

# SOUTH AFRICA: Custom Tour – Eastern Escarpment and Kruger National Park May 2017

By Jason Boyce



Leopard – we couldn't get enough of them!



#### **TOUR ITINERARY**

# Overnight

Day 1 – Suikerbosrand and Marievale	Johannesburg
Day 2 – Drive to Dullstroom	Linger Longer, Dullstroom
Day 3 – Dullstroom Birding – Mt Sheba	Mt Sheba, Pilgrims Rest
Day 4 – Mt Sheba and the Panorama Route	Mt Sheba, Pilgrims Rest
Day 5 – Mt Sheba – Kruger National Park	Berg en Dal, KNP
Day 6 – Kruger National Park	Berg en Dal, KNP
Day 7 – Kruger National Park	Satara, KNP
Day 8 – Kruger National Park	Satara, KNP
Day 9 – Kruger – Sabie Sands Private Reserve	Cheetah Plains, Sabie Sands
Day 10 – Sabie Sands Private Reserve	Cheetah Plains, Sabie Sands
Day 11 – Sabie Sands Private Reserve	Cheetah Plains, Sabie Sands
Day 12 – Sabie Sands Private Reserve - White River	White River (End of Tour)

#### **OVERVIEW**

This trip was specially designed for Kieran and Pattie to see the very best of the escarpment of South Africa and the low-lying Kruger National Park to the east. The beautiful scenes of the Blyde River Canyon, Pilgrims Rest village, the rolling grasslands and rocky hillsides of Dullstroom, and the indigenous forest of Mt Sheba offer some incredible birding with many a photo opportunity. The Kruger National Park and the Sabie Sands Private Game Reserve gave us a perfect balance of birding and special close-up mammal sightings. Kieran, who has been birding for a long time and who has joined us on many trips – most recently to Cuba with Chris Lotz – was relishing the chance to finally get stuck into birding in Southern Africa. Species such as Gurney's Sugarbird, Secretarybird, African Hoopoe, and African Barred Owlet were all on the cards. Pattie, on the other hand, was patiently awaiting sightings of special mammals such as the powerful lion and the mystical leopard as well as cheetah and a chance to see wild dog.

#### 3 May - Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve and Marievale Bird Sanctuary

A day trip with senior tour leader Dylan Vasapolli was a fantastic way to kick things off here in the southern hemisphere. A total of 106 species were recorded for the day, including some cracking grassland species from Suikerbosrand and some waterfowl from Marievale Bird Sanctuary. In Suikerbosrand Cape Rock Thrush and Mocking Cliff Chat were seen calling from the same song-post, while both Brown Snake Eagle and Jackal Buzzard put in a nice display. The thorn veld scrub was productive: Common Scimitarbill, Kalahari Scrub Robin, and Green-winged Pytilia were all seen. Marievale was stunning in the afternoon light. African Snipe, Black Crake, and African Rail were moving around and feeding quite close to the road. A true highlight was watching multiple Marsh Owls flying slowly over the open grassy areas.

# 4 - 5 May - Drive to Dullstroom and Dullstroom birding

We started our drive to the eastern escarpment of South Africa. We would stay one night in Dullstroom to bird the surrounding high-altitude grasslands and then two nights at Mt Sheba to enjoy forest walks as well as some more escarpment birding and extravagant scenery. En route to Dullstroom we decided to fit in some birding in the Wilge River Valley north of Bronkhorstspruit. Here we kicked off our list with the likes of **Striped Pipit**, **Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird**, **Thick-billed Weaver**, **Black Cuckooshrike**, **Southern Black Tit**, **Black-crowned Tchagra**, **Pearl-breasted Swallow**, and a noisy party of **Arrow-marked Babblers**. Other birds en route included **Southern Black Flycatcher**, **Pied Starling**, and an elegant **Long-crested Eagle**. Dullstroom birding was enjoyable: **Eastern Long-billed Lark**, **Rock Kestrel**, **Buff-streaked Chat**, **Mountain Wheatear**, and **African Olive Pigeons** all performed in one way or another. The town is quaint, and we surely won't forget the excellent omelets and the fresh trout!

#### 6 - 7 May – Mt Sheba Birding and the Panorama Route

It's a beautiful drive to Mt Sheba, and the rocky hillsides and golden grasslands quickly become an indigenous-forested descent toward the beautiful lodging. The forested descent, as one would expect, holds a really awesome list of forest bird species as well as samango monkey. We caught up in the forest with species like **Knysna Turaco**, **Chorister Robin-Chat**, **Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler**, **Southern Double-Collared Sunbird**, and **Olive Thrush**.



Gurney's Sugarbird, Mt Sheba

We spent a full day birding the surrounding forest edges in the morning and traversing the beautiful sites that the famous Panorama Route has to offer. The morning's birding session was productive, yielding African Goshawk, African Dusky Flycatcher, African Olive Pigeon, Olive Woodpecker, Cape Batis, Lemon Dove, and the beautiful White-starred Robin. We were also very fortunate to pick up some escarpment species like Southern Tchagra and Red-necked Spurfowl as well as Gurney's Sugarbird. The sugarbird was completely confiding and sat up in the open for an extended period of time – a great sighting! A stunning, clear day meant that our drive to Pilgrim's Rest and to Graskop and then northwards to the Blyde River Canyon lookouts was thoroughly enjoyable. The Pinnacle Rock lookout as well as God's Window were the first couple of stops. However, the Three

Rondavels lookout was definitely the favorite spot of the day. Lunch was at a local spot called Boskombuis (Afrikaans for 'bush kitchen'), which served traditional meals such as Pap en sous, Chicken Potjie, and a traditional curried mince dish called Bobotie. This was a spot that I will be sure to visit more often from now on!



A panoramic view at the Three Rondavels – whoa!

# 8 - 9 May - Drive to Kruger National Park and Berg en Dal area birding

Kieran, Pattie, and I set off down the escarpment towards the town of Hazyview. We planned on entering the Kruger National Park at Phabeni Gate and from there making our way to Pretoriuskop for lunch. After picking up some local fresh fruit from a road farm stall we made our way into Kruger.

The excitement of having lots of animals and birds around every corner was huge, and it wasn't long before we enjoyed a few new birds and some more of the common mammal species. Birding highlights en route to our accommodation for the next two nights included White-crested and Retz's Helmetshrikes, Bushveld Pipit, Green-capped Eremomela, and an adult and later an immature Dark Chanting Goshawk. The sounds of Burchell's Starlings and Brown-headed Parrots were almost perpetual on the road leading toward the rest camp, while the grounds of the camp held African Paradise Flycatcher, Grey Tit-Flycatcher, Collared and White-bellied Sunbirds, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Little Sparrowhawk, Black-headed Oriole, Burchell's Coucal, Purple-crested Turaco, African Barred Owlet, Hamerkop, Bearded Scrub Robin, White-browed Robin-Chat, and Greater Blue-eared Starling as well as both Orange-breasted and Grey-headed Bushshrikes! What a haul!

A super-productive night drive from Berg en Dal was enjoyed. Common duiker (an occasional road-kill-scavenging antelope – as we learned on the drive), steenbok, and spotted hyena were in good numbers, as too was **Bronze-winged Courser** – a ridiculous 17 individuals were seen on the drive! Other birding highlights in the area were **Martial Eagle**, **Burchell's Coucal**, **Bushveld Pipit**, **Black Stork**, and **Red-billed Oxpecker**.

African Barred Owlet, Berg en Dal Rest Camp

### 10 - 11 May - Birding Satara and surrounds

Drought in the area over the past year and a half was followed by a really good rainfall season this past January through March. This meant that certain species were doing really well. The Satara area was testament to that with excellent numbers of Common Buttonquail and Harlequin Quail. The buttonquail were particularly special as they were often seen on the road accompanied by a number of little balls of fluff on toothpick-legs. They would soon scurry off into the long grass, not to be seen again. We had booked ourselves onto a night drive in Berg en Dal, and we did the same thing up here in Satara. We checked out the air strip nearby as the local pride of lion often hangs around there – but no luck. We did pick up both Square-tailed and Fiery-necked Nightjar in addition to African elephant, blue wildebeest, and scrub hare. Not long after that we bumped into an African wild cat – what a stunning little cat! A pair of Marsh Owls was a nice surprise, hunting over the open fields for small rodents. Other night drive highlights included spotted hyena, (probable) large spotted genet, Common Quail, and a large male leopard that unfortunately moved off into the long grass before everyone could get onto it. We spent time in the Satara and Olifants areas over the course of the next day, and it was a privilege to see great numbers of African elephant, giraffe, waterbuck, greater kudu, warthog, vervet monkey, and chacma baboon. Birding was slow at times but great in the camp sites - we enjoyed the likes of Whiteheaded, Hooded, and Lappet-faced Vultures, African Hawk-Eagle, Shikra, Yellowbilled Oxpecker, White-throated Robin-Chat, Mourning Collared Dove, Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, African Green Pigeon, and a stunning Secretarybird gliding through the grassland. We were also fortunate enough to find a couple of Southern Ground Hornbills patrolling the area right alongside Satara Rest Camp. Some of the local ponds and rivers held Knob-billed Duck, Black Crake, Water Thick-knee, and both Woolly-necked and the gigantic **Saddle-billed Stork** – a Kruger great!



Black Stork – Near Berg en Dal, Kruger National Park

## 12 - 14 May – Sabie Sands Private Game Reserve, Cheetah Plains

It was to be a fairly short drive that morning from Satara through the Orpen Gate and into Sabie Sands at Gowrie Gate. We picked up a few things along the way — an adult **Tawny Eagle** standing out as one of the better sightings. We kicked things off with a drive that afternoon already, and we were rewarded with a sighting of a coalition of cheetahs crossing through the Cheetah Plains property in the west. 'Breathtaking elegance on paws' is about the only way I know how to describe these majestic animals. We weren't done yet — we bumped into a couple of **Red-crested Korhaans** en route north. These guys were a treat to watch as they gave us their characteristic click-peep call that repeats over and over rapidly. Eventually we made our way to where a pride of lions was reported. Sure enough, we found them — a whole pride right alongside the road with a host of cubs! This was one of the best game drives that I have personally been on; not only were the sightings great, but it was a beautiful evening with great company.



Cheetah

Over the course of the next few days we made sure to be out nice and early in the mornings, leaving just before sunrise to catch the first bit of light possible. This meant an early cup of coffee as well as a very South African rusk to wake you up. Once you're out there in the fresh, cool air, waiting for the next sighting, nothing could be better! We had great sightings of some of the more common animals such as giraffe, plains zebra, greater kudu, blue wildebeest, impala, and nyala, while seeing side-striped jackal was a little less common. Bird parties commonly held Blue Waxbill, Chinspot Batis, White-crested Helmetshrike, Black-backed Puffback, and Golden-tailed, Cardinal, and Bearded Woodpeckers. Terrestrial birds included the very vocal Coqui Francolin and Swainson's and Natal Spurfowls, Crested Francolin, and Helmeted Guineafowl. A pair of Bateleur perched high on an open branch was a real treat! This species is more often than not seen in its characteristic rocking motion while on the wing.



A pair of Bateleur, Sabie Sands

We were completely spoiled when it came to the charismatic Southern Ground Hornbill. We bumped into a group of four birds a couple of times and were able to observe them prowling the grasslands in search of any little (or large) morsel they could find. Other hornbill species were also abundant during the trip; these were Southern Yellow-billed, Southern Red-billed, Crowned, and African Grey Hornbills. The gardens at the lodge were super-productive. Kieran and I enjoyed walking up and down, checking to see what was knocking about. Suddenly, "What's that calling?" - Scarlet-chested Sunbird! A small flowering creeper was growing on the wall alongside the reception; the sunbird couldn't resist the nectar from these flowers. What a stunning bird! Before we knew it, our last morning was upon us, and I'm still not sure that we can believe it ourselves, but our last drive on the last morning of our tour was really special! We had mentioned in passing that this would indeed be the last chance for us to spot the enigmatic African wild dog. Well, you guessed it: Out of the blue we bumped right into a small pack of three dogs that had just spotted a large group of impala. This can't be happening – are we about to see a wild dog kill? In a flash they were off, full speed ahead! Impala scattered everywhere. Well, the dogs were close but unsuccessful this time around, and unfortunately after all that excitement they quickly disappeared into the thickets. Well, we had major excitement to end off a wonderful trip!

There were many great memories made and many new species of bird seen - a huge thanks to Kieran and Pattie! I hope you guys will continue to enjoy the natural world as much as you do now!

# South Africa - The Escarpment and Kruger National Park May 2017 Bird List

Bird List		
Bold	l = Country endemic	
	d, VU = Vulnerable, EN = Endangered itically Endangered	d, CE =
Common name IOC 7.2	Scientific name IOC 7.2	Trip
	STRUTHIONIFORMES	
Ostriches	<b>Struthionidae</b>	
Common Ostrich	Struthio camelus	1
	ANSERIFORMES	
Ducks, Geese and Swans	Anatidae	
White-faced Whistling Duck	Dendrocygna viduata	1
Knob-billed Duck	Sarkidiornis melanotos	1
Egyptian Goose	Alopochen aegyptiaca	1
African Black Duck	Anas sparsa	1
Yellow-billed Duck	Anas undulata	1
Red-billed Teal	Anas erythrorhyncha	1
	GALLIFORMES	
<b>Guineafowl</b>	<u>Numididae</u>	
Helmeted Guineafowl	Numida meleagris	1
Pheasants and allies	<b>Phasianidae</b>	
Coqui Francolin	Peliperdix coqui	1
Crested Francolin	Dendroperdix sephaena	1
Natal Spurfowl	Pternistis natalensis	1
Red-necked Spurfowl	Pternistis afer	1
Swainson's Spurfowl	Pternistis swainsonii	1
Common Quail	Coturnix coturnix	1
Harlequin Quail	Coturnix delegorguei	1
	PODICIPEDIFORMES	
Grebes	<u>Podicipedidae</u>	
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	1
	CICONIIFORMES	
<u>Storks</u>	<u>Ciconiidae</u>	
Black Stork	Ciconia nigra	1
Woolly-necked Stork	Ciconia episcopus	1
Saddle-billed Stork	Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis	1
Marabou Stork	Leptoptilos crumenifer	1
	PELECANIFORMES	

Neddicky	Cisticola fulvicapilla	1
Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis	1
Desert Cisticola	Cisticola aridulus	1
Tawny-flanked Prinia	Prinia subflava	1
Drakensberg Prinia	Prinia hypoxantha	1
Bar-throated Apalis	Apalis thoracica	1
Yellow-breasted Apalis	Apalis flavida	1
Green-backed Camaroptera	Camaroptera brachyura	1
Stierling's Wren-Warbler	Calamonastes stierlingi	1
Yellow-bellied Eremomela	Eremomela icteropygialis	1
Green-capped Eremomela	Eremomela scotops	1
Burnt-necked Eremomela	Eremomela usticollis	1
<u>Laughingthrushes</u>	Leiothrichidae	
Arrow-marked Babbler	Turdoides jardineii	1
White-eyes	Zosteropidae	
Cape White-eye	Zosterops virens	1
Sugarbirds	Promeropidae	
Gurney's Sugarbird	Promerops gurneyi	1
Starlings, Rhabdornis	Sturnidae	
Wattled Starling	Creatophora cinerea	1
Cape Starling	Lamprotornis nitens	1
Greater Blue-eared Starling	Lamprotornis chalybaeus	1
Burchell's Starling	Lamprotornis australis	1
Pied Starling	Lamprotornis bicolor	1
Red-winged Starling	Onychognathus morio	1
<u>Oxpeckers</u>	Buphagidae	
Yellow-billed Oxpecker	Buphagus africanus	1
Red-billed Oxpecker	Buphagus erythrorynchus	1
Thrushes	<u>Turdidae</u>	
Orange Ground Thrush	Geokichla gurneyi	1
Groundscraper Thrush	Turdus litsitsirupa	1
Kurrichane Thrush	Turdus libonyana	1
Olive Thrush	Turdus olivaceus	1
Chats, Old World Flycatchers -	<u>Muscicapidae</u>	
Bearded Scrub Robin	Cercotrichas quadrivirgata	1
White-browed Scrub Robin	Cercotrichas leucophrys	1
Brown Scrub Robin	Cercotrichas signata	1
Grey Tit-Flycatcher	Myioparus plumbeus	1
Southern Black Flycatcher	Melaenornis pammelaina	1
Pale Flycatcher	Melaenornis pallidus	1
Fiscal Flycatcher	Melaenornis silens	1
Ashy Flycatcher	Muscicapa caerulescens	1

African Dusky Flycatcher	Muscicapa adusta	1
Cape Robin-Chat	Cossypha caffra	1
White-throated Robin-Chat	Cossypha humeralis	1
White-browed Robin-Chat	Cossypha heuglini	1
Red-capped Robin-Chat	Cossypha natalensis	1
Chorister Robin-Chat	Cossypha dichroa	1
White-starred Robin	Pogonocichla stellata	1
Cape Rock Thrush	Monticola rupestris	1
African Stonechat	Saxicola torquatus	1
Buff-streaked Chat	Campicoloides bifasciatus	1
Mocking Cliff Chat	Thamnolaea cinnamomeiventris	1
Ant-eating Chat	Myrmecocichla formicivora	1
Familiar Chat	Oenanthe familiaris	1
Sunbirds	Nectariniidae	
Collared Sunbird	Hedydipna collaris	1
Amethyst Sunbird	Chalcomitra amethystina	1
Scarlet-chested Sunbird	Chalcomitra senegalensis	1
Malachite Sunbird	Nectarinia famosa	1
Southern Double-collared Sunbird	Cinnyris chalybeus	1
Greater Double-collared Sunbird	Cinnyris afer	1
Marico Sunbird	Cinnyris mariquensis	1
White-bellied Sunbird	Cinnyris talatala	1
Old World Sparrows, Snowfinches	Passeridae	
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	1
Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	Passer diffusus	1
Yellow-throated Petronia	Gymnoris superciliaris	1
Weavers, Widowbirds	<u>Ploceidae</u>	
Red-billed Buffalo Weaver	Bubalornis niger	1
Thick-billed Weaver	Amblyospiza albifrons	1
Cana Waayar	TO 7	
Cape Weaver	Ploceus capensis	1
Southern Masked Weaver	Ploceus velatus	1
-	1	
Southern Masked Weaver	Ploceus velatus	1
Southern Masked Weaver Red-headed Weaver	Ploceus velatus Anaplectes rubriceps	1 1
Southern Masked Weaver Red-headed Weaver Red-billed Quelea	Ploceus velatus Anaplectes rubriceps Quelea quelea	1 1 1
Southern Masked Weaver Red-headed Weaver Red-billed Quelea Southern Red Bishop	Ploceus velatus Anaplectes rubriceps Quelea quelea Euplectes orix	1 1 1 1
Southern Masked Weaver Red-headed Weaver Red-billed Quelea Southern Red Bishop White-winged Widowbird	Ploceus velatus Anaplectes rubriceps Quelea quelea Euplectes orix Euplectes albonotatus	1 1 1 1 1
Southern Masked Weaver Red-headed Weaver Red-billed Quelea Southern Red Bishop White-winged Widowbird Long-tailed Widowbird	Ploceus velatus Anaplectes rubriceps Quelea quelea Euplectes orix Euplectes albonotatus Euplectes progne	1 1 1 1 1
Southern Masked Weaver Red-headed Weaver Red-billed Quelea Southern Red Bishop White-winged Widowbird Long-tailed Widowbird Waxbills, Munias and allies	Ploceus velatus Anaplectes rubriceps Quelea quelea Euplectes orix Euplectes albonotatus Euplectes progne Estrildidae	1 1 1 1 1 1
Southern Masked Weaver Red-headed Weaver Red-billed Quelea Southern Red Bishop White-winged Widowbird Long-tailed Widowbird Waxbills, Munias and allies Cut-throat Finch	Ploceus velatus Anaplectes rubriceps Quelea quelea Euplectes orix Euplectes albonotatus Euplectes progne Estrildidae Amadina fasciata	1 1 1 1 1 1
Southern Masked Weaver Red-headed Weaver Red-billed Quelea Southern Red Bishop White-winged Widowbird Long-tailed Widowbird  Waxbills, Munias and allies Cut-throat Finch Red-billed Firefinch	Ploceus velatus Anaplectes rubriceps Quelea quelea Euplectes orix Euplectes albonotatus Euplectes progne Estrildidae Amadina fasciata Lagonosticta senegala	1 1 1 1 1 1 1

Bronze Mannikin	Lonchura cucullata	1
Indigobirds, Whydahs	<u>Viduidae</u>	
Village Indigobird	Vidua chalybeata	1
Wagtails, Pipits	<b>Motacillidae</b>	
Cape Wagtail	Motacilla capensis	1
African Pied Wagtail	Motacilla aguimp	1
Cape Longclaw	Macronyx capensis	1
African Pipit	Anthus cinnamomeus	1
Long-billed Pipit	Anthus similis	1
Striped Pipit	Anthus lineiventris	1
Bushveld Pipit	Anthus caffer	1
<u>Finches</u>	<b>Fringillidae</b>	
Yellow-fronted Canary	Crithagra mozambica	1
Streaky-headed Seedeater	Crithagra gularis	1
Cape Canary	Serinus canicollis	1
<b>Buntings, New World Sparrows</b>	<b>Emberizidae</b>	
Cinnamon-breasted Bunting	Emberiza tahapisi	1
Golden-breasted Bunting	Emberiza flaviventris	1
TOTAL		251

South Africa - The Escarpment and Kruger National Park May 2017 Mammal List		
Common Name	Scientific Name	Trip
	RODENTIA	
	Sciuridae	
Smith's bush squirrel	Paraxerus cepapi	1
	LAGOMORPHA	
	Leporidae	
Scrub Hare	Lepus saxatilis	1
	PRIMATES	
	Cercopithecidae	
Chacma baboon	Papio ursinus	1
Vervet monkey	Chlorocebus pygerythrus	1
Samango monkey	Cercopithecus mitis labiatus	1
	CARNIVORA	
	Canidae	
African wild dog	Lycaon pictus	1
Black-backed jackal	Canis mesomelas	1
Side-striped jackal	Canis adustus	1
	Felidae	
Lion	Panthera leo	1

Leopard	Panthera pardus	1
Cheetah	Acinonyx jubatus	1
African wild cat	Felis silvestris lybica	1
	Hyaenidae	
Spotted hyena	Crocuta crocuta	1
	Viverridae	
Cape genet	Genetta tigrina	1
	Herpestidae	
Yellow mongoose	Cynictis penicillata	1
Banded mongoose	Mungos mungo	1
Slender mongoose	Herpestes sanguineus	1
	PROBOSCIDEA	
Elephants:	Elephantidae	
African/Savannah Elephant	Loxodonta africana	1
	PERISSODACTYLA	
	Equidae	
Plains zebra	Equus quagga	1
	Rhinocerotidae	
White Rhinoceros	Ceratotherium simum	1
	CETARTIODACTYLA	
	Suidae	
Warthog	Phacochoerus africanus	1
	Hippopotamidae	
Hippopotamus	Hippopotamus amphibius	1
	Giraffidae	
Giraffe	Giraffa camelopardalis	1
	Bovidae	
African buffalo	Syncerus caffer	1
Bushbuck	Tragelaphus scriptus	1
Impala	Aepyceros melampus	1
Blue wildebeest	Connochaetes taurinus taurinus	1
Oribi	Ourebia ourebi	1
Blesbok	Damaliscus pygargus phillipsi	1
Common duiker	Sylvicapra grimmia	1
Klipspringer	Oreotragus oreotragus	1
Steenbok	Raphicerus campestris	1
Grey rhebok	Pelea capreolus	1
Greater kudu	Tragelaphus strepsiceros	1
Nyala	Tragelaphus angasii	1
Waterbuck	Kobus ellipsiprymnus	1
TOTAL		36