



SOUTH AFRICA: 3-DAY DRAKENSBERG AND SANI PASS BIRDING TOUR REPORT

By Dominic Rollinson



Drakensberg Rockjumper is always a highlight of a day's birding on Sani Pass.

Overview

This three-day birding tour of the Sani Pass and Drakensberg Mountains aims to target as many of the high altitude and mid-elevation specials of the KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa, many of which are South African endemics or near-endemics. The main birding attraction of this short tour is our day up the famed Sani Pass, which crosses into the Kingdom of Lesotho, however we also enjoy some grassland and montane forest birding at slightly lower elevations. Some of the specials we found on this tour included **Drakensberg Rockjumper**, **Drakensberg Siskin**, **Mountain Pipit**, **Bearded** and **Cape Vultures**, **Blue** and **Grey Crowned Cranes**, **Black-winged Lapwing**, **Southern Bald Ibis**, **Crowned Eagle**, **Half-collared Kingfisher**, **Ground Woodpecker**, **Fairy Flycatcher**, **Grey Tit**, **Orange Ground Thrush**, **Gurney's Sugarbird**, **Greater Double-collared Sunbird**, and many others.



*The cute **Fairy Flycatcher** was seen on the plateau in the Kingdom of Lesotho.*

Detailed Report

Day 1. Durban to Himeville

We left Durban soon after sunrise and headed inland to our first birding stop near to the Karkloof area, in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, where we would spend most of the morning. At a quick stop in some grasslands, we started racking up good birds in the form of **Black-winged Lapwing**, **Southern Bald Ibis**, **Martial** and **Long-crested Eagles**, **Jackal Buzzard**, **Drakensberg Prinia**

and many **Red-collared Widowbirds**. A **European Honey Buzzard** was also seen nearby, always a great bird to see anywhere in South Africa. We then pressed on further into the Karkloof area and birded some scrubby areas on the edge of a timber plantation which was surprisingly productive, and we managed to add **Lesser Honeyguide** (missed by most of the group), **Black Saw-wing**, **Neddicky**, **Greater Double-collared Sunbird**, **African Firefinch** and its brood parasite **Dusky Indigobird**, along with **Golden-breasted Bunting** and a calling **Cape Grassbird** which would remain unseen for now.

Around mid-morning we arrived at our primary birding site for the morning, Benvie Garden, where we enjoyed our breakfast with a number of interesting forest species calling as we ate. After finishing our breakfast, we took a walk around the garden and found some great birds including the likes of **Orange Ground Thrush** (our big target here), **Woolly-necked Stork**, **Cape Batis**, **Black-headed Oriole**, **African Paradise Flycatcher**, **Bar-throated Apalis**, **Olive Thrush**, **Yellow-throated Bush Sparrow**, **Cape Weaver**, **Forest Canary**, and a pair of **Crowned Eagles** which were busy displaying above us. In the patch of forest above the gardens we found other exciting birds such as **Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler**, **Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher** and calling **African Emerald Cuckoo** and **White-starred Robin**, neither of which would show themselves.

After finishing our forest birding for the day and after a quick lunch we made our way further inland and climbed in elevation as we headed towards the Drakensberg Mountains. We didn't find too much of interest for the rest of the afternoon until a birding stop outside Himeville at a small dam, which held **Cape Shoveler**, **South African Shelduck**, **African Spoonbill** and **African Wattled Lapwing**. However, the Wattled Cranes which are regular here, were unfortunately not around today. A little closer to Himeville we birded some grasslands on the edge of a wetland which gave us beautiful looks at **Yellow-crowned Bishop**, brief views of **Pale-crowned Cisticola** and prolonged views of **Long-tailed Widowbirds**, as they performed their crazy display flights.



Long-tailed Widowbirds were displaying in grasslands throughout the area.

Day 2. Sani Pass birding

Today was the day we'd all been looking forward to as we were to spend most of the day up Sani Pass, one of South Africa's premier birding sites. We left our accommodation with our local guides Aldo and Stuart just after dawn and made our way towards the base of the pass and had a few good birding stops en route. These stops yielded some great birds such as **Red-throated Wryneck**, **Southern Boubou**, **Bokmakierie**, **Cape Crow**, **Cape Grassbird**, **African Yellow Warbler**, **Greater Double-collared Sunbird**, **Yellow Bishop**, **Sweet Waxbill** and the highly prized **Bush Blackcap**. We then stopped for some breakfast alongside a river which had a bunch of nice birds around. First prize went to a **Half-collared Kingfisher** which eventually showed well for us, and we also found **Cape Batis**, **Olive Thrush**, **Fiscal Flycatcher**, **Brimstone** and **Cape Canaries** and **Streaky-headed Seedeater**.

After breakfast we started to ascend the pass proper and the birding continued to pick up. The lower boulder-strewn slopes had good numbers of **Gurney's Sugarbird** perching up on protea bushes while **Karoo Prinia**, **Wailing Cisticola**, **Cape Rock Thrush**, **Buff-streaked Chat**, **Ground Woodpecker**, **Cape Bunting** and **Horus Swift** also put in appearances for us. The higher-elevation rocky areas (such as around the switchbacks, just below the Lesotho border post) were really birdy and this is where we found our first **Drakensberg Rockjumper** of the day along with **Drakensberg Siskin**, **Sickle-winged Chat** and flyovers of **Cape** and **Bearded Vultures**. Two mammal highlights were encountered on the drive too, in the form of **Mountain Reedbuck** and **Grey Rhebok**.



Gurney's Sugarbird showed well as we ascended Sani Pass.

Once onto the top of Sani Pass and the plateau at around 2,800 metres (9,100 feet) in elevation we found a different suite of birds which inhabit the short Karoo-type vegetation which dominates the

plateau. **Layard's Warbler**, **Fairy Flycatcher**, **Sentinel Rock Thrush**, **Mountain Wheatear** and **Yellow Canary** were relatively abundant while we had to work for **Grey Tit** and **Large-billed Lark**. The target bird of any summer trip to the plateau is **Mountain Pipit** which was surprisingly abundant and were in full voice today. We also enjoyed decent views of a couple of **African Black Ducks** on a nearby river. After some lunch and a quick drink at the Sani Top Chalet (the highest pub in Africa, which included more views of **Drakensberg Rockjumper**) we made our way back down the pass. The descent was fairly uneventful but did produce fleeting glimpses of the skulking **Barratt's Warbler**.



*The attractive **Sentinel Rock Thrush** was seen on the plateau.*

After safely negotiating the pass, we enjoyed some birding around the Himeville area which produced **Grey Crowned Crane**, **White Stork**, **Jackal Buzzard**, **Ant-eating Chat**, **Quailfinch** and **Red-collared**, **Fan-tailed** and **Long-tailed Widowbirds**. After a long day out, we enjoyed a good drink and meal before heading to bed for our last night of this short tour.

Day 3. KwaZulu-Natal Midlands birding and transfer to Durban

We had another early start this morning and headed out to Marutswa Forest to try our luck at Cape Parrot. Disappointingly the parrots were a no-show this morning and so we had to be content with **African Olive Pigeon**, **Terrestrial Brownbul**, **Speckled Mousebird**, **Amethyst** and **Malachite Sunbirds**, **African Firefinch** and **Forest Canary** which all kept us entertained on the forest edge. After giving up on the parrots we headed to the Mkomazi Valley where our next big target was **Blue Swallow**. This rare swallow is listed as Vulnerable by BirdLife International and is mostly

threatened by the loss of mid-altitude grassland habitat where it breeds in South Africa. The swallows took a little while but eventually we had great views of at least one adult male and a juvenile as they went about feeding low over the grasslands, alongside **Black Saw-wings**. Other good birds in the area included **Lazy Cisticola**, **Fan-tailed Grassbird** (heard only), **Sweet Waxbill** and **Common House Martin**.

We then made our way further down the valley and enjoyed some bushveld birding with our lunch stop. Birds seen here included **Natal Spurfowl**, **Purple-crested Turaco**, **Green Wood Hoopoe**, **Black-headed Oriole**, **Cape Starling**, **Thick-billed Weaver** and **Golden-breasted Bunting**. As we crossed the Mkomazi River we enjoyed perched views of a **Crowned Eagle**. From here, it was the long drive back to Durban where we arrived in the late afternoon, after a successful three days of Drakensberg birding.

Bird List - Following IOC (12.1)

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

The following notation after species names is used to show conservation status following BirdLife International: EN = Endangered, VU = Vulnerable.

Common Name	Scientific Name
Ducks, Geese, Swans (Anatidae)	
White-faced Whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>
Spur-winged Goose	<i>Plectropterus gambensis</i>
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>
South African Shelduck	<i>Tadorna cana</i>
Cape Shoveler	<i>Spatula smithii</i>
African Black Duck	<i>Anas sparsa</i>
Yellow-billed Duck	<i>Anas undulata</i>
Pheasants & Allies (Phasianidae)	
Natal Spurfowl	<i>Pternistis natalensis</i>
Swifts (Apodidae)	
African Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>
African Black Swift	<i>Apus barbatus</i>
Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>
Horus Swift	<i>Apus horus</i>
White-rumped Swift	<i>Apus caffer</i>
Turacos (Musophagidae)	
Purple-crested Turaco	<i>Gallirex porphyreolophus</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Cuckoos (Cuculidae)	
African Emerald Cuckoo (H)	<i>Chrysococcyx cupreus</i>
Black Cuckoo (H)	<i>Cuculus clamosus</i>
Red-chested Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus solitarius</i>
Pigeons, Doves (Columbidae)	
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Speckled Pigeon	<i>Columba guinea</i>
African Olive Pigeon	<i>Columba arquatrix</i>
Red-eyed Dove	<i>Streptopelia semitorquata</i>
Ring-necked Dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>
Rails, Crakes & Coots (Rallidae)	
African Rail (H)	<i>Rallus caerulescens</i>
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Red-knobbed Coot	<i>Fulica cristata</i>
Cranes (Gruidae)	
Grey Crowned Crane - EN	<i>Balearica regulorum</i>
Blue Crane - VU	<i>Grus paradisea</i>
Grebes (Podicipedidae)	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Plovers (Charadriidae)	
Blacksmith Lapwing	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>
Black-winged Lapwing	<i>Vanellus melanopterus</i>
African Wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus senegallus</i>
Three-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>
Storks (Ciconiidae)	
Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</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>
Southern Bald Ibis - VU	<i>Geronticus calvus</i>
Hadada Ibis	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
African Spoonbill	<i>Platalea alba</i>
Hérons, Bitterns (Ardeidae)	
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Black-headed Heron	<i>Ardea melanocephala</i>
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Hamerkop (Scopidae)	
Hamerkop	<i>Scopus umbretta</i>
Ospreys (Pandionidae)	
Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Kites, Hawks, Eagles (Accipitridae)	
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>
African Harrier-Hawk	<i>Polyboroides typus</i>
Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>
European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>
Cape Vulture - EN	<i>Gyps coprotheres</i>
Crowned Eagle	<i>Stephanoaetus coronatus</i>
Martial Eagle - EN	<i>Polemaetus bellicosus</i>
Long-crested Eagle	<i>Lophaetus occipitalis</i>
African Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus ranivorus</i>
Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptius</i>
African Fish Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus vocifer</i>
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Forest Buzzard	<i>Buteo trizonatus</i>
Mousebirds (Coliidae)	
Speckled Mousebird	<i>Colius striatus</i>
Wood Hoopoes (Phoeniculidae)	
Green Wood Hoopoe	<i>Phoeniculus purpureus</i>
Kingfishers (Alcedinidae)	
Malachite Kingfisher	<i>Corythornis cristatus</i>
Half-collared Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo semitorquata</i>
Giant Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle maxima</i>
Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
African Barbets (Lybiidae)	
Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird (H)	<i>Pogoniulus bilineatus</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Honeyguides (Indicatoridae)	
Lesser Honeyguide	<i>Indicator minor</i>
Woodpeckers (Picidae)	
Red-throated Wryneck	<i>Jynx ruficollis</i>
Ground Woodpecker	<i>Geocolaptes olivaceus</i>
Caracaras, Falcons (Falconidae)	
Rock Kestrel	<i>Falco rupicolus</i>
Amur Falcon	<i>Falco amurensis</i>
Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>
Wattle-eyes, Batises (Platysteiridae)	
Cape Batis	<i>Batis capensis</i>
Bushshrikes (Malaconotidae)	
Bokmakierie	<i>Telophorus zeylonus</i>
Black-crowned Tchagra (H)	<i>Tchagra senegalus</i>
Southern Boubou	<i>Laniarius ferrugineus</i>
Shrikes (Laniidae)	
Southern Fiscal	<i>Lanius collaris</i>
Figbirds, Orioles, Turnagra (Oriolidae)	
Black-headed Oriole	<i>Oriolus larvatus</i>
Drongos (Dicruridae)	
Fork-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>
Monarchs (Monarchidae)	
Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher	<i>Trochocercus cyanomelas</i>
African Paradise Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone viridis</i>
Crows, Jays (Corvidae)	
Cape Crow	<i>Corvus capensis</i>
Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>
White-necked Raven	<i>Corvus albicollis</i>
Rockjumpers (Chaetopidae)	
Drakensberg Rockjumper	<i>Chaetops aurantius</i>
Fairy Flycatchers (Stenostiridae)	
Fairy Flycatcher	<i>Stenostira scita</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Tits, Chickadees (Paridae)	
Southern Black Tit (H)	<i>Melaniparus niger</i>
Grey Tit	<i>Melaniparus afer</i>
Larks (Alaudidae)	
Large-billed Lark	<i>Galerida magnirostris</i>
Bulbuls (Pycnonotidae)	
Sombre Greenbul (H)	<i>Andropadus importunus</i>
Terrestrial Brownbul	<i>Phyllastrephus terrestris</i>
Dark-capped Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus tricolor</i>
Swallows, Martins (Hirundinidae)	
Black Saw-wing	<i>Psalidoprocne pristoptera</i>
Banded Martin	<i>Neophedina cincta</i>
Brown-throated Martin	<i>Riparia paludicola</i>
Rock Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne fuligula</i>
Blue Swallow - VU	<i>Hirundo atrocaerulea</i>
White-throated Swallow	<i>Hirundo albigularis</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
Lesser Striped Swallow	<i>Cecropis abyssinica</i>
Greater Striped Swallow	<i>Cecropis cucullata</i>
Crombecs, African Warblers (Macrosphenidae)	
Cape Grassbird	<i>Sphenoeacus afer</i>
Leaf Warblers & Allies (Phylloscopidae)	
Willow Warbler (H)	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus ruficapilla</i>
Reed Warblers & Allies (Acrocephalidae)	
African Yellow Warbler	<i>Iduna natalensis</i>
Grassbirds & Allies (Locustellidae)	
Fan-tailed Grassbird (H)	<i>Catriscus brevirostris</i>
Barratt's Warbler	<i>Bradypterus barratti</i>
Little Rush Warbler (H)	<i>Bradypterus baboecala</i>
Cisticolas & Allies (Cisticolidae)	
Lazy Cisticola	<i>Cisticola aberrans</i>
Wailing Cisticola	<i>Cisticola lais</i>
Levaillant's Cisticola	<i>Cisticola tinniens</i>
Neddicky	<i>Cisticola fulvicapilla</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
Pale-crowned Cisticola	<i>Cisticola cinnamomeus</i>
Karoo Prinia	<i>Prinia maculosa</i>
Drakensberg Prinia	<i>Prinia hypoxantha</i>
Bar-throated Apalis	<i>Apalis thoracica</i>
Green-backed Camaroptera (H)	<i>Camaroptera brachyura</i>
Sylviid Babblers (Sylviidae)	
Bush Blackcap - VU	<i>Sylvia nigricapillus</i>
Layard's Warbler	<i>Curruca layardi</i>
White-eyes (Zosteropidae)	
Cape White-eye	<i>Zosterops virens</i>
Sugarbirds (Promeropidae)	
Gurney's Sugarbird	<i>Promerops gurneyi</i>
Starlings, Rhabdornis (Sturnidae)	
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
Cape Starling	<i>Lamprotornis nitens</i>
Pied Starling	<i>Lamprotornis bicolor</i>
Red-winged Starling	<i>Onychognathus morio</i>
Thrushes (Turdidae)	
Orange Ground Thrush	<i>Geokichla gurneyi</i>
Olive Thrush	<i>Turdus olivaceus</i>
Chats, Old World Flycatchers (Muscicapidae)	
Fiscal Flycatcher	<i>Melaenornis silens</i>
African Dusky Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa adusta</i>
Cape Robin-Chat	<i>Cossypha caffra</i>
White-starred Robin (H)	<i>Pogonocichla stellata</i>
Cape Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola rupestris</i>
Sentinel Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola explorator</i>
African Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>
Buff-streaked Chat	<i>Campicoloides bifasciatus</i>
Sickle-winged Chat	<i>Emarginata sinuata</i>
Ant-eating Chat	<i>Myrmecocichla formicivora</i>
Mountain Wheatear	<i>Myrmecocichla monticola</i>
Familiar Chat	<i>Oenanthe familiaris</i>
Sunbirds (Nectariniidae)	
Collared Sunbird	<i>Hedydipna collaris</i>
Grey Sunbird (H)	<i>Cyanomitra veroxii</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Amethyst Sunbird	<i>Chalcomitra amethystina</i>
Malachite Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia famosa</i>
Greater Double-collared Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris afer</i>
White-bellied Sunbird (H)	<i>Cinnyris talatala</i>
Old World Sparrows, Snowfinches (Passeridae)	
Yellow-throated Bush Sparrow	<i>Gymnoris superciliaris</i>
Cape Sparrow	<i>Passer melanurus</i>
Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Weavers, Widowbirds (Ploceidae)	
Thick-billed Weaver	<i>Amblyospiza albifrons</i>
Cape Weaver	<i>Ploceus capensis</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>
Fan-tailed Widowbird	<i>Euplectes axillaris</i>
Red-collared Widowbird	<i>Euplectes ardens</i>
Long-tailed Widowbird	<i>Euplectes progne</i>
Waxbills, Munias & Allies (Estrildidae)	
Bronze Mannikin	<i>Spermestes cucullata</i>
Sweet Waxbill	<i>Coccygia melanotis</i>
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>
Quailfinch	<i>Ortygospiza atricollis</i>
African Firefinch	<i>Lagonosticta rubricata</i>
Indigobirds, Whydahs (Viduidae)	
Dusky Indigobird	<i>Vidua funerea</i>
Pin-tailed Whydah	<i>Vidua macroura</i>
Wagtails, Pipits (Motacillidae)	
Cape Wagtail	<i>Motacilla capensis</i>
African Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla aguimp</i>
Cape Longclaw	<i>Macronyx capensis</i>
African Pipit	<i>Anthus cinnamomeus</i>
Mountain Pipit	<i>Anthus hoeschi</i>
Finches, Euphonias (Fringillidae)	
Forest Canary	<i>Crithagra scotops</i>
Yellow-fronted Canary	<i>Crithagra mozambica</i>
Drakensberg Siskin	<i>Crithagra symonsi</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Yellow Canary	<i>Crithagra flaviventris</i>
Brimstone Canary	<i>Crithagra sulphurata</i>
Streaky-headed Seedeater	<i>Crithagra gularis</i>
Cape Canary	<i>Serinus canicollis</i>
Buntings (Emberizidae)	
Cape Bunting	<i>Emberiza capensis</i>
Golden-breasted Bunting	<i>Emberiza flaviventris</i>
Total seen	168
Total heard only	14
Total recorded	182

Mammal List

Common Name	Scientific Name
Bovids (Bovidae)	
Southern Reedbuck	<i>Redunca arundinum</i>
Mountain Reedbuck	<i>Redunca fulvorufula</i>
Grey Rhebok	<i>Pelea capreolus</i>
Old World Monkeys (Cercopithecidae)	
Vervet Monkey	<i>Chlorocebus pygerythrus</i>
Chacma Baboon	<i>Papio ursinus</i>
Murids (Muridae)	
Sloggett's Vlei Rat	<i>Otomys sloggetti</i>
Total seen	6