



SOUTH AFRICA: 3-DAY TANKWA KAROO BIRDING TOUR REPORT

By Dominic Rollinson



Rufous-eared Warbler is relatively common in the plains of the Tankwa Karoo.

Overview

The semi-desert of the Tankwa Karoo hosts a number of South African endemics and near-endemics which form the focus of birding trips to the area. A Tankwa Karoo birding trip is unlikely to produce a large species list, however what few species are encountered are mostly specialists which are adapted to living in the harsh semi-desert conditions. Some of the important species we saw on this particular tour included **Cinnamon-breasted**, **Rufous-eared**, **Namaqua** and **Layard's Warblers**, **Karoo Eremomela**, **Karoo Korhaan**, **Karoo**, **Large-billed**, **Spike-heeled** and **Karoo Long-billed Larks**, **Namaqua Sandgrouse** and **Black-headed Canary**. After the three days of birding, we had a decent list of 95 species which included many of the dry-country specials that we were after.



*A small group of the cute **Karoo Eremomela** was seen well.*

Detailed Report

Day 1. Cape Town to the Tankwa Karoo

We left the bright lights of Cape Town before dawn and were met by some very unseasonal weather in the form of low clouds and spots of rain as we drove along the Dutoitskloof Pass and arrived at our first scheduled birding stop. We would be targeting a few mountain fynbos specials here and managed birds such as **Jackal Buzzard**, **Cape Siskin**, **Cape Bulbul**, calling **Cape Grassbird**, **Neddicky**, **Fiscal Flycatcher**, **Cape Sugarbird** and the prize for the morning, a (relatively) showy **Victorin's Warbler**. Unfortunately, our major target, Protea Canary, would not show for us.

From here, we made our way into the drier habitat of the Karoo where a roadside stop to scan a dam produced **Lesser Flamingo**, **Cape Shoveler** and a few other common waterbirds. Next, we scanned the dry scrub and acacia stands at Karooport, which yielded **Namaqua Warbler**, **Namaqua Dove**, **White-backed Mousebird**, **Pied Starling** and **White-throated Canary**. A large **Black Spitting Cobra** was seen in some nearby bushes which was a good reminder to watch where we stepped.

Making our way into the Tankwa Karoo proper, we birded the semi-desert plains which proved really worthwhile, and bagged us **Pale Chanting Goshawk**, **Karoo Korhaan**, **Spike-heeled Lark**, **Karoo** and **Tractrac Chats**, **Karoo Scrub Robin**, **Rufous-eared Warbler**, and a group of three **Namaqua Sandgrouse** as they slowly walked across the road. After birding the plains we enjoyed our lunch in the shade of some acacia trees at Skitterykloof gorge which had a feeding **Fairy Flycatcher** giving us great views as it went about its business. We worked the nearby bushes and scrub and managed to find **Mountain Wheatear**, **Long-billed Crombec**, **Dusky Sunbird**, **White-throated Canary** and some of the group managed brief views of the big target of the area, **Cinnamon-breasted Warbler**.

We finished off the day with **Nicholson's Pipit** close to our accommodation and a scrumptious dinner as we enjoyed a beautiful Tankwa Karoo sunset and a drink. Unfortunately, the wind had picked up which meant our night drive did not produce much of interest besides a couple **Scrub Hares**.



Tractrac Chat was one of the many chat species seen in the Tankwa Karoo.

Day 2. Tankwa Karoo birding

We woke early with the exciting prospect of the whole day to bird the Tankwa Karoo. Almost immediately we improved our views of **Rufous-eared Warbler** and **Karoo Lark**, while a **Grey**

Tit put in a brief appearance. In a dry rocky gorge, we all got onto the skulking **Cinnamon-breasted Warbler** and also found **Grey-backed Cisticola** and **Layard's Warbler** nearby. Further up the gorge we managed to find a single **Pale-winged Starling**. Birding the open plains gave us great views of a small feeding flock of **Karoo Eremomelas** while the calling **Southern Black Korhaan** would not show itself. Our last birding stop before breakfast saw us working some palm trees, which yielded large numbers of **Yellow** and **White-throated Canaries** and a single **Black-headed Canary**.

After a lovely sit-down breakfast at our accommodation, we headed north towards the Tankwa Karoo National Park to try and track down a few remaining target birds. As we went further north, we started to see a few more **Tractrac Chats**, **Pale Chanting Goshawks** and other common Karoo species such as **Karoo Chat**, **Large-billed** and **Red-capped Larks** and **Karoo Scrub Robin**. A pair of **South African Shelducks** were also seen at a small farm dam near to the road. Once in the park we came across a large group of **Common Ostriches**, with a leucistic bird being a particularly bizarre sight. New birds for the trip included **Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark**, **Lark-like Bunting**, **Greater Kestrel**, **Chestnut-vented Warbler**, **Pirit Batis**, **Karoo Long-billed Lark** and we had good views of a flyover **Booted Eagle**. We searched the plains for Burchell's Courser but despite our best efforts we couldn't find any of these rare nomads.



A leucistic Common Ostrich was an unexpected sight!

After the long drive back south, we finished the day off by enjoying some birding around our accommodation which produced further sightings of **Layard's Warbler**, **Bokmakierie**, **Cape Bunting** and **Red-faced Mousebird**.

Day 3. Tankwa Karoo birding and return to Cape Town

Today was our last day in the Tankwa Karoo and we enjoyed the birding around our accommodation and Skitterykloof gorge which produced further sightings of **South African Shelduck, Fairy Flycatcher, Grey Tit, Booted Eagle, Karoo Lark, Mountain Wheatear, Rufous-eared Warbler and Yellow Canary.**



Grey morph Mountain Wheatears were common in the rocky areas of the Tankwa Karoo.

After another excellent sit-down breakfast, we made our way out of the Tankwa Karoo which did not produce much of interest and then we made another stop at Dutoitskloof area to have a further crack at Protea Canary. Unfortunately, despite another good search, the canaries would not show for us, and we had to eventually give up on this tough mountain fynbos endemic. Good birds seen here did however include **Cape Rock Thrush, Neddicky and Bokmakierie.** We eventually made it back into Cape Town late in the afternoon after a thoroughly enjoyable three days in the dry and dusty plains of the Tankwa Karoo.

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: VU = Vulnerable.

Common Name	Scientific Name
Ostriches (Struthionidae)	
Common Ostrich	<i>Struthio camelus</i>
Ducks, Geese, Swans (Anatidae)	
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>
South African Shelduck	<i>Tadorna cana</i>
Cape Shoveler	<i>Spatula smithii</i>
Yellow-billed Duck	<i>Anas undulata</i>
Pheasants & Allies (Phasianidae)	
Cape Spurfowl (H)	<i>Pternistis capensis</i>
Bustards (Otididae)	
Karoo Korhaan	<i>Eupodotis vigorsii</i>
Southern Black Korhaan – VU (H)	<i>Afrotis afra</i>
Sandgrouse (Pteroclididae)	
Namaqua Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles namaqua</i>
Pigeons, Doves (Columbidae)	
Speckled Pigeon	<i>Columba guinea</i>
Ring-necked Dove (H)	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>
Laughing Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>
Namaqua Dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>
Cranes (Gruidae)	
Blue Crane - VU	<i>Grus paradisea</i>
Flamingos (Phoenicopteridae)	
Lesser Flamingo	<i>Phoeniconaias minor</i>
Plovers (Charadriidae)	
Three-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>
Sandpipers, Snipes (Scolopacidae)	
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Cormorants, Shags (Phalacrocoracidae)	
Reed Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo africanus</i>
Ibises, Spoonbills (Threskiornithidae)	
African Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>
Hadada Ibis (H)	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>
Hérons, Bitterns (Ardeidae)	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Kites, Hawks, Eagles (Accipitridae)	
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>
Pale Chanting Goshawk	<i>Melierax canorus</i>
Jackal Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufofuscus</i>
Mousebirds (Coliidae)	
White-backed Mousebird	<i>Colius colius</i>
Red-faced Mousebird	<i>Urocolius indicus</i>
Caracaras, Falcons (Falconidae)	
Rock Kestrel	<i>Falco rupicolus</i>
Greater Kestrel	<i>Falco rupicoloides</i>
Wattle-eyes, Batises (Platysteiridae)	
Pririt Batis	<i>Batis pririt</i>
Bushshrikes (Malaconotidae)	
Bokmakierie	<i>Telophorus zeylonus</i>
Southern Boubou	<i>Laniarius ferrugineus</i>
Shrikes (Laniidae)	
Southern Fiscal	<i>Lanius collaris</i>
Drongos (Dicruridae)	
Fork-tailed Drongo (H)	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>
Crows, Jays (Corvidae)	
Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>
White-necked Raven	<i>Corvus albicollis</i>
Fairy Flycatchers (Stenostiridae)	
Fairy Flycatcher	<i>Stenostira scita</i>
Tits, Chickadees (Paridae)	
Grey Tit	<i>Melaniparus afer</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Larks (Alaudidae)	
Spike-heeled Lark	<i>Chersomanes albofasciata</i>
Karoo Long-billed Lark	<i>Certhilauda subcoronata</i>
Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark	<i>Eremopterix verticalis</i>
Karoo Lark	<i>Calendulauda albescens</i>
Large-billed Lark	<i>Galerida magnirostris</i>
Red-capped Lark	<i>Calandrella cinerea</i>
Bulbuls (Pycnonotidae)	
Cape Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus capensis</i>
Swallows, Martins (Hirundinidae)	
Rock Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne fuligula</i>
Pearl-breasted Swallow	<i>Hirundo dimidiata</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Greater Striped Swallow	<i>Cecropis cucullata</i>
Crombecs, African Warblers (Macrosphenidae)	
Cape Grassbird	<i>Sphenoeacus afer</i>
Long-billed Crombec	<i>Sylvietta rufescens</i>
Cisticolas & Allies (Cisticolidae)	
Grey-backed Cisticola	<i>Cisticola subruficapilla</i>
Levaillant's Cisticola	<i>Cisticola tinniens</i>
Neddicky	<i>Cisticola fulvicapilla</i>
Karoo Prinia	<i>Prinia maculosa</i>
Namaqua Warbler	<i>Phragmacia substriata</i>
Rufous-eared Warbler	<i>Malcorus pectoralis</i>
Cinnamon-breasted Warbler	<i>Euryptila subcinnamomea</i>
Karoo Eremomela	<i>Eremomela gregalis</i>
Sylviid Babblers (Sylviidae)	
Layard's Warbler	<i>Curruca layardi</i>
Chestnut-vented Warbler	<i>Curruca subcoerulea</i>
White-eyes (Zosteropidae)	
Cape White-eye	<i>Zosterops virens</i>
Sugarbirds (Promeropidae)	
Cape Sugarbird	<i>Promerops cafer</i>
Starlings, Rhabdornis (Sturnidae)	
Pied Starling	<i>Lamprotornis bicolor</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Red-winged Starling	<i>Onychognathus morio</i>
Pale-winged Starling	<i>Onychognathus nabouroup</i>
Thrushes (Turdidae)	
Karoo Thrush	<i>Turdus smithi</i>
Chats, Old World Flycatchers (Muscicapidae)	
Karoo Scrub Robin	<i>Cercotrichas coryphoeus</i>
Fiscal Flycatcher	<i>Melaenornis silens</i>
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>
African Dusky Flycatcher (H)	<i>Muscicapa adusta</i>
Cape Robin-Chat (H)	<i>Cossypha caffra</i>
Cape Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola rupestris</i>
Karoo Chat	<i>Emarginata schlegelii</i>
Tractrac Chat	<i>Emarginata tractrac</i>
Mountain Wheatear	<i>Myrmecocichla monticola</i>
Familiar Chat	<i>Oenanthe familiaris</i>
Sunbirds (Nectariniidae)	
Orange-breasted Sunbird	<i>Anthobaphes violacea</i>
Southern Double-collared Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris chalybeus</i>
Dusky Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris fuscus</i>
Old World Sparrows, Snowfinches (Passeridae)	
Cape Sparrow	<i>Passer melanurus</i>
Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Weavers, Widowbirds (Ploceidae)	
Cape Weaver	<i>Ploceus capensis</i>
Southern Masked Weaver	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>
Yellow Bishop	<i>Euplectes capensis</i>
Waxbills, Munias & Allies (Estrildidae)	
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>
Wagtails, Pipits (Motacillidae)	
Cape Wagtail	<i>Motacilla capensis</i>
African Pipit	<i>Anthus cinnamomeus</i>
Nicholson's Pipit	<i>Anthus nicholsoni</i>
Finches, Euphonias (Fringillidae)	
Cape Siskin	<i>Crithagra totta</i>
Yellow Canary	<i>Crithagra flaviventris</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
White-throated Canary	<i>Crithagra albogularis</i>
Black-headed Canary	<i>Serinus alario</i>
Buntings (Emberizidae)	
Lark-like Bunting	<i>Emberiza impetuani</i>
Cape Bunting	<i>Emberiza capensis</i>

Total seen	88
Total heard only	7
Total recorded	95