

NORTHERN SOUTH AFRICA TRIP REPORT PRIVATE TOUR

31 OCTOBER - 5 NOVEMBER 2017

By Dylan Vasapolli



The rare **Taita Falcon** (Falco fasciinucha) showed well.



Overview

This short tour was an extension to northern South Africa for a private client, following our set-departure South Africa tours to the Western Cape and Subtropical South Africa. The primary goal was to target species occurring in northern South Africa that are absent/uncommon elsewhere in the country and/or any species missed on the set-departure South Africa tours. This short tour began and ended in Johannesburg and saw us transiting northwards first to the rich thornveld of the Zaagkuilsdrift Road, followed by the montane forests of the Magoebaskloof hills before visiting the moist grasslands and broad-leaved woodlands found in north-eastern Gauteng.

Day 1, October 31. Johannesburg

Following the conclusion of our set-departure Subtropical South Africa tour earlier in the day I met up with James, who would be joining this post-tour extension, in the early evening. We headed for dinner and, following dinner, drove south of Johannesburg to search for African Grass Owl. We arrived on site and began working the region. We enjoyed excellent views of a number of **Marsh Owls**, along with **Spotted Thick-knee**, but drew a blank on the grass owl for most of our time. But at our last stop we had success and saw a single **African Grass Owl** come in, although it remained distant and did leave us wanting more. Then we called it an evening and retired to our beds.

Day 2, November 1. Johannesburg to Zaagkuilsdrift

Despite the late end to the previous day we began early this morning as we headed to a nearby wetland to try for in particular Red-chested Flufftail, among others. We initially headed through a tract of grasslands before arriving at the wetland. We got off to a good start, finding a covey of confiding Orange River Francolins along with a few Cape Longclaws. Soon after arriving at the wetland we picked up on the hooting of a **Red-chested Flufftail** and got into position to see it. We waited patiently for it to cross the gap, and soon our wait was rewarded as we had views of a male as it came out, quickly walked through the gap, and disappeared. We persisted for a little while longer and had some good repeat views before leaving the bird be. The wetland was alive this morning, and we enjoyed a regular procession of ducks overhead, including Whitefaced and Fulvous Whistling Ducks, Spur-winged and Egyptian Geese, Cape, Red-billed, and Hottentot Teals, and African Black and Yellow-billed Ducks, while numbers of African Snipes gave their drumming display flight all around us. African Rail and Black Crake remained heard only, although we did manage to get good views of Glossy and African Sacred Ibises, African Swamphen, Black-winged Stilt, Burchell's Coucal, Marsh Owl, Lesser Swamp, Little Rush, and African Reed Warblers, Levaillant's Cisticola, Fan-tailed Widowbird, and Orange-breasted Waxbill. We turned our attention to the surrounding grasslands again and slowly worked our way through them. Here we added Swainson's Spurfowl, Northern Black Korhaan, Crowned and African Wattled Lapwings, Diederik Cuckoo, Spike-heeled Lark, Banded Martin, a plethora of cisticolas, namely Zitting, Desert, Cloud and Wing-snapping Cisticolas and Black-chested Prinia, Capped Wheatear, Longtailed Widowbird, and Black-throated Canary. Then we headed to a nearby spot for Melodious Lark, although we sadly missed this bird. We enjoyed a similar suite of species to what we had had earlier in the day, with the highlights going to a pair of Secretarybirds and South African Cliff Swallow. Then we made our way northwards towards the Zaagkuilsdrift



Road, but not before stopping in the Seringveld Conservancy for some afternoon birding. Being in a tract of broad-leaved woodland here, the birding can be difficult, as one looks for bird parties, which contain the primary specials. We had a slow afternoon and had to work hard for our species, getting only a few of the main specials. The major standouts were Lizard Buzzard, Striped Kingfisher, White-fronted Bee-eater, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Brown-backed Honeybird, Brubru, Pearl-breasted Swallow, Green-capped Eremomela, and Bushveld Pipit. Other species seen here included Red-chested Cuckoo, European Bee-eater, African Hoopoe, Green Wood Hoopoe, Black-headed Oriole, Lesser Striped Swallow, Long-billed Crombec, White-browed Scrub Robin, Southern Black Flycatcher, White-bellied Sunbird, and Golden-breasted Bunting. When we arrived on the Zaagkuilsdrift Road in the late afternoon we made our way to our lodge, where we checked in and settled down for a good dinner under the stars. Afterwards we had another night drive and enjoyed a highly successful outing. A glorious Southern White-faced Owl showed well early, which was followed by Western Barn Owl, Marsh Owl, and Fiery-necked Nightjar. Pearl-spotted Owlet was heard only. This rounded off an excellent day with just shy of 130 species having been seen.



Orange River Francolin showed well early in the day.

Day 3, November 2. Zaagkuilsdrift to Magoebaskloof

We began bright and early once more, forgetting about our tired eyes all too quickly. We did a morning drive along the road, slowly birding our way through the thornveld until we arrived at the occasionally inundated floodplain, although it was still dry now with only a few pools of water present. We had an exceptional morning and managed to find many of the regions specials. The roads were littered with Crested Francolin and Natal and Swainson's Spurfowls, while the thicker vegetation closer to the river provided us with Black and Red-chested Cuckoos, a surprise Grey-headed Kingfisher, African Grey Hornbill, Lesser Honeyguide, Cardinal Woodpecker, Orange-breasted Bushshrike, Southern Boubou, Willow Warbler, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Arrow-marked Babbler, Spotted Flycatcher, and White-throated Robin-Chat. The acacia thornveld delivered Pearl-spotted Owlet, Red-faced Mousebird, Southern Yellow-billed and Southern Red-billed Hornbills, Acacia Pied Barbet, Chinspot



Batis, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Magpie Shrike, Cape Penduline Tit, Ashy Tit, Pearl-breasted Swallow, Barred Wren-Warbler, Southern Pied Babbler, Chestnut-vented Warbler, Kalahari Scrub Robin, Marico Flycatcher, Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, Scaly-feathered Weaver, Lesser Masked Weaver, Green-winged Pytilia, Red-billed and Jameson's Firefinches, and Blue Waxbill. The small patches of water around the floodplain held a surprising number of species, such as White-faced Whistling Duck, Knob-billed Duck, Yellow-billed Stork, African Spoonbill, Hamerkop, Great Egret, Black Heron, and African Jacana. The dry plains around the water provided Kittlitz's Plover, Namaqua Dove, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark, African Pipit, and Quailfinch, while the dry scrub held Gabar Goshawk, Grey Go-away-bird, Whitebacked Mousebird, Red-breasted Swallow, Marico Sunbird, Great Sparrow, and Yellow Canary. We eventually arrived back at the lodge for brunch, after which we tackled the road northwards as we headed to Polokwane and eventually to Magoebaskloof, where we would spend the night. After a few hours we arrived at our first port of call in some dry scrub east of Polokwane, where we searched for our primary target here, Short-clawed Lark. Although the time of day wasn't great, we were confident we would get the bird and set off. After quite some time I picked up the shrill, high-pitched call of this bird, and it took us a while to track it down, but we eventually did and enjoyed some good and extended views of a pair of Short-clawed Larks, as they foraged along a track, occasionally popping up to the tops of the bushes. Other species seen here included Spotted Thick-knee, European Bee-eater, Kalahari and Whitebrowed Scrub Robins, Cape Weaver, and Streaky-headed Seedeater.



The localized Short-clawed Lark was one of many highlights today.

With a little bit of time left in the day we hastily headed toward the forested Magoebaskloof hills, where we'd try to track down our target species. We arrived in a bustling party, filled with all sorts of bird calls and constant movement, which made it somewhat tricky to keep track of what was going on around us. The delightful **Cape Batis** showed well, as did **Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler** and **Bar-throated Apalis**. We had to work to get our views of **Olive Bushshrike**, **Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher** and **Barratt's Warbler**, though, but we



enjoyed views of all of these, before a trill gave away **Green Twinspot**. The bird was quite skittish and sadly only gave us quick views as it flitted around the thickets, leaving us wanting more. **Chorister Robin-Chat** and **White-starred Robin** also showed well before I picked up on an **Orange Ground Thrush** singing. We started to search for the bird, and as so often happens with this species, contrary to its name, I managed to find it calling high up in the canopy of a truly massive tree. We enjoyed some good scope views until our necks gave in and we pressed on. **Narina Trogon, Knysna Turaco**, and **Yellow-streaked Greenbul** all remained heard only. Daylight was almost gone by now, and our last species seen included **African Emerald Cuckoo**, **Drakensberg Prinia**, **Olive Thrush**, **Cape Robin-Chat**, **Southern Double-collared Sunbird**, and **Cape** and **Forest Canaries**. A flock of **Cape Parrots** flew noisily overhead as we got back to our car. We headed to our comfortable accommodation, and a night walk after dinner produced great views of **African Wood Owl**. This rounded off another excellent day, with our day list exceeding 150 species.

Day 4, November 3. Magoebaskloof and surrounds

We brushed our tired eyes off once again this morning, as we headed out nice and early in search of the rare and difficult Striped Flufftail. It was a perfect morning with overcast conditions but no rain, yet we were to be disappointed, as no matter where we tried, we failed to get any calling birds. We worked the grassland patch for a good few hours, and with soaked clothes we gave up to focus on some of our other targets. Some of the birds seen on this morning venture included African Black Duck, Woolly-necked Stork, some great views of a soaring Rufous-breasted Sparrowhawk, African Olive Pigeon, Brown-backed Honeybird, Black Saw-wing, Cape Grassbird, Wailing Cisticola, Drakensberg Prinia, Southern Double-collared Sunbird, Yellow Bishop, and African Pied Wagtail. We moved into the montane forests on Woodbush Forest Drive and slowly worked our way down the track. The birding was mostly pretty quiet, but we did enjoy a few bird parties and connected with the majority of our targets here. We had some great views of noisy Knysna Turacos as they bounded around the tree tops, while African Emerald and Red-chested Cuckoos called at regular intervals. We enjoyed views of the prized Narina Trogon together with Olive Woodpecker and a few flight views of Cape Parrots. The thickets in the mid-story held species such as Cape Batis, Olive Bushshrike, Grey Cuckooshrike, Square-tailed Drongo, Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher, Sombre and Yellow-streaked Greenbuls, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Bar-throated Apalis, and quite literally on the edge of the last bit of forest Black-fronted Bushshrike. This prized bird is perhaps the biggest target here, and after a bit of effort we were rewarded with some good views. The understory held Olive Thrush, Chorister Robin-Chat, White-starred Robin and Greenbacked Camaroptera. A quick stop at Debengeni Falls delivered Mountain Wagtail but not much else. With lunch on the horizon we headed to Tzaneen, where we collected lunch and headed into the suburbs in search of another target, Magpie Mannikin. Our stop here was spectacular, and we were regularly interrupted by all sorts of species, ranging from the large Purple-crested Turaco to the dainty Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird. Thickets held African Paradise Flycatcher, White-browed Robin-Chat, Collared Sunbird, and Spectacled Weaver, while the more open areas along a stream produced Red-faced Cisticola, Scarletchested Sunbird, Holub's Golden Weaver, and after a few brief flyovers some good perched views of a flock of Magpie Mannikins. A number of hirundines worked the sky, with highlights going to Wire-tailed and Greater and Lesser Striped Swallows. Following our success here we headed into the bushveld east of Tzaneen, where we left the clouds behind and found ourselves



in full sun and dying of the heat and humidity. Despite the conditions we enjoyed a steady stream of birds, with highlights going to Little Sparrowhawk, Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, Broadbilled Roller, Common Scimitarbill, Black-collared Barbet, Black Cuckooshrike, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Croaking Cisticola, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Violet-backed Starling, Kurrichane Thrush, Pale Flycatcher, White-throated Robin-Chat, Red-headed Weaver, and a brief Bushveld Pipit. The main standout, however, were Grey-headed, Orange-breasted, and Gorgeous Bushshrikes, which we found in exactly the same place and enjoyed some spectacular views of the prized Gorgeous Bushshrike in particular. Our afternoon was rounded off with a Bat Hawk sitting contently on its nest, which pushed our daily tally to just shy of 130 species.



Black-fronted Bushshrike was a highlight during the day.

Day 5, November 4. Magoebaskloof to Zusterstroom

With a few possible options for the day we decided to focus on the incredibly rare Taita Falcon, which had been showing well recently, even though it meant quite a long detour. A quick morning walk around the grounds of the lodge started our morning and gave up **Knysna Turaco**, Olive and Golden-tailed Woodpeckers, Olive Bushshrike, Grey Cuckooshrike, Squaretailed Drongo, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Chorister Robin-Chat, and Swee Waxbill, while Narina Trogon, Barratt's Warbler and Brown Scrub Robin all remained heard only. Following breakfast we checked out and headed off for the Strydom Tunnel, where we'd try for Taita Falcon. We arrived on site and after a short wait were rewarded with our first views of a bird came screaming in along the cliffs. We enjoyed a few more excellent flight views before the bird finally settled on a perch we could see, and we had some good, albeit distant scope views of the bird perched. Our time here also provided Cape Vulture, Red-winged Starling, Mocking Cliff and Familiar Chats, while Cape Rock Thrush was just heard. With the rare falcon firmly under our belts we tried our luck at a Buff-spotted Flufftail that had been showing well not far off our route, although we would be trying at the worst time of day. We arrived on site and the patience game began. We tried for a good few hours but had to walk away empty-handed. Highlights here were Narina Trogon, Half-collared



Kingfisher, and **Terrestrial Brownbul**. With still quite a bit of ground to cover we hit the road for our final destination in the Wilge River Valley, Zusterstroom. We made good ground and arrived shortly before dark, enjoying **Southern Bald Ibis**, **Long-crested Eagle**, and **Whiskered Tern** en route. After dinner we set off for a night drive, although it was on the quiet side, being notably windy. **Spotted Thick-knee**, **Spotted Eagle-Owl**, **Marsh Owl**, and **Rufous-cheeked Nightjar** were all seen, while **Pearl-spotted Owlet** and **Fiery-necked Nightjar** remained heard only.



We had incredible views of Taita Falcon.

Day 6, November 5. Zusterstroom to Johannesburg

This being the last day of this tour we gave it our all and headed off to Mabusa Nature Reserve, where we'd spend the day before needing to head back to the airport in the early afternoon. We birded the grasslands first before moving into the broad-leaved woodland and enjoyed quite a bit of success. Our primary target was **Short-tailed Pipit**, and after some patience we enjoyed many good flight views of this nomadic and poorly-known species as they commuted around. All our efforts to get views on the ground were thwarted, however. Coqui and Shelley's Francolins together with White-bellied Bustard called from down in the valley. But we did enjoy some good views of a covey of Red-winged Francolin, while Montagu's Harrier floated by and a pair of **Buffy Pipits** foraged on the roadside before we headed into the woodland. We enjoyed a plethora of activity in the woodland with birds dripping from the trees all around us at times. Notable species here included Striped Kingfisher, Black-crowned Tchagra, Brubru, Southern Black Tit, Fawn-colored and Flappet Larks, Green-capped Eremomela, Redbilled Oxpecker, Groundscraper Thrush, Yellow-throated Petronia, numbers of Bushveld Pipits, and Golden-breasted Bunting. We had to pull ourselves away from the constant activity as we headed deeper into the reserve. Open tracts of previously-burnt grassland gave us a surprise when we found about four Temminck's Coursers. After having had our fill of these strange birds we entered some rocky woodland, which produced Brown Snake Eagle, Cape Vulture, Brown-backed Honeybird, Bearded Woodpecker, Red-breasted Swallow, Lazy Cisticola, Long-billed Pipit, and the tricky Short-toed Rock Thrush. Our next port of a call



was a river, where we birded the surrounding bush. This too was most productive, and after much searching we eventually found our main target, White-backed Night Heron, another poorly-known species. We had to be content with brief views, as the bird was skittish and only allowed us flight views. During our efforts searching for this bird we found, among others, Levaillant's Cuckoo, Malachite, Giant, Pied, and Half-collared Kingfishers, White-fronted Bee-eater, Greater Honeyguide, and Village Weaver. With time moving on we tried a last spot, hoping for Melodious Lark, but. with the wind pumping and the day being hot, we struck out and had to be content with Jackal Buzzard, Zitting, Cloud, Desert and Wind-snapping Cisticolas, and Ant-eating Chat. This brought our trip to an end, and, stopping for lunch along the way, we made our way to the Johannesburg airport, where I dropped James off.



Bushveld Pipit was around in numbers today.

I would kindly like to thank James for the good times and especially the many exceptional sightings we had, including a number of highly-sought-after species. Although it was a fairly short trip we did very well, ending with 300 species having been seen and with the vast majority of our targets having being found.

| CUSTOM TOUR SOUTH AFRICA - NOVEMBER 2017 – BIRD LIST Bold = country endemic Status: VU = Vulnerable, EN = Endangered | | | |
|--|---------------------|---|--|
| | | | |
| | ANSERIFORMES | | |
| Ducks, Geese and Swans | <u>Anatidae</u> | | |
| White-faced Whistling Duck | Dendrocygna viduata | 1 | |
| Fulvous Whistling Duck | Dendrocygna bicolor | 1 | |









| Cuckoos | Cuculidae | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|---|
| Burchell's Coucal | Centropus burchellii | 1 |
| Levaillant's Cuckoo | Clamator levaillantii | 1 |
| Diederik Cuckoo | Chrysococcyx caprius | 1 |
| African Emerald Cuckoo | Chrysococcyx cupreus | 1 |
| Black Cuckoo | Cuculus clamosus | 1 |
| Red-chested Cuckoo | Cuculus solitarius | 1 |
| | STRIGIFORMES | |
| Barn Owls | <u>Tytonidae</u> | |
| Western Barn Owl | Tyto alba | 1 |
| African Grass Owl | Tyto capensis | 1 |
| Owls | <u>Strigidae</u> | |
| Southern White-faced Owl | Ptilopsis granti | 1 |
| Spotted Eagle-Owl | Bubo africanus | 1 |
| African Wood Owl | Strix woodfordii | 1 |
| Pearl-spotted Owlet | Glaucidium perlatum | 1 |
| Marsh Owl | Asio capensis | 1 |
| | CAPRIMULGIFORMES | |
| <u>Nightjars</u> | <u>Caprimulgidae</u> | |
| Rufous-cheeked Nightjar | Caprimulgus rufigena | 1 |
| Fiery-necked Nightjar | Caprimulgus pectoralis | 1 |
| | APODIFORMES | |
| <u>Swifts</u> | Apodidae | |
| African Palm Swift | Cypsiurus parvus | 1 |
| Little Swift | Apus affinis | 1 |
| White-rumped Swift | Apus caffer | 1 |
| | COLIIFORMES | |
| <u>Mousebirds</u> | Coliidae | |
| Speckled Mousebird | Colius striatus | 1 |
| White-backed Mousebird | Colius colius | 1 |
| Red-faced Mousebird | Urocolius indicus | 1 |
| | TROGONIFORMES | |
| Trogons | Trogonidae | |
| Narina Trogon | Apaloderma narina | 1 |
| | CORACIIFORMES | |
| Rollers | <u>Coraciidae</u> | |
| Lilac-breasted Roller | Coracias caudatus | 1 |
| Broad-billed Roller | Eurystomus glaucurus | 1 |
| Kingfishers | <u>Alcedinidae</u> | |







Remizidae

Penduline Tits







| Scaly-feathered Weaver | Sporopipes squamifrons | 1 |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Spectacled Weaver | Ploceus ocularis | 1 |
| Cape Weaver | Ploceus capensis | 1 |
| Holub's Golden Weaver | Ploceus xanthops | 1 |
| Lesser Masked Weaver | Ploceus intermedius | 1 |
| Southern Masked Weaver | Ploceus velatus | 1 |
| Village Weaver | Ploceus cucullatus | 1 |
| Red-headed Weaver | Anaplectes rubriceps | 1 |
| Southern Red Bishop | Euplectes orix | 1 |
| Yellow Bishop | Euplectes capensis | 1 |
| Fan-tailed Widowbird | Euplectes axillaris | 1 |
| White-winged Widowbird | Euplectes albonotatus | 1 |
| Red-collared Widowbird | Euplectes ardens | 1 |
| Long-tailed Widowbird | Euplectes progne | 1 |
| Waxbills, Munias and allies | Estrildidae | |
| Green-winged Pytilia | Pytilia melba | 1 |
| Green Twinspot | Mandingoa nitidula | 1 |
| Red-billed Firefinch | Lagonosticta senegala | 1 |
| Jameson's Firefinch | Lagonosticta rhodopareia | 1 |
| Blue Waxbill | Uraeginthus angolensis | 1 |
| Swee Waxbill | Coccopygia melanotis | 1 |
| Common Waxbill | Estrilda astrild | 1 |
| Orange-breasted Waxbill | Amandava subflava | 1 |
| Quailfinch | Ortygospiza atricollis | 1 |
| Bronze Mannikin | Lonchura cucullata | 1 |
| Magpie Mannikin | Lonchura fringilloides | 1 |
| Indigobirds, Whydahs | <u>Viduidae</u> | |
| Pin-tailed Whydah | Vidua macroura | 1 |
| Wagtails, Pipits | Motacillidae | |
| Cape Wagtail | Motacilla capensis | 1 |
| Mountain Wagtail | Motacilla clara | 1 |
| African Pied Wagtail | Motacilla aguimp | 1 |
| Cape Longclaw | Macronyx capensis | 1 |
| African Pipit | Anthus cinnamomeus | 1 |
| Long-billed Pipit | Anthus similis | 1 |
| Buffy Pipit | Anthus vaalensis | 1 |
| Short-tailed Pipit | Anthus brachyurus | 1 |
| Bushveld Pipit | Anthus caffer | 1 |
| Finches, Euphonias | <u>Fringillidae</u> | |



1

300

TOTAL

Golden-breasted Bunting

Emberiza flaviventris

| CUSTOM TOUR | SOUTH AFRICA - NOVEMBER MAMMAL LIST | <u> 2017 – </u> |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| Common Name | Scientific Name | Trip |
| | PRIMATES | |
| | Cercopithecidae | |
| Chacma Baboon | Papio ursinus | 1 |
| Blue Monkey | Cercopithecus mitis | 1 |
| Vervet Monkey | Chlorocebus pygerythrus | 1 |
| | LAGOMORPHA | |
| | Leporidae | |
| Scrub Hare | Lepus saxatilis | 1 |
| | RODENTIA | |
| | Sciuridae | |
| Smith's Bush Squirrel | Paraxerus cepapi | 1 |
| - | CARNIVORA | |
| | Canidae | |
| Black-backed Jackal | Canis mesomelas | 1 |
| | Herpestidae | |
| Yellow Mongoose | Cynictis penicillata | 1 |
| | CETARTIODACTYLA | |
| | Bovidae | |
| Black Wildebeest | Connochaetes gnou | 1 |
| Red Hartebeest | Alcelaphus buselaphus caama | 1 |
| Blesbok | Damaliscus pygargus phillipsi | 1 |
| Springbok | Antidorcas marsupialis | 1 |
| TOTAL | | 11 |

