola, the endemic Drakenberg Prinia, Fan-tailed Grassbird, the endemic Cape Rock Thrush, White-bellied Sunbird, Streaky-headed Seedeater, the endemic Buff-streaked Chat, Familiar Chat and Mocking Cliff Chat. In addition, the lookout is a good area to look out for raptors, including Cape Vulture, Verreaux's Eagle, Rock Kestrel, Lanner and Peregrine Falcon.

Set on the banks of the tranquil Blyde River, our thatched lodge for the evening is every nature lover's dream and rests under the shade of majestic Jackalberry and Fig trees. We will enjoy dinner and a good night's rest here.

🏠 **Accommodation: Blyde River Wilderness Lodge**

DAY 4: Drive to Satara Camp in Kruger National Park

We start the day with an early walk in the rocky woodland around the lodge, where the transition zone between the highveld and the lowland savannah is found. Our walk will take us along the Kadisi Trail, with views of some of the canyon's wonderful geological formations. Birding here can be superb and we hope to see Mocking Cliff Chat, Striped

Pipit, Lazy Cisticola, White-throated Robin-Chat, African Firefinch, Sweet Waxbill, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Black-crowned Tchagra and Golden-breasted Bunting, among others.

After breakfast we will depart, perhaps taking in the canyon view site before heading for the edge of the escarpment and dropping down to the Lowveld (the low-lying savannah region of the north-east).

After about an hour and a half we will enter the world famous Kruger National Park at Orpen Gate on the western side of the park. The Kruger National Park covers almost 20000 square kilometres and is the tenth largest game reserve in the world. The big game viewing in Kruger rival that of any reserve in Africa with large Elephant, Buffalo and Lion populations being relatively easily seen. The park is without doubt the finest birding locality in southern Africa. Due to its massive size and incredible biodiversity, it supports a unique combination of wilderness areas and varied habitats. For the birder, the high diversity and density of bird species is the great attraction. Every year over a million visitors tally up in the region of 520 bird species.

This is where the going gets really slow, due to the incredible numbers of bird species to be seen. These could include Green-winged Pytilia, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Southern Yellow and Red-billed Hornbills, Swainson's Spurfowl, Senegal and Crowned Lapwings, Magpie Shrike, Lilac-breasted and Purple Rollers, Common Scimitarbill and many others. Raptors are plentiful in this area of the park and we could see Goshawk, Wahlberg's, Tawny and Martial Eagles, Bateleur, Brown Snake Eagle and several other large raptors.

Here in the south-central region of the park the basaltic soils result in good grass growth and a reduced shrub component, and this more open Knobthorn / Marula savannah attracts the grazers such as Burchell's Zebra, Blue Wildebeest, Common Waterbuck and Cape Buffalo. These in turn provide food for Lion prides and Spotted Hyena clans, while the smaller herbivores such as Impala and Warthog are preyed upon by Leopard, Wild Dog and Cheetah.

Satara camp itself, although fairly large, has a rustic charm, with the bulk of the accommodation set out in a series of circles. We will arrive late in the afternoon in time for sundowners. We will have dinner in the camp's restaurant and settle in for the night with the African sounds all around us.

🏠 Accommodation: Satara Camp

DAY 5: Satara Camp in Kruger National Park

Today we will enjoy a full day of birding and sightseeing around Satara Camp. One of the most famous roads in the entire park is the S100 road that runs east-west from Satara towards the Lebombo mountains and Mozambique. Many long-time visitors to "Kruger" (as

the park is affectionately known) swear by this road for spectacular sightings of the Big Five and all sorts of other interesting creatures!

We could have lunch on the go or at one of the many picnic sites in the park, or return to camp to enjoy lunch. We will make our choice depending on the group's birding and personal needs.

We will drive along the savannah plains surrounding Satara and look for Common Ostrich, Kori and Black-bellied Bustard, Secretarybird, Red-backed Shrike, Sabota and Flappet Lark, Bronze-winged and Temminck's Courser, African Pipit, Wattled Starling, Red-billed Quelea, Common Quail and Chestnut-backed Sparrowlark amongst many others. We will also look for predators and their kills, which could attract White-headed, White-backed, Hooded and Cape Vulture. An Egyptian Vulture was even seen here regularly a while ago!

We will also concentrate some of our effort in Satara camp itself, and here we will look for Burchell's Starling, Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, African Mourning Dove, Thick-billed Weaver, Groundscraper Thrush, Lesser Masked Weaver, Little Swift, Woodland Kingfisher and the almost ever-present African Scops Owl close to the restaurant complex.

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 nightjars is a possibility.

We will enjoy dinner in the camp restaurant and settle in for a good night's rest.

🏠 **Accommodation: Satara Camp**

DAY 6: Drive to Skukuza Camp in Kruger National Park

Today we will be moving southwards to Skukuza Rest Camp 90 kilometres from Satara. We will be birding and game viewing and breakfast will be had en route at one of the park's many picnic spots.

Skukuza is the park's administrative headquarters, its largest camp and sometimes feels like a small town compared to the other camps in Kruger. It is situated on the southern bank of the Sabie River. This is a perennial river and one of the largest and most biologically diverse in the park. The habitat here comprises riparian zones, with large trees lining the river banks, and Sabie River thickets away from the river courses. Birds we will be looking out for in this area include Saddle-billed Stork, Goliath Heron, White-crowned Lapwing, African Finfoot, African Darter, White-browed Robin-Chat, Bearded Scrub Robin, Collared and Scarlet-chested Sunbirds, Cardinal Woodpecker, African Goshawk, African Fish Eagle, Orange-breasted and Grey-headed Bushshrikes, Wire-tailed Swallow, Pied and Giant Kingfishers, among many others.

The permanent water source here attracts large numbers of Impala, one of the main prey items of Leopard, and we will be on the lookout for these and other predators such as Lion, Wild Dog and Spotted Hyena. Elephant and Cape Buffalo are also common in

the area, usually heading down to the river as the day heats up. The area is, however, not really suited to large numbers of grazing animals and small herds of browsers such as Kudu and Bushbuck are more common here.

We should arrive at the camp in time for a late lunch and a rest period, after which we will head out on an afternoon drive if time permits. Once back in camp we will freshen up and enjoy dinner in the Cattle Baron restaurant in camp.

Remember to look out for dove-sized Fruit Bat and the very cute Thick-tailed Bushbaby on your way back to your chalet!

Accommodation: Skukuza Camp

DAY 7: Skukuza Camp in Kruger National Park

Today we have a full day of game viewing and birding in the Skukuza area. We will enjoy an early breakfast and either head out into the park immediately, or do a walk in the camp itself before heading out. Camp birding in Kruger should not be underestimated! The Sycamore Figs along the river provide excellent birding, attracting African Green Pigeon, Purple-crested Turaco and Brown-headed Parrot when in fruit.

The reed banks visible from the walkway are good for sightings of Half-collared Kingfisher, Red-faced Cisticola and both Red-backed and Bronze Mannikin. Seven species of flycatcher occur in the camp: Grey Tit-Flycatcher, African Paradise Flycatcher, Southern Black Flycatcher, African Dusky Flycatcher (winter vagrant), Spotted Flycatcher (summer migrant), Ashy Flycatcher and Pale Flycatcher. In winter, flowering aloes attract Scarlet-chested, White-bellied and Marico Sunbirds, as well as Black-headed Oriole and various weavers. We will also check the river for African Black Duck and Hamerkop.

A few kilometers to the west, on the Paul Kruger Gate road, is the turn off to the famous Lake Panic Bird Hide. This can be a very rewarding site, with Malachite Kingfisher, Green-backed Heron, Wire-tailed Swallow, Greater Painted Snipe, Spur-winged Goose, White-faced Whistling Duck, Black Crake and Thick-billed Weaver among the many species providing photographic opportunities.

The plant nursery at Skukuza attracts a variety of birds, and, time permitting, we will swing by and look for Marico and Collared Sunbird, while the nearby golf course has had its fair share of rarities, including River Warbler and Buff-spotted Flufftail! The tall riverine woodland along the Sabie and Sand rivers is one of the best places in South Africa to search for the rare Thick-billed Cuckoo during the summer months.

We will have lunch today either back in Skukuza or at Lower Sabie Camp, and return to Skukuza in the late afternoon. We will then have dinner in the restaurant and enjoy a good night's rest.

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

🏠 **Accommodation: Skukuza Camp**

DAY 8: Drive to Pretoriuskop Camp in Kruger National Park

Once again, after a morning drive and breakfast, we'll head on to our next camp and the last stop for the tour, about 50 kilometres away.

Pretoriuskop Camp is situated in the region of the Park that receives the highest rainfall and is dominated by a veld type known as Pretoriuskop Sourveld. The tall, coarse grasses growing here are not too palatable, so the area does not hold large numbers of grazers, though it is particularly good for White Rhinoceros and the rare and beautiful Sable antelope. It is immediately apparent to any visitor that Pretoriuskop is a unique camp, as brilliant red Common Coral trees adorn the camp, pre-dating the decision to make exclusive use of indigenous plants in laying out rest camp gardens. Nostalgia prompted an exception to the rule for Pretoriuskop, the Kruger's oldest rest camp, and exotic flowering plants were allowed to stay, enhancing the strong sense of the past that is so pervasive.

Birds we will be searching for in the surrounding grassland savannah area include Dark Chanting Goshawk, African Cuckoo-Hawk, Bushveld Pipit, Yellow-throated Petronia, Pale Flycatcher, Retz's and White-crested Helmetshrikes, Red-billed Firefinch, Golden-breasted Bunting, Grey Penduline Tit, Neddicky, Green-capped and Yellow-bellied Eremomelas, among others.

The impressive granite dome known as "Shabeni Hill" is not far from the camp; here we will look for Lizard Buzzard, Shikra, Little Sparrowhawk and the rare Ovambo Sparrowhawk. The dense thickets at the base of the dome are good for Southern Boubou, Red-throated Wryneck, Amethyst Sunbird, Striped Pipit, Brown-crowned Tchagra and Mocking Cliff Chat, as well as the more easily heard than seen Gorgeous and Grey-headed Bushshrike.

There are several camp specials around the pool area and we will take a walk there and look for Brown-headed Parrot, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Black-headed Oriole, Common Scimitarbill, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Black-collared Barbet, Violet-backed Starling, Black-backed Puffback, Red-headed Weaver, Blue Waxbill and Arrow-marked Babbler. A pair of Bat Hawks have even been seen hunting in the camp at dusk!

We will probably arrive at camp in the afternoon and will have time to settle in before an afternoon drive in the area and a final dinner in the camp's restaurant or even a traditional South African Barberque (Braai), while we listen for the distinctive call of Freckled Nightjar.

🏠 **Accommodation: Pretoriuskop Camp**

DAY 9: Drive to Johannesburg and Departure

There will be a final optional activity on the last morning, offering a last chance to see species missed so far. After breakfast we'll meander slowly out of the park and then head back to Johannesburg, a five hour drive away.

Our tour ends in Johannesburg at the O.R. Tambo International Airport.

Thank you for choosing Nature Travel Birding.