

Birding Ecotours



SOUTH AFRICA: 1-DAY KGOMO-KGOMO AND ZAAGKUILSDRIFT DAY TRIP

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By Anton Schultz



Allen's Gallinule is a tricky species best sought after in the summer months on the Kgomo-Kgomo floodplain.

Overview

This Johannesburg- and Pretoria-based South African birding day tour takes us to one of the most exciting and well-known birding roads in the country, the mighty Kgomo-Kgomo floodplain and Zaagkuilsdrift Road, located in rich thornveld north of Pretoria. Although dry and dusty for most of the year, these flats become flooded with summer rains and host some of, if not *the*, most exciting tropical birding to be found anywhere in the country when inundated.

This particular day trip was conducted for a single client, Simon, and saw us focusing on tropical wetland birding, along with excellent thornveld and bushveld species. Being close to the end of March, Simon timed his visit well, arriving at the tail end of the summer season just before migrants begin their journey back to North Africa and Europe. We enjoyed a superb day's birding under overcast and rainy conditions, finishing with just over 150 species recorded in total. Highlights included: **White-backed Duck, Black Heron, Collared Pratincole, Temminck's Courser, Allen's Gallinule, Lesser Moorhen, Bennett's Woodpecker, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Sedge Warbler, Marico Sunbird, Orange-breasted and Violet-eared Waxbill, Purple Indigobird and Shaft-tailed Whydah.**

For context, this roughly 15-mile (25-kilometer) dirt road, and its associated floodplain, boast an impressive list of over 430 species recorded over the years. It typically requires repeated visits to even begin to approach this total, and even after more than 50 visits myself, I still find new "Zaagies" birds to add to my list regularly.



*The dazzling **Violet-eared Waxbill** can be found throughout the year on Zaagkuilsdrift Road.*

Detailed Report

I met Simon at his hotel around 04:30 in Johannesburg, and we were off, stopping only briefly for an early morning coffee on the way to our birding site to keep ourselves awake. Normally I take clients straight onto the Zaagkuilsdrift Road, but today I thought we would try birding from the outskirts of the small town of Makapanstad toward the now birding-famous Kgomo-Kgomo instead. This proved to be an excellent decision, as the birding immediately exploded around sunrise. We kicked things off with a fantastic male **Marico Sunbird**, followed by **Cape Penduline Tit**, **Barred Wren-Warbler**, and **Lesser Honeyguide**. Driving along the long, pothole-ridden road, we were treated to a litany of stunning brood parasites, including **Purple** and **Village Indigobirds**, **Pin-tailed**, **Shaft-tailed**, and **Long-tailed Paradise Whydahs**, along with several of their respective host species such as **Red-billed Firefinch**, **Green-winged Pytilia**, and the stunning **Violet-eared Waxbill**. At one particularly productive stop, two **Pearl-spotted Owlets** drew in a flurry of smaller species, including **Burnt-necked Eremomela**, **Chin-spot Batis**, and **Black-chested Prinia**, alongside a showstopping **Crimson-breasted Shrike**, and an excellent view of the difficult **Bennett's Woodpecker**.



*The dapper **Shaft-tailed Whydah** is the brood parasite of the **Violet-eared Waxbill** (pictured above).*

There's something special about birding at dawn in South Africa, as the country stirred to life, people queued for taxis, corn cobs roasted over open flames, and lawns were swept in the crisp morning air. So too did the birds begin to stir in the villages, a family of **Green Wood Hoopoes** moved between houses, a juvenile **Gabar Goshawk** tried its luck hunting pigeons, and **Lilac-**

breasted Rollers dotted the telephone wires. Soon, however, the crisp air faded and the day heated up quickly. We were fortunate to have cloud cover as we approached the bridge overlooking the massive Kgomo-Kgomo floodplain. This wetland is legendary for good reason, and our list quickly filled with waterfowl including **White-faced Whistling** and **African Black Ducks**, **Blue-billed** and **Red-billed Teals**, and **Spur-winged Goose**. A highlight had to be the famous **Black Heron** performing its iconic nighttime-daytime feeding behaviour, accompanied by a supporting cast of **Purple**, **Squacco** and **Black-headed Herons**, while **African Snipe** provided a soundtrack of jet-like display calls nearby.

Among the wetland vegetation, **Sedge Warblers** delivered rapid, warbling songs, while flashes of color came from **Malachite Kingfisher**, **Yellow-crowned Bishop**, and **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater**, not to mention the incredibly inconspicuous but no less beautiful **Orange-breasted Waxbill**. The absolute highlight of the morning had to be three separate sightings of **Allen's Gallinule**, an exceptionally difficult tropical wetland species, along with its more common relative, the **African Swamphen**, and two juvenile **Lesser Moorhens** that had been lingering in the area for the season. Away from the flooded areas, we were incredibly fortunate to find a local rarity in the form of a **Collared Pratincole**, along with a couple of obliging **Temminck's Coursers**, both nomadic species that are not always reliable at any given site. Here we also picked up **Kittlitz's Plover** and a few **Red-capped Larks**.



Blue-cheeked Bee-Eaters are probably the most colorful birds on the floodplain in summer.

Back toward Makapanstad, the clouds began to break, but the birding remained strong. A particular highlight was a brilliant **Southern Pied Babbler** sitting out in the open, along with two **Great Spotted Cuckoos**. In the midday heat, we decided to try our luck back at the start of the Zaagkuilsdrift Road, where the excellent birding continued. Here we encountered species such as

Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, African Firefinch, and Marico Flycatcher, as well as the trio of **Red-billed, Southern Yellow-billed,** and **African Grey Hornbills** moving through the thornveld. In the surrounding open farmland, we also added **Amur Falcon, Lesser Kestrel, Southern White-crowned Shrike** and **White-winged Widowbird**. We finished the day along the infamous “Crake Road,” which continues its way towards the excellent Zaagkuilsdrift Bird Sanctuary and Lodge. Although we did not manage any crakes so late in the day, the birding was still rewarding, with **Quailfinch** flying overhead, a brief sighting of **White-throated Robin-Chat**, and a **Striated Heron** hunting quietly along the Pienaars River.

One unfortunate reality of a day trip is that it has to end eventually, in this case a little earlier than planned due to some much-needed African rain. Overall, however, it was a fantastic day, with over 150 species recorded in a relatively short time. Many trips to Europe aim for similar totals over the course of two weeks! Zaagkuilsdrift and the Kgomo-Kgomo floodplain are premier birding destinations indeed and well worth a stopover if you ever find yourself with a day to spare before catching a flight out of OR Tambo International Airport.



*In summer or winter, the fairly common **Crimson-breasted Shrike** is always a fan favourite!*

Bird List - Following IOC 15.1 (March 2025)

Birds 'heard only' are marked with (H) after the common name, all other species were seen.

Common name	Scientific name
Ducks, Geese, Swans (Anatidae)	
White-faced Whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>
White-backed Duck	<i>Thalassornis leuconotus</i>
Spur-winged Goose	<i>Plectropterus gambensis</i>
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>
Blue-billed Teal	<i>Spatula hottentota</i>
African Black Duck	<i>Anas sparsa</i>
Yellow-billed Duck	<i>Anas undulata</i>
Red-billed Teal	<i>Anas erythrorhyncha</i>
Guineafowl (Numididae)	
Helmeted Guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>
Pheasants & Allies (Phasianidae)	
Crested Francolin	<i>Ortygornis sephaena</i>
Natal Spurfowl (H)	<i>Pternistis natalensis</i>
Swainson's Spurfowl	<i>Pternistis swainsonii</i>
Swifts (Apodidae)	
African Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>
Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>
White-rumped Swift	<i>Apus caffer</i>
Turacos (Musophagidae)	
Grey Go-away-bird	<i>Crinifer concolor</i>
Cuckoos (Cuculidae)	
Burchell's Coucal	<i>Centropus burchellii</i>
Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>
Jacobin Cuckoo	<i>Clamator jacobinus</i>
Diederik Cuckoo	<i>Chrysococcyx caprius</i>
Pigeons, Doves (Columbidae)	
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Speckled Pigeon	<i>Columba guinea</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Red-eyed Dove	<i>Streptopelia semitorquata</i>
Ring-necked Dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>
Laughing Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>
Namaqua Dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>
Rails, Crakes & Coots (Rallidae)	
Lesser Moorhen	<i>Paragallinula angulata</i>
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Allen's Gallinule	<i>Porphyrio alleni</i>
African Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio madagascariensis</i>
Black Crake (H)	<i>Zapornia flavirostra</i>
Stilts, Avocets (Recurvirostridae)	
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
Plovers (Charadriidae)	
Three-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>
Blacksmith Lapwing	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>
Crowned Lapwing	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>
African Wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus senegallus</i>
Kittlitz's Plover	<i>Charadrius pecuarius</i>
Jacanas (Jacanidae)	
African Jacana	<i>Actophilornis africanus</i>
Sandpipers, Snipes (Scolopacidae)	
African Snipe	<i>Gallinago nigripennis</i>
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>
Courasers, Pratincoles (Glareolidae)	
Temminck's Courser	<i>Cursorius temminckii</i>
Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>
Gulls, Terns, Skimmers (Laridae)	
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Storks (Ciconiidae)	
Yellow-billed Stork	<i>Mycteria ibis</i>
Anhingas, Darters (Anhingidae)	
African Darter	<i>Anhinga rufa</i>
Cormorants, Shags (Phalacrocoracidae)	
Reed Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo africanus</i>
Ibises, Spoonbills (Threskiornithidae)	
African Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>
Hadada Ibis	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
Hérons, Bitterns (Ardeidae)	
Black Heron	<i>Egretta ardesiaca</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>
Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Ardea ibis</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>
Black-headed Heron	<i>Ardea melanocephala</i>
Kites, Hawks, Eagles (Accipitridae)	
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>
Gabar Goshawk	<i>Micronisus gabar</i>
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Owls (Strigidae)	
Pearl-spotted Owlet	<i>Glaucidium perlatum</i>
Mousebirds (Coliidae)	
Red-faced Mousebird	<i>Urocolius indicus</i>
Wood Hoopoes (Phoeniculidae)	
Green Wood Hoopoe	<i>Phoeniculus purpureus</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Hornbills (Bucerotidae)	
Southern Red-billed Hornbill	<i>Tockus rufirostris</i>
Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill	<i>Tockus leucomelas</i>
African Grey Hornbill	<i>Lophoceros nasutus</i>
Rollers (Coraciidae)	
Lilac-breasted Roller	<i>Coracias caudatus</i>
European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>
Kingfishers (Alcedinidae)	
Brown-hooded Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon albiventris</i>
Woodland Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon senegalensis</i>
Malachite Kingfisher	<i>Corythornis cristatus</i>
Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
Bee-eaters (Meropidae)	
White-fronted Bee-eater	<i>Merops bullockoides</i>
Blue-cheeked Bee-eater	<i>Merops persicus</i>
European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>
African Barbets (Lybiidae)	
Crested Barbet	<i>Trachyphonus vaillantii</i>
Acacia Pied Barbet (H)	<i>Tricholaema leucomelas</i>
Honeyguides (Indicatoridae)	
Lesser Honeyguide	<i>Indicator minor</i>
Woodpeckers (Picidae)	
Bennett's Woodpecker	<i>Campethera bennettii</i>
Golden-tailed Woodpecker (H)	<i>Campethera abingoni</i>
Caracaras, Falcons (Falconidae)	
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>
Amur Falcon	<i>Falco amurensis</i>
Wattle-eyes, Batises (Platysteiridae)	
Chinspot Batis	<i>Batis molitor</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Bushshrikes (Malaconotidae)	
Orange-breasted Bushshrike (H)	<i>Chlorophoneus sulfureopectus</i>
Brown-crowned Tchagra	<i>Tchagra australis</i>
Black-backed Puffback	<i>Dryoscopus cubla</i>
Southern Boubou	<i>Laniarius ferrugineus</i>
Crimson-breasted Shrike	<i>Laniarius atrococcineus</i>
Drongos (Dicuridae)	
Fork-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>
Monarchs (Monarchidae)	
African Paradise Flycatcher (H)	<i>Terpsiphone viridis</i>
Shrikes (Laniidae)	
Southern White-crowned Shrike	<i>Eurocephalus anguitimens</i>
Magpie Shrike	<i>Lanius melanoleucus</i>
Lesser Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius minor</i>
Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>
Crows, Jays (Corvidae)	
Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>
Penduline Tits (Remizidae)	
Cape Penduline Tit	<i>Anthoscopus minutus</i>
Larks (Alaudidae)	
Red-capped Lark	<i>Calandrella cinerea</i>
Bulbuls (Pycnonotidae)	
Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>
Swallows, Martins (Hirundinidae)	
Pearl-breasted Swallow	<i>Hirundo dimidiata</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
White-throated Swallow	<i>Hirundo albigularis</i>
Greater Striped Swallow	<i>Cecropis cucullata</i>
Lesser Striped Swallow	<i>Cecropis abyssinica</i>
Red-breasted Swallow	<i>Cecropis semirufa</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Crombecs, African Warblers (Macrosphenidae)	
Long-billed Crombec	<i>Sylvietta rufescens</i>
Leaf Warblers (Phylloscopidae)	
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
Reed Warblers & Allies (Acrocephalidae)	
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
Marsh Warbler (H)	<i>Acrocephalus palustris</i>
Cisticolas & Allies (Cisticolidae)	
Rattling Cisticola	<i>Cisticola chiniana</i>
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
Tawny-flanked Prinia	<i>Prinia subflava</i>
Black-chested Prinia	<i>Prinia flavicans</i>
Green-backed Camaroptera (H)	<i>Camaroptera brachyura</i>
Barred Wren-Warbler	<i>Calamonastes fasciolatus</i>
Burnt-necked Eremomela	<i>Eremomela usticollis</i>
Sylviid Babblers (Sylviidae)	
Chestnut-vented Warbler	<i>Curruca subcoerulea</i>
Laughingthrushes & Allies (Leiothrichidae)	
Arrow-marked Babbler	<i>Turdoides jardineii</i>
Southern Pied Babbler	<i>Turdoides bicolor</i>
Starlings, Rhabdornises (Sturnidae)	
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
Wattled Starling	<i>Creatophora cinerea</i>
Cape Starling	<i>Lamprotornis nitens</i>
Burchell's Starling	<i>Lamprotornis australis</i>
Chats, Old World Flycatchers (Muscicapidae)	
White-browed Scrub Robin	<i>Cercotrichas leucophrys</i>
Marico Flycatcher	<i>Bradornis mariquensis</i>
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>
White-throated Robin-Chat	<i>Dessonornis humeralis</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Sunbirds (Nectariniidae)	
Marico Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris mariquensis</i>
White-bellied Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris talatala</i>
Old World Sparrows, Snowfinches (Passeridae)	
Cape Sparrow	<i>Passer melanurus</i>
Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>
Weavers, Widowbirds (Ploceidae)	
Red-billed Buffalo Weaver	<i>Bubalornis niger</i>
White-browed Sparrow-Weaver	<i>Plocepasser mahali</i>
Scaly-feathered Weaver	<i>Sporopipes squamifrons</i>
Southern Masked Weaver	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>
Red-billed Quelea	<i>Quelea quelea</i>
Yellow-crowned Bishop	<i>Euplectes afer</i>
Southern Red Bishop	<i>Euplectes orix</i>
White-winged Widowbird	<i>Euplectes albonotatus</i>
Waxbills, Munias & Allies (Estrildidae)	
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>
Quailfinch	<i>Ortygospiza atricollis</i>
Orange-breasted Waxbill	<i>Amandava subflava</i>
Violet-eared Waxbill	<i>Granatina granatina</i>
Blue Waxbill	<i>Uraeginthus angolensis</i>
Green-winged Pytilia	<i>Pytilia melba</i>
Red-billed Firefinch	<i>Lagonosticta senegala</i>
African Firefinch	<i>Lagonosticta rubricata</i>
Indigobirds, Whydahs (Viduidae)	
Village Indigobird	<i>Vidua chalybeata</i>
Purple Indigobird	<i>Vidua purpurascens</i>
Pin-tailed Whydah	<i>Vidua macroura</i>
Shaft-tailed Whydah	<i>Vidua regia</i>
Long-tailed Paradise Whydah	<i>Vidua paradisaea</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Wagtails, Pipits (Motacillidae)	
Cape Wagtail	<i>Motacilla capensis</i>
African Pipit	<i>Anthus cinnamomeus</i>
Finches, Euphonias (Fringillidae)	
Black-throated Canary	<i>Crithagra atrogularis</i>
Yellow-fronted Canary	<i>Crithagra mozambica</i>
Yellow Canary	<i>Crithagra flaviventris</i>
Species seen:	146
Species heard:	8
Total species recorded:	154