



**SUBTROPICAL SOUTH AFRICA 18-DAY BIRDING
ADVENTURE**

25 FEBRUARY – 14 MARCH 2020



Southern Bald Ibis (photo Ian Merrill) is one of our target species on this tour.

This subtropical tour provides a representative sample of the very best that African birding can offer. Huge numbers of species will be seen (the typical bird list for this adventure is in the range of 400 species), and we will also find large numbers of South African endemics. Apart from yielding hundreds of bird species, this dream African experience also provides the possibility of seeing Lion, Cheetah, Leopard, African Elephants, rhinos, Nile Crocodiles, Hippopotamus, Giraffe, various antelopes, plus many other mammal species, as well as breathtaking scenery. We also often get feedback that the accommodation on this tour is great!

We start this birding safari in Durban on the east coast of South Africa, bounded by the warm Indian Ocean. Durban must be one of the “birdiest” cities on earth, and we spend time looking for subtropical coastal species before heading inland to the “KwaZulu-Natal midlands” and the foothills of the imposing Drakensberg Escarpment, where temperate-forest and high-grassland birds abound. The rare **Cape Parrot** is one of the targets (which, interestingly, can’t be found on our Cape birding tour despite the name), as are the beautiful **Green Twinspot**, two super *Zoothera* species (**Spotted** and **Orange Ground Thrushes**), **Narina Trogon**, the spectacularly-marked **Green Twinspot**, and, last but not least, the Vulnerable **Blue Swallow** (what a truly spectacular-looking hirundine!). We then ascend the heights of the Drakensberg into Lesotho via the Sani Pass, an amazing road that gives access from the base of the escarpment right up to the high plateau at 10,000 feet (over 3,000 meters), with different endemics appearing as elevation increases – near the base are birds such as **Bush Blackcap**, then as one ascends **Gurney’s Sugarbird**, **Ground Woodpecker**, **Sentinel Rock Thrush**, and shining, metallic **Malachite Sunbird** appear, followed eventually by high-plateau species including **Drakensberg Rockjumper**, **Drakensberg Siskin**, and **Bearded Vulture**.

Zululand, probably the most bird-diverse corner of South Africa, is next on our agenda, and not only does it have a great many species, but there are several very localized ones, basically only occurring here and in southern Mozambique – e.g. **Pink-throated Twinspot**, **Lemon-breasted Canary**, and **Neergaard’s Sunbird**. This also is big mammal country and one of the world’s strongholds for Black and White Rhinoceros, very good for Leopard, and hosts a variety of mammals not likely to be seen in Kruger – including Nyala, Samango Monkey, the absolutely tiny Suni antelope, etc.

We then ascend to the legendary (among birders seeking endemics) Wakkerstroom highlands, and eventually we reach the Kruger National Park, one of the world’s greatest game parks, which also has a bird list of over 500 species.

Before flying home out of Johannesburg we sample an area which gives access to some Kalahari-type birds, meaning we usually add a large number of species to our already large bird list right at the end of the trip – these include such beauties as **Crimson-breasted Shrike**, **Southern Pied Babbler**, **Violet-eared Waxbill**, **Kalahari Scrub Robin**, **Long-tailed Paradise Whydah**, and many others.

This Birding Tour South Africa adventure can be combined with our **Western Cape, South Africa, 12-day Birding Adventure February 2020** tour.

Itinerary (18 days/17 nights)

Day 1. Durban arrival and start of coastal birding

Your international flight (or local flight if you are joining us from our Western Cape Birding Adventure) arrives in Durban. For those joining both the Cape and subtropical trips, folks such as Chris in the Birding Ecotours office plan to book the one-way flight from Cape Town to Durban for everyone (on this, the first day of the subtropical trip, which is also the last day of the Cape trip). It is no problem at all, however, if you have already booked this flight. If we book the flight for you, the cost can just be added to the balance you owe – the flight is usually R1000-R2000 (ballpark).

We always see a great many new birds this afternoon already (a lot of them within our lodge garden), as Durban is certainly a world away from the Cape. “Garden” birds in Durban can include **African Crowned Eagle** (usually flying over), the spectacular **Purple-crested Turaco**, various different barbet species (always charismatic and good-looking), and sometimes even **Black-throated Wattle-eye**. Estuary birding this afternoon, or more likely tomorrow morning, can generate several tern species as well as **Lesser Sand Plover**, **Greater Sand Plover**, and other shorebirds.

Overnight: Gateway Country Lodge, Durban

Day 2. Durban to Underberg, birding on the way

After further birding in the Durban area, where we’ll spend quite a lot of time getting to grips with a whole new suite of species, we’ll eventually start heading inland. We may spend some time birding Oribi Gorge for the likes of **Knysna Turaco**, **Knysna Woodpecker** (rare), **Chorister Robin Chat**, **Grey Sunbird**, and a host of others. As we head toward the foothills of the Drakensberg, where we will spend two nights near Underberg at the base of the Sani Pass, we may try for the likes of **Blue Swallow** and other ‘mistbelt grassland’ species. (The swallows have become fairly rare in South Africa, and, depending on their recent whereabouts, we may only try for them on day 4.) The higher elevations in the Underberg region present us with completely new habitats – largely high-altitude grassland (with spectacular, displaying **Southern Red Bishop**, **Red-collared Widowbird**, and the most extravagant of all, **Long-tailed Widowbird**, being a real feature of the rolling-hill landscape). Patches of temperate forest occur in the more secluded valleys protected from fires – here we find some very localized species not occurring in the subtropical coastal forests.

Overnight: Sani Valley Lodge, Himeville

Day 3. Birding day trip up the Sani Pass and into Lesotho

This is one of the most spectacular birding adventures one can embark on. We spend a very full day, taking along picnic breakfasts and lunches, ascending the Sani Pass, which gives amazing access to most of the Drakensberg endemics within the space of a single day. The “barrier of spears” (as the Drakensberg is known to locals) is impressive to say the least, and the scenery today is amazing as we gradually ascend from the foothills to the plateau. Bird-life changes as altitude increases – **Drakensberg Prinia**, **Bush Blackcap**, and **Cape Grassbird** of the lower thickets (consisting largely of “ouhout” or “old wood”, a bush species that looks older than it is because of its gnarled bark) are replaced by **Malachite Sunbird** and **Gurney’s Sugarbird** in the higher *Protea* belt (also with **Ground Woodpecker** and rock thrushes on the slopes here), which are eventually replaced by **Mountain Pipit**, **African Rock Pipit** (rare, though), **Drakensberg**

Rockjumper (common and confiding), **Drakensberg Siskin**, and **Bearded Vulture** on the relatively flat plateau within Lesotho. After a long day we eventually “come down the mountain” again for a well-deserved dinner (and a toast to all the endemics!).

Overnight: Sani Valley Lodge, Himeville

Day 4. Birding the Underberg area, transfer to Eshowe

We spend a lot of the morning birding the “midlands” for the beautiful **Blue Swallow**, **Southern Bald Ibis**, **Black-winged Lapwing**, **Secretarybird**, **Denham’s Bustard**, **Southern Ground Hornbill**, **Narina Trogon** (and other forest birds), and last but not least **Cape Parrot**. On occasion we do manage to locate breeding pairs of **Wattled Crane** in the Himeville area as well (on our October tour); however, they too have become scarce and are nomadic in the region. We then travel northward (usually via Durban again) to the small town of Eshowe, where some tantalizing birds lurk.

Overnight: Birds of Paradise B&B, Eshowe

Day 5. Birding a variety of sites around Eshowe

A couple of the sites we’ll bird today (such as Amatikulu Nature Reserve, the Raffia Palms Monument, Dlinza Forest, and Ongoye Forest) are on the subtropical coast, whereas others are in the cooler midlands closer to Eshowe, where we’re spending two nights. **Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon**, **Crowned Hornbill**, **Trumpeter Hornbill**, and a variety of canopy species (e.g. **Grey Cuckooshrike** and with some luck **Scaly-throated Honeyguide**) are the prized species accessible at the canopy tower at Dlinza Forest. We’ll be sure also to spend time walking the trails below, as this is one of the best places anywhere for the stunning **Spotted Ground Thrush**. Ongoye Forest is the only site for the “Woodward’s” subspecies of **Green Barbet**, plus this is also an excellent place for **Yellow-streaked Greenbul**, **Brown Scrub-Robin** and a great many other temperate forest birds.

The coast from Mtunzini southward to Amatikulu is good for **Collared Pratincole**, a vegetarian vulture (**Palm-nut Vulture**), **Green Twinspot**, **Grey Waxbill**, and **Red-backed Mannikin** (the last three mentioned are seed-eating birds that often mix in quiet and easily overlooked ground-feeding flocks). **Swamp Nightjar** is sometimes encountered.

Overnight: Birds of Paradise B&B, Eshowe

Day 6. Dlinza Forest again, followed by transfer to St Lucia

We basically clean up on Eshowe/Dlinza Forest birds before heading northwards to the small, wild town of St Lucia, where hippos can occasionally roam the streets at night and Thick-tailed Greater Galagos (bush-babies) certainly cry from the trees lining the main street. It’s an incredibly rich area for birds, mammals, and all kinds of other wildlife. Excellent garden and park birds of this leafy village include **African Pygmy Kingfisher**, the spectacular **Livingstone’s Turaco** with its impressive crest and bright crimson wings, **Buff-spotted Flufftail**, **Rudd’s Apalis**, **Woodward’s Batis**, **Lemon Dove**, and various cuckoo species such as the small, shining-green **Klaas’s Cuckoo**.

Overnight: St Lucia Wetlands Guest House, St Lucia

Day 7. Birding the UNESCO World Heritage Site iSimangaliso Wetland Park

We’ll head into this park, where we have to take great care as it is full of Africa’s big mammals, including rhinos and large cats (which of course we’ll try to see!). **Southern Banded Snake-**

Eagle, Rosy-throated Longclaw (with some luck), **Green Twinspot, Crested Guineafowl**, and many other excellent birds will be sought as we head to Cape Vidal.

Overnight: St Lucia Wetlands Guest House, St Lucia

Day 8. St Lucia to Mkhuzi Game Reserve

Mkhuzi Game Reserve is an amazing place. It's a tiny reserve, but it boasts a huge bird and mammal list. We'll try here for some very localized species that only occur in Zululand and southern Mozambique, such as **Lemon-breasted Canary, Neergaard's Sunbird**, and the fabulous **Pink-throated Twinspot**. **Gorgeous Bushshrike** is common here but sometimes needs a bit of time to be seen well, as it's a true skulker in the sand forest thickets. With luck we might see the wonderful circular flight display of **African Broadbill**. **Pel's Fishing Owl** is occasionally also seen in Mkhuzi but is much more reliable on our Namibia/Okavango/Victoria Falls birding tour. We keep the night drive optional, as some folks prefer to take the time to rest, but let it be known that Leopard and other great mammals, sometimes along with owls, nightjars, and other nocturnal birds are often seen. Special mammals that can be seen in Mkhuzi during the day include the diminutive Suni antelope, the very pretty Nyala, and Black Rhinoceros (although usually sticking to thick cover here, so more easily seen on our Namibia birding tours). We may well also see White Rhinoceros.

Overnight: Main (Mantuma) Camp, Mkhuzi Game Reserve

Day 9. Birding Mkhuzi Game Reserve

We will have a full day of birding and mammal-viewing in this diverse park. Some species that we may encounter today include **Grey Penduline-Tit, Common Scimitarbill, Bearded Woodpecker, White-crested** and **Retz's Helmhetsrikes, Purple-banded Sunbird**, and many more.

Overnight: Main (Mantuma) Camp, Mkhuzi Game Reserve

Day 10. Mkhuzi Game Reserve to Wakkerstroom

We have a long day of driving today as we ascend from the lowlands of Zululand to the legendary (among birders seeking endemics) Wakkerstroom highlands. This upland village is famed for its amazing birds, including two lark species, **Rudd's Lark** (Vulnerable) and **Botha's Lark** (Endangered), two "korhaan" (small bustard) species, **Blue Korhaan** and **White-bellied Bustard, Southern Bald Ibis, Blue Crane, Grey Crowned Crane, South African Cliff Swallow, Jackal Buzzard, African Grass Owl, Marsh Owl, Red-throated Wryneck, Pale-crowned Cisticola**, arguably the most beautiful pipit on earth, **Yellow-breasted Pipit**, and a great many others.

Overnight: Wetlands Country House & Sheds, Wakkerstroom

Day 11. Birding the Wakkerstroom area

This entire day is allocated to Wakkerstroom birding, where we often make use of a local guide for a full or a half day.

Overnight: Wetlands Country House & Sheds, Wakkerstroom

Day 12. Wakkerstroom to Kruger National Park

We have another long drive today, but the reward is that we'll eventually arrive in one of Africa's greatest game parks. The mammal and bird diversity here is staggering. African Elephant, Hippopotamus, Lion, Leopard, Cheetah, African Wild Dog (now extremely rare), both African rhino species, Giraffe, and a stack of antelopes and smaller mammals will be sought. Nile Crocodile is quite common here. The park is absolutely full of birds, including a lot of storks, the most admired one being **Saddle-billed Stork**, the most grotesque-looking one being **Marabou Stork**, etc., three hornbill species, various unbelievably colorful starlings, a mega-diversity of raptors (one of the most beautiful one being **Bateleur**, which thankfully is still common in this park, although outside the park it has suffered badly); there are a large number of other eagles and smaller birds of prey in the park besides this, though, many vultures (one can often see several species around a lion kill), beautiful barbets, turacos, several bee-eaters, **Blue Waxbill**, and just so many other wonderful birds.

Overnight: Lower Sabie Rest Camp or Skukuza Rest Camp or similar, Kruger National Park

Day 13. Birding Kruger National Park

We have a full day to look for mammals and birds in this great game park. (Night drives are an optional extra here in the Kruger National Park, let us know if you would like to book yourself on one.)

Overnight: Lower Sabie Rest Camp or Skukuza Rest Camp or similar, Kruger National Park

Day 14. Birding Kruger National Park

We'll spend a second full day in this exciting national park, another day to see a good sample of both fascinating mammals as well as amazing birds.

Overnight: Satara Rest Camp or similar, Kruger National Park

Day 15. Kruger to the highlands of Dullstroom via the Great Escarpment

Today we spend the best part of the morning still within the Kruger National Park, using as much time as we can to pick up on birds and mammals that we may have missed until now. We normally exit the park at either Phabeni or Paul Kruger Gate and start our ascent to the rolling, high altitude grasslands of Dullstroom. Dullstroom birding can be very rewarding; all three crane species can sometimes be found, along with **Cape Eagle-Owl**, **Gurney's Sugarbird**, **Yellow-breasted Pipit**, **Eastern Long-billed Lark** and a great many other specials.

Overnight: Linger Longer Country Retreat, Dullstroom

Day 16. Dullstroom to Rust de Winter

The final destination of the trip is the Rust de Winter/Piensaarsrivier area, which is within easy striking distance of Johannesburg airport (1.5 hours when no traffic). This is a well-known birding area, where Kalahari-type birds abound, giving our list a large boost right at the end of the trip. **Kalahari Scrub Robin**, **Black-chested Prinia**, the unbelievably bright **Crimson-breasted Shrike**, one of the most striking babblers of the world, namely **Southern Pied Babbler**, many different bee-eaters, and (as always) a host of other birds await us.

Overnight: Zenzele River Lodge, Rust de Winter

Day 17. Rust de Winter and Zaagkuildrift Birding

We spend the last full day of the tour exploring some drier "thornveld" scrub habitat, where we will add a host of new species. Depending on conditions we will normally bird the Zaagkuildrift

road to the Kgomomo-Kgomomo floodplain (normally flooded during our March tours, which allows us to try for some elusive crakes and warblers). The floodplain and surrounds can produce a host of waterfowl as well as the likes of **Kittlitz's Plover**, **Black-winged Pratincole**, **Temminck's Courser**, **Capped Wheatear**, **Shaft-tailed Whydah**, and many others.

Day 18. Transfer to Johannesburg and departure

Your international flight can depart any time after 3 p.m. today, but we will use the morning to add birding en route.

Duration: 18 days
Group size: 8 (rarely 9)
Date: 25 February – 14 March 2020
Start: Durban
End: Johannesburg

Price: R77,450 per person sharing. (The prices assume a group of 8, but we typically guarantee the departure even with a smaller group.)

Single supplement: R12,744

Price includes:

Meals
Accommodation
Entrance fees
Guiding fees and local guide
All transport while on tour

Price excludes:

International flights
Personal insurance
Alcoholic beverages
Gratuities
Laundry service
Personal expenses such as gifts

Please note that the itinerary above cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors.