BUDGET SOUTH AFRICA BIRDING TOUR: THE NORTH

17–25 MAY 2027



*The stunning **Violet-eared Waxbill** should be seen on the first few days of this tour.*

Overview

South Africa is one of the premier birding destinations on the African continent. The ease of travel, excellent infrastructure, welcoming people, wealth of birding-related information, affordability, and abundant access to reserves and national parks make South Africa a must-visit destination for any global birder. Over 850 species have been recorded in South Africa, and no fewer than 38 are endemic to the country (some are shared with South Africa's two smallest neighbors, Swaziland and Lesotho). The highest levels of endemism are found in the fynbos and Karoo habitats of the Cape provinces, as well as in the country's high-altitude grasslands on its central plateau. In contrast, the subtropical northern provinces are the most species-diverse regions of the country.

This is the final tour of our budget tour series, which also includes other critical parts of the country; the Northern Cape, Cape Town, and Zululand. This budget South African birding tour focuses on the avian-rich Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces, located in the northeast of the country. To keep costs down on this tour, we do not stay in the high-end accommodation typical of our other South African birding tours. Instead, we stay in comfortable, cost-conscious accommodation throughout the tour.

A variety of diverse habitats, including Polokwane Plateau bushveld, montane grassland, Afrotemperate forest, subtropical thicket, Mopani and riverine woodlands, and several types of mixed woodlands, each with their respective avian assemblages, contribute to the impressive array of species on offer on this tour. Over the course of this nine-day tour, we may see close to 400 species with highlights including **Short-clawed Lark**, **Crimson-breasted Shrike**, **Gurney's Sugarbird**, **Buff-streaked Chat**, **Cape Parrot**, **Black-fronted Bushshrike**, **Magpie Mannikin**, **Bat Hawk**, **Gorgeous Bushshrike**, **Blue Crane**, **Southern Bald Ibis**, and so much more!



Coqui Francolin *will be searched for around Polokwane.*

Although this tour is not as mammal focused as some of our other tours in northern South Africa, we should see a few of the more widespread African mammals, such as **Southern Giraffe**, **Greater Kudu**, **Sable Antelope**, **Plains Zebra**, **Impala**, **Waterbuck**, **Bontebok**, **Vervet** and **Blue Monkeys**, and **Rhebok**, among others.

Detailed Itinerary (9 days/8 nights)

Day 1. Arrival in Johannesburg and transfer to Dinokeng Game Reserve

This northern South Africa budget birding tour begins in Johannesburg, the largest city in South Africa and the country's main point of entry. We ask that you arrive before 2:00 p.m. today, as we have a two-hour drive to our accommodation tonight.

For those of you joining this tour after our **Budget South Africa Birding Tour: Zululand**, you will fly in from Durban the previous day or this morning (we will advise and assist with the interconnecting arrangements). Upon arrival in Johannesburg, you will be met at the airport, and we will make our way north to Dinokeng Game Reserve.



*We should see the marvelous **Crimson-breasted Shrike** at several sites on this trip.*

Dinokeng Game Reserve is the only "Big 5" reserve in Gauteng Province, meaning that (**White**/**Black**) **Rhinoceros**, **Leopard**, **Lion**, **Cape Buffalo**, and **African Savanna Elephant** can be seen in the reserve. Additionally, other mammals like **Greater Kudu**, **Common Eland**, **Southern Giraffe**, **Plains Zebra**, **Blue Wildebeest**, **Hartebeest**, and several other species occur here. We may spot mammals in Dinokeng, but our time in the reserve is brief—it mainly serves as an overnight stop, with arrival in the late afternoon and departure early the next morning. We will also get our trip list off to a good start and should have our first exposure to common species like **Swainson's** and **Natal Spurfowls**, **Crested Francolin**, **Red-crested Korhaan**, **Green Wood Hoopoe**, **Southern Yellow-billed**, **Southern Red-billed** and **African**

Grey Hornbills, **Lilac-breasted Roller**, **Crested Barbet**, **Magpie** and **Crimson-breasted Shrikes**, **Rattling Cisticola**, **Southern Pied** and **Arrow-marked Babblers**, and **Burchell's Starling**, among many others.

Overnight: Dinokeng Game Reserve

Day 2. Dinokeng Game Reserve to Polokwane

Today, we will start with an early morning birding session in Dinokeng before setting off for Polokwane, the capital of the northernmost Limpopo Province. En route, we will stop to bird along the Zaagkuilsdrift Road. This dirt road passes through Kalahari-type Vachellia thornveld, where we hope to connect with birds like **Northern Black Korhaan**, **Southern Pied Babbler**, **Kalahari Scrub Robin**, **White-throated Robin-Chat**, **Chestnut-vented Warbler**, **Cut-throat Finch**, **Scaly-feathered Weaver**, **White-browed Sparrow-Weaver**, **Shaft-tailed Whydah**, and **Yellow Canary**.



*The attractive and relatively localized **White-throated Robin-Chat** is common along the Zaagkuilsdrift Road.*

After a two-and-a-half hour drive, we should arrive in Polokwane and head out for an afternoon session in the Vachellia thornveld, where we hope to see species like the gorgeous **Crimson-breasted Shrike**, **Kalahari Scrub Robin**, **Barred Wren-Warbler**, **Marico Flycatcher**, **Burnt-necked Eremomela**, **Ashy Tit**, **Cape Penduline Tit**, **Great Sparrow**, and **Violet-eared** and **Black-faced Waxbills**. We should also have our first chance at the range-restricted **Short-clawed Lark**, the uncommon **Bushveld Pipit**, and **Shelley's** and **Coqui Francolins**.

Overnight: Polokwane

Day 3. Polokwane and Chebeng Grasslands birding

We will have an early start this morning and make our way west of Polokwane to the Chebeng Grasslands. These seemingly overgrazed grasslands between the villages are home to several localized and scarce species. Our main target is **Short-clawed Lark**, and we should connect with this species after listening out for its distinctive whistling call. Remarkably, no fewer than ten lark species have been recorded from this area, and we will likely see a number of species, including **Spike-heeled** (an isolated population occurs here), **Pink-billed**, **Sabota**, **Rufous-naped**, **Red-capped**, and **Grey-backed Sparrow-Larks**. **Melodious Lark** is rare here, but we do occasionally connect with this special species. Other birds to look out for in these short grasslands include **White-bellied Bustard**, **Northern Black Korhaan**, **Greater Kestrel**, **Temminck's Courser**, **Capped Wheatear**, **Ant-eating Chat**, **Cloud Cisticola**, **Cape Longclaw**, and the stunning **Long-tailed Widowbird**.



*The range-restricted **Short-clawed Lark** is one of our primary targets at Chebeng.*

The scarce **Tinkling Cisticola** and unobtrusive **Yellow-bellied Eremomela** favor areas with slightly more shrubby vegetation. A nearby granite outcrop supports a small **Cape Vulture** colony, and we often see a few birds cruising overhead, along with the Critically Endangered (BirdLife International) **White-backed Vulture**.

After a busy morning, we will return to Polokwane for lunch and head out for another birding session in the Vachellia thornveld, where we will likely connect with many of the species mentioned under Day 1. The Polokwane Game Reserve also supports good numbers of mammals like **Plains Zebra**, **Sable Antelope**, **Southern Giraffe**, **Tsessebe**, **Impala**, **Common Eland**, and more!

Overnight: Polokwane

Day 4. Polokwane to Magoebaskloof (via Wolkberg)

We will leave Polokwane early today and make our way east towards the northern reaches of the Great Escarpment. En route, we will stop to scan a few sports fields where **Southern Bald Ibis** is seen from time to time (although this species is by no means guaranteed here). We will then head up into the Wolkberg Mountains, rapidly gaining altitude and leaving behind the Polokwane Plateau bushveld. On our way up, we will stop in the mixed bushveld habitats of the lower slopes to look for **Mocking Cliff Chat**, **Black Cuckooshrike**, **Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird**, **Short-toed Rock Thrush**, **Striped Pipit**, and **Rock-loving Cisticola**.

Once we reach the higher reaches of the Wolkberg Mountains, we will bird the montane grasslands and Protea stands for species like the endemic **Gurney's Sugarbird** (Cape Sugarbird, the only other member of this southern African endemic family, can be seen on our **Budget South Africa Birding Tour: Cape Town's Fynbos Endemics**), **Malachite** and **Greater Double-collared Sunbirds**, **Wailing Cisticola**, the endemic **Buff-streaked Chat**, **Cape Bunting**, and **Nicholson's Pipit**. We will also keep an eye skywards for **Verreaux's Eagle**, which breeds on the cliffs in the area.



*The characterful **Buff-streaked Chat** is an attractive endemic of South Africa's highlands.*

We will then proceed to the quaint town of Haenertsburg, nestled in the Wolkberg Mountains. The grasslands surrounding the town are productive and may yield **African Yellow Warbler**, **Red-collared Widowbird**, **Drakensberg Prinia**, **Yellow Bishop**, **Levaillant's Cisticola**, **Cape Grassbird**, and, with some luck, **Fan-tailed Grassbird**. In the afternoon, we will have our first exposure to the Afrotemperate forests of the northern escarpment. These are cool, high-altitude forests that are often shrouded in mist.

Some of our top targets will include **Narina Trogon**, **Knysna Turaco**, **Cape Parrot**, **Lemon Dove**, **African Emerald Cuckoo**, **Square-tailed Drongo**, **Scaly-throated Honeyguide**, **Black-fronted** and **Olive Bushshrikes**, **Orange Ground Thrush**, **Chorister Robin-Chat**, **Brown Scrub Robin**, **White-starred Robin**, **Yellow-streaked Greenbul**, **Grey**

Cuckooshrike, **Barratt's Warbler**, **Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler**, **Forest Canary**, **Swee Waxbill**, **Green Twinspot**, and so many more! We may also luck onto the mighty **Crowned Eagle**, which hunts **Blue Monkeys** and other large prey species in the forests. We should see the more common **Long-crested Eagle** and **Jackal Buzzard**, too.

After a busy day, we will return to our comfortable hotel, where we should hear **African Wood Owl** and even the secretive **Buff-spotted Flufftail** at night.

Overnight: Magoebaskloof



*The endemic **Cape Parrot** occurs in the forests of Magoebaskloof.*

Day 5. Magoebaskloof and Tzaneen birding

Our plan today is to spend the morning birding the Afrotemperate forests, targeting any species we may have missed yesterday, and improving our views of some of these secretive denizens. After an early morning session in the forests, we will drop down into the subtropical lowlands around the town of Tzaneen. We will stop at a few low-water bridges in the area to look for **Mountain Wagtail**, **African Finfoot**, and **Half-collared Kingfisher**, all of which can be challenging to see at the best of times. In Tzaneen, we hope to see the localized **Magpie Mannikin** and several new trip birds like **Purple-crested Turaco**, **White-browed Robin-Chat**, **Red-faced Cisticola**, **Holub's Golden Weaver**, **Scarlet-chested** and **Collared Sunbirds**, and **African Firefinch**, among many others. We will also try for **Blue-spotted Wood Dove**, which is exceptionally scarce in South Africa.

Time dependent, we may bird the mixed woodland habitats east of Tzaneen, where we have a chance at **Green-capped Eremomela**, **Pale Flycatcher**, **Yellow-throated Longclaw**, and **Bearded Scrub Robin**. In the afternoon, we will stop at a eucalyptus stand where a pair of **Bat Hawks** have bred for several years. We will return to our accommodation in Magoebaskloof for an early night in anticipation of more exciting birding tomorrow.

Overnight: Magoebaskloof



*We will look for the scarce **Bat Hawk** around Tzaneen.*

Day 6. Lowveld birding

Today, we will meet up with a local bird guide for what promises to be one of the highlights of the trip. We will make our way east of Magoebaskloof and into the Lowveld, an area of low-lying subtropical woodlands and savanna habitats. On the way, we will keep an eye open for **Lilac-breasted Roller**, **Lizard Buzzard**, and **Greater Blue-eared Starling** on the roadside fences and powerlines. Upon arrival at Hans Merensky Nature Reserve, we will immediately start exploring the Mopani woodlands.

A lengthy list is always expected in this area, and we should kick our list off with **African Grey**, **Southern Yellow-billed**, and **Southern Red-billed Hornbills**, **Striped Kingfisher**, **Emerald-spotted Wood Dove**, **African Green Pigeon**, **Bennett's**, **Bearded**, **Golden-tailed**, and **Cardinal Woodpeckers**, **Grey-rumped Swallow**, **Southern Black Tit**, **Green-capped Eremomela**, **Grey Penduline Tit**, **Pale Flycatcher**, **Green Wood Hoopoe**, **Purple Roller**, **Bearded Scrub Robin**, **White-crested** and **Retz's Helmetshrikes**, **Red-headed Weaver**, **Red-billed Buffalo Weaver**, and **Orange-breasted Bushshrike**, to name a few.

Birds of prey are well represented here, and we regularly see **Bateleur**, **Tawny**, and **Wahlberg's Eagles**, **African Hawk-Eagle**, **Black-chested** and **Brown Snake Eagles**, **Dark Chanting Goshawk**, and **Shikra**. We also stand a chance of seeing a few vultures, such as **Hooded** and **White-backed Vultures**, occasionally joined by small numbers of **Cape** and **Lappet-faced Vultures**.

The woodlands here also host several trickier species, which we will focus on finding. These include **Bushveld Pipit**, **African Cuckoo**, **White-breasted Cuckooshrike**, **Stierling's Wren-Warbler**, and **African Barred Owlet**.

In the afternoon, we will make our way back to Magoebaskloof via Tzaneen, attempting to find any remaining targets in the subtropical woodlands.

Overnight: Magoebaskloof



*The characterful **Retz's Helmetshrike** can be seen during our time in the Lowveld.*

Day 7. Magoebaskloof to Dullstroom

After our final breakfast in Magoebaskloof, we will start the scenic drive south towards the charming town of Dullstroom, located in the rolling grasslands of the neighboring Mpumalanga Province. The drive will take at least four hours, and we will pass through a variety of habitats as we travel through spectacular mountain passes along South Africa's northern escarpment.

We may arrive in Dullstroom in time for a late afternoon birding session at Verloren Vallei Nature Reserve. The grasslands here are likely to yield several new species for us, with possibilities including **Denham's Bustard**, **Red-winged** and **Grey-winged Francolins**, **Pied Starling**, **Mountain Chat**, **Eastern Long-billed Lark**, **Bokmakierie**, **Banded Martin**, and **Sentinel Rock Thrush**, among others. In the evening, we will try to see the resident pair of **Cape Eagle-Owls**, which sometimes perch out in the open well before sunset.

Overnight: Dullstroom

Day 8. Dullstroom birding

We will have a full day today to explore the grasslands around Dullstroom. Our targets will include many of the species mentioned on Day 7, and we will have additional chances for some of the highland specials, such as **Buff-streaked Chat** and **Gurney's Sugarbird**, should we have missed them in Limpopo. Another species that we may have a chance to see is the endemic **Yellow-breasted Pipit**. Although its seasonal movements are poorly understood, most individuals appear to move to lower elevations at this time of the year, but we may luck onto a straggler. We will also keep an eye open for **Blue Crane** and **Southern Bald Ibis**, both of which are fairly common in the area. Although Verloren Vallei was once a reliable site for **Wattled Crane**, the birds have become exceptionally scarce in recent years, and we will require luck to find this rare bird.

Overnight: Dullstroom



*We will search for **Southern Bald Ibis** in the grasslands around Dullstroom.*

Day 9. Dullstroom to Johannesburg, and departure

We may squeeze in a final pre-breakfast birding session around Dullstroom this morning before making our way back to Johannesburg. After just under three hours on the road, we will arrive in Johannesburg and make our way to O.R. Tambo International Airport. You are free to depart at any time after 3:00 p.m.

Overnight: Not included

Please note that the itinerary 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. In addition, we sometimes have to use a different guide from the one advertised due to tour scheduling or other factors.

Trip Details:

Duration:	9 days
Group size:	4–6
Dates:	17–25 May 2027
Start:	Johannesburg, South Africa
End:	Johannesburg, South Africa
Prices:	R 59,400 per person sharing, based on 4–6 participants (2027)
Single supplements:	R 13,800 (2027)

Price includes:

All accommodation
Meals (from dinner on Day 1 until breakfast on Day 9)
Unlimited bottled water
Expert tour leader
All entrance & conservation fees
All ground transport
Airport transfers (first and final days only)

Price excludes:

International/domestic flights (to/from Johannesburg)
Visas
Items of a personal nature, e.g., gifts, laundry, internet access, etc.
Any pre- or post-tour accommodation, meals, or activities
Soft/alcoholic drinks
Personal travel insurance
Gratuities (please see our tipping guidelines blog)