BUDGET SOUTH AFRICA BIRDING TOUR: ZULULAND SPECIALS

10–16 MAY 2027



*The delightful **Pink-throated Twinspot** is a major Zululand special, and one of our main targets on this tour.*

Overview

This Zululand birding tour forms part of our carefully designed budget circuit, which also includes Cape Town, northern South Africa, and the Northern Cape. Together, these tours offer an opportunity to explore South Africa's ecological diversity, from arid desert systems to coastal forests, fynbos, and savanna. By combining these destinations, participants can build a well-rounded bird list while experiencing a wide range of habitats and endemic-rich regions. While some tours focus on species numbers and others on localized endemics, KwaZulu-Natal's Zululand region offers a strong combination of both.

This budget tour showcases a carefully selected range of Zululand's most rewarding birding destinations, while maintaining comfortable and affordable accommodation. We begin in the forested hills of Eshowe, known for its endemic and forest-specialist species, before moving to the St Lucia area within iSimangaliso Wetland Park, where wetland, estuarine, and coastal habitats offer excellent birding. We then continue into the Hluhluwe region, exploring a mosaic of sand forest, savanna, and grassland, each supporting its own suite of species. The tour concludes along the coast at Mtunzini, where estuarine and coastal forest systems provide a final set of birding opportunities.

Across these habitats, we will target a wide range of regional specials and sought-after species. Highlights may include **African Pygmy Goose**, **Southern Banded Snake Eagle**, **Palm-nut Vulture**, **Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon**, **Green Barbet**, **Narina Trogon**, **Spotted Ground Thrush**, **Rudd's Apalis**, **Neergaard's Sunbird**, **Pink-throated Twinspot**, **Woodward's Batis**, **Lemon-breasted Canary** and **Mangrove Kingfisher**.

In addition to the birdlife, Zululand also offers rewarding mammal encounters. Species such as **Common Hippopotamus**, **White Rhinoceros**, **Nyala**, **Giraffe**, and **Common Warthog** are regularly seen, and even **Leopard** could be seen with some luck.



*Trogons are a highly prized family of birds worldwide. South Africa has just one species, the **Narina Trogon**, which is a prime target on this tour.*

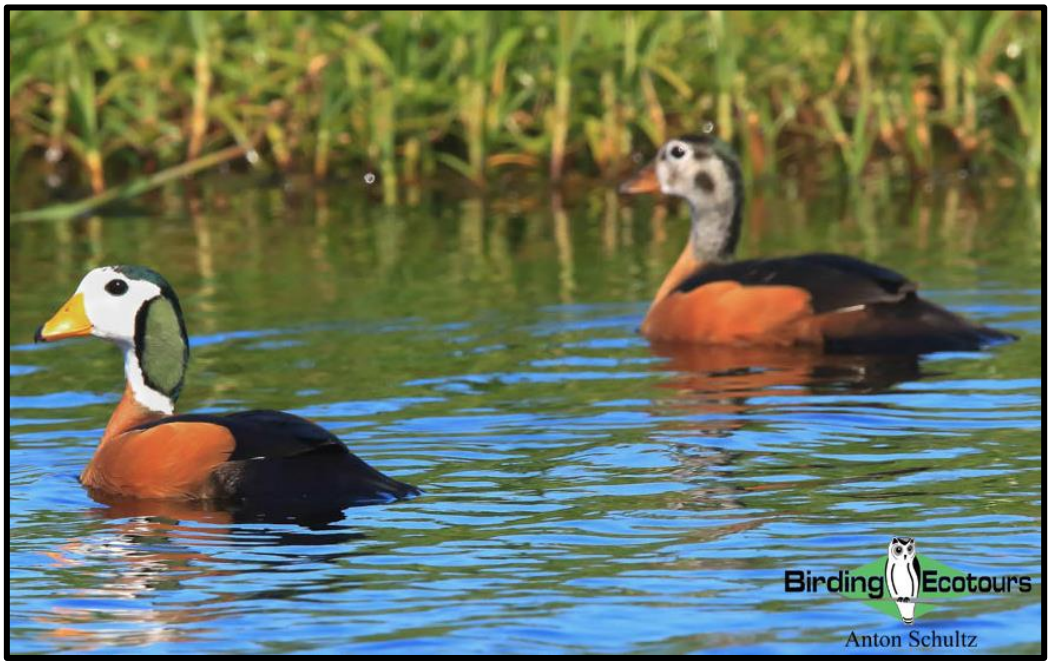
Detailed Itinerary (7 days/6 nights)

Day 1. Arrival in Durban and transfer to Eshowe

This budget Zululand birding tour begins in Durban, one of South Africa's key coastal gateways. We ask that you arrive by 2 p.m. today, as we have a short transfer to get to our accommodation this afternoon. For those joining this tour after our **Budget South Africa Birding Tour: Cape Town's Fynbos Endemics**, you will arrive from Cape Town this morning. Upon arrival in Durban, you will be met at the airport and link up with the group.

En route to our accommodation, we will travel through a mix of coastal lowlands, farmland, and scattered wetland systems, offering our first introduction to the region's birdlife. Species such as **Long-crested Eagle**, and **African Woolly-necked Stork** are characteristic roadside sightings, while brief stops may produce species typical of subtropical lowlands, including **Purple-crested Turaco**, **Crowned Hornbill**, **Square-tailed Drongo**, **Red-capped Robin-Chat**, **Collared Sunbird** and **Spectacled Weaver**.

If time allows, we may make a short stop at productive wetland sites, where a variety of waterbirds can be expected. These areas may support species such as **Red-billed** and **Blue-billed Teals**, **African Jacana**, **Goliath Heron**, **Great White Pelican**, **Rufous-winged Cisticola** and possibly even **African Pygmy Goose**.



***African Pygmy Goose** has to be one of the cutest geese in the world.*

As we approach Eshowe, the landscape transitions into patches of natural coastal and scarp forest, marking our entry into one of Zululand's key birding regions. We aim to arrive in the late afternoon, allowing time to settle into our accommodation. Depending on time and conditions, there may be a short opportunity for introductory birding around the area.

In the evening, we will enjoy our first dinner together and discuss the birding to come over the next few days. With some luck, we may even have **African Wood Owl** visiting our accommodation.

Overnight: Eshowe

Day 2. Dlinza forest and transfer to St Lucia

We begin the day with an early morning visit to Dlinza Forest, one of the finest remaining patches of coastal scarp forest in southern Africa. This rich indigenous forest offers excellent opportunities for a range of sought-after species, and we will make use of the well-known aerial boardwalk and canopy tower, which provide a unique vantage point into the forest canopy. Early mornings here are particularly productive, with chances of encountering **Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon** as they move or call from the treetops. Other key species include **Narina Trogon**, **Spotted Ground Thrush**, **Chorister Robin-Chat**, **Green Twinspot**, **Grey Cuckooshrike**, and **Scaly-throated Honeyguide**.

After our morning in Dlinza, we begin our journey north possibly making a detour past Ongoye Forest, the only site in South Africa for the highly localized **Green Barbet**. This species can be extremely challenging, but time spent along the forest edge and access roads may also produce **Yellow-streaked Greenbul**, **Green Malkoha**, **Brown Scrub Robin** and further chances for some other key forest species.



*The restricted distribution of the **Green Barbet** is believed to be linked to the availability of fruiting figs at any given time of year in Ongoye Forest.*

We continue towards the holiday town of St Lucia. As we enter town, we have excellent chances of encountering **Southern Brown-throated Weaver** alongside the more widespread **Eastern Golden Weaver**, often in close proximity.

Later in the afternoon, we will likely explore the iGwalagwala Trail, a well-known patch of coastal forest on the edge of town. Species we may encounter here include **Livingstone's Turaco**, **Trumpeter Hornbill**, **Narina Trogon**, **Olive Bushshrike**, **Green Malkoha**, **Grey Sunbird**, **Black-throated Wattle-eye**, and **Dark-backed Weaver**, along with a variety of other forest-edge and thicket species. We may also hear calls evocative of summer, such as **African Emerald Cuckoo** (which occasionally overwinters in South Africa), though following these calls often reveals the vocal mimicry of **Red-capped Robin-Chat**.

We then settle into our accommodation, with the remainder of the afternoon or evening at leisure or for additional local birding. Dinner will be in town, where St Lucia's well-known **Common Hippopotamuses** sometimes wander through the streets.

Overnight: St Lucia



Livingstone's Turaco *is one of the many iconic specials we will search for in St Lucia.*

Day 3: Eastern Shores of iSimangaliso Wetland Park

Today we will spend most of the day in the Eastern Shores section of iSimangaliso Wetland Park, one of the most diverse birding areas in Zululand. This extensive mosaic of wetlands, grassland, dune forest, and coastal shoreline provides consistently rewarding birding. Wetland pans and reedbeds may produce **African Pygmy Goose**, **White-backed Duck**, **Saddle-billed Stork**, and **Malachite Kingfisher**, while the surrounding woodlands support a different suite of species, including **Rudd's Apalis**, **Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher**, **Woodward's Batis**, **Brown Scrub Robin**, and **Grey Waxbill**. The open grasslands add further variety, with species such as **Black-bellied Bustard**, **Yellow-throated Longclaw**, and **Croaking Cisticola** all possible. Raptors are always a possibility here, with the scarce **Southern Banded Snake Eagle** being a particularly sought-after target.

While focusing on birds, we will also keep an eye out for the park's impressive mammals, including **White Rhinoceros**, **Giraffe**, **Plains Zebra**, and the relatively scarce **Samango Monkey**, while, with some luck, even **Leopard** may be encountered.

Notably, the iSimangaliso Wetland Park is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, recognized for its exceptional biodiversity and the variety of ecosystems packed into a relatively small area.

This evening, we have the option of undertaking a night drive in search of the highly sought-after **Swamp Nightjar**, along with a few other nocturnal species.

Overnight: St Lucia



Southern Banded Snake Eagle *is often found perched on man-made structures.*

Day 4: St Lucia to Hluhluwe and the Nibela Floodplains

We may begin the day with another walk along the iGwalagwala Trail before breakfast, taking advantage of the cool, still conditions when forest birds are most active. Here, we will search for a similar suite of coastal forest species to those encountered previously.

After breakfast, we depart St Lucia and make our way towards Hluhluwe. The nearby floodplains form part of the most productive wetland systems in Zululand. Seasonal water levels create a constantly shifting mosaic of shallow pans, mudflats, and grassy margins, often supporting large concentrations of birds. These wetlands can host an impressive diversity, from conspicuous species such as **Greater Flamingo** and **Pink-backed Pelican** to a wide range of herons, ducks, and waders. Species such as **Black Heron**, **Goliath Heron**, **Purple Swamphen**, and **Yellow-billed Egret** are all possible, while overhead flocks of **White-winged**, **Whiskered**, and **Caspian Terns** add to the spectacle. Afternoons here can be particularly memorable, as large flocks move across the floodplain in the golden light.

The surrounding grasslands are equally rewarding, and we will search for species such as the striking and localized **Rosy-throated Longclaw**, along with **Black-winged** and **Senegal Lapwings**.

Overnight: Hluhluwe



Rosy-throated Longclaw *is tied to seasonally flooded plains and damp grasslands.*

Day 5: Zululand bushveld and sand forest mosaic

Today is a full day exploring the rich mosaic of habitats that make Zululand one of the most exciting birding regions in South Africa. We will cover a combination of bushveld, savanna, sand forest, grassland, and wetland systems, each contributing its own suite of species and ensuring a diverse and rewarding day in the field.

This region is particularly well known for its localized specials, and we will focus much of our effort on tracking down some of Zululand's most sought-after birds. Among the highlights we will be searching for are **Neergaard's Sunbird**, **Gorgeous Bushshrike**, **Pink-throated Twinspot**, **Grey Waxbill**, **Grey-rumped Swallow**, and **Eastern Nicator**, while the elusive **African Broadbill** remains a possibility, though always a challenging one.

In addition to these specials, the surrounding bushveld supports a range of widespread species, and we are likely to encounter birds such as **Southern Red-fronted Tinkerbird**, **Yellow-throated Bush Sparrow**, **Grey Tit-Flycatcher**, **Black Cuckooshrike**, **Red-billed Oxpecker**, and **Orange-breasted Bushshrike** among many others. In areas supporting Lala palm stands, we will make a concerted effort to find the localized **Lemon-breasted Canary**, a highly sought-after species which almost exclusively uses these palms for nesting. With such a variety of environments to explore, today offers one of the most exciting birding days of the tour, with the potential for a long list of both regional specials and widespread savanna species.

Overnight: Hluhluwe

Day 6: Hluhluwe and transfer to Mtunzini

We begin the day with some final morning birding in the Hluhluwe area, making the most of any remaining targets from the previous day. The combination of sand forest, woodland, and open patches can again be productive, and this session provides a valuable opportunity to pick up species we may have missed, or to enjoy improved views of some of Zululand's specials in

the soft early morning light. After breakfast, we depart Hluhluwe and make our way south towards the coastal town of Mtunzini. The drive takes us back through a variety of Zululand habitats, and we will remain attentive for any additional sightings along the way.



*The aptly named **Gorgeous Bushshrike** is a shy species of thicket habitats. We will need a good dose of luck to see it this well, though its far-carrying calls are a feature of Zululand.*

On arrival at Mtunzini, we will head into the local Umlalazi Nature Reserve, a well-known birding site where coastal forest, mangroves, estuary, and dune systems meet. One of the key features of this area is its stands of raffia palms, which support one of the most localized and sought-after species in South Africa, the **Palm-nut Vulture**. We will spend time searching these palms, where this unique species (one of the few largely vegetarian raptors in the world) can often be found feeding or roosting.

The surrounding coastal forest and estuarine habitats can also be very productive, with species such as the highly sought after **Mangrove Kingfisher**, **Black-throated Wattle-eye**, **Grey Sunbird**, and **Green Malkoha** all possible. Along the estuary margins, a variety of water-associated species may be present, adding further diversity to the afternoon's birding. We return to our accommodation in Mtunzini in the late afternoon, where we can relax before dinner and reflect on our penultimate day in this remarkable region of South Africa.

Overnight: Mtunzini

Day 7: Mtunzini and departure

Our final morning will be relaxed, with time for a short birding session before departure. We will likely explore the Siyaya Forest Trail or do some light birding around the village, depending on time and conditions. This provides a final opportunity to pick up any remaining coastal forest or estuarine species, or to enjoy improved views of birds encountered earlier in the tour.

After breakfast, we will transfer to King Shaka International Airport in Durban, where the tour concludes around midday (kindly only book your flights out from 3 p.m. onwards today).

For those continuing on our complementary **Budget South Africa Birding Tour: The North**, this will begin the following morning, allowing for a chance to unwind with a smooth transition between the two trips.

Overnight: Not included



Mangrove Kingfisher *is a scarce denizen of South Africa's east coast, with birds moving into the Mtunzini area during the mid-year period.*

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.

Tour Details:

Duration:	7 days
Group size:	4–6
Dates:	10–16 May 2027
Start:	Durban, South Africa
End:	Durban, South Africa
Prices:	R 48,790 per person sharing, based on 4–6 participants (2027)
Single supplements:	R 7,040 (2027)

Price includes:

All accommodation
Meals (from dinner on Day 1 until breakfast on Day 7)
Unlimited bottled water
Expert tour leader
All entrance & conservation fees
All ground transport
Airport pick-up and drop-off (Days 1 and 7 only)

Price excludes:

International/domestic flights (to/from Durban)
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/medical insurance
Gratuities (please see our tipping guidelines blog)