

Southern Africa October 2006

1st Leg Zambia, Botswana & Namibia

Stone Lesser-striped Swallows, Okavango Owls and Erongo Eagles...

Livingstone to Walvis Bay – 29th September to 12th October 2006 – Caprivi Specials & Namibian/Angolan Endemics with Chris Lotz

Zambia, Botswana & Namibia Leg Itinerary

28th September London to Johannesburg

29th September Johannesburg to Livingstone

29th September to 1st October Zambia – Livingstone – [Livingstone Safari Lodge]

1st October to 3rd October Namibia – Katima Mulilo – [Kalizo Lodge]

3rd October to 5th October Botswana – Okavango Delta Panhandle – Shakawe – [Drotsky's Cabins]

5th October to 12th October Namibia – Rundu Sarasungu Lodge] – Waterberg Plateau Park – Erongo [Hohenstein Lodge] – Walvis Bay [Protea Hotel]

12th October Fly from Walvis Bay to Cape Town

19th October Fly from Cape Town to Durban

30th October return from Johannesburg to Heathrow

Overview

Notes: All photographs © copyright to Bo Beolens, Brian Anderson and Sue Sayers. Bold numbers in square brackets indicate the route number in Southern Africa Birdfinder. Names highlighted in yellow are eponymous names of birds explained in the addendum.

Throughout the “Africa” reports Brian Anderson’s – a full-time wheelchair user – provides an assessment of how disabled friendly each property visited was. This will be shown just after the website reference for each holiday destination.

The vehicles used for touring each country were minibus types and were not adapted for disabled access. The method used to get Brian on and off the vehicles was a mixture of pushing and sliding from the wheelchair to the floor of the vehicle, and then being lifted from there to the passenger seat by two people i.e. under each arm and straight lift.

This practical method worked out pretty well, despite the loss of dignity and Brian’s acceptance of the situation. Other vehicles were used from time to time i.e. 4-wheel drives and high safari-type vehicles and various push/pull methods were used to get him on board.

Guide:

Chris Lotz – Owner Operator

Participants:

Bo [Report Writer] & Maggie Crombet-Beolens, Brian & Joanna Anderson, Sue Sayers and Andy Senior

Bo Beolens Brian Anderson Joanna Anderson

Maggie Beolens Andy Senior Sue Sayers

Detailed Daily Diary

This leg was a truly marvellous 2-week multi-nation birding safari. The adventure first sampled one of the richest birding regions in Africa, the Victoria Falls/Caprivi/Okavango region. This is one of the greatest bird (both water birds and woodland species) and mammal havens on earth. The itinerary then took us westwards into increasingly dryer habitats and eventually into the very heart of the Namib Desert with its beautiful, rugged mountains, gravel plains, camelthorn-lined dry riverbeds, dunes and more. The stunning, scenically diverse Namib Desert (which extends into southern Angola) is inhabited by a host of endemic bird species. Finally, this leg ended on the Namib Coast. Here, Namibia's only true endemic (Dune Lark) displays above sparsely vegetated red sand dunes, the diminutive, endangered Damara Tern reaches its highest densities anywhere, the beautiful Chestnut-banded Plover runs over the sand, and an amazing spectacle of flamingos, pelicans, waders and grebes work the Walvis Bay Lagoon.

Birds were of course, the focus of this trip, but, we also incidentally saw many interesting mammals (some of them well-known African mammals and others endemic to the southern African desert), and, of course, we saw splendid scenery.

***28th September 2006 – Overnight Flights from London to Johannesburg
Day 1, 29th Sep 2006:***

After an early morning arrival in Johannesburg we had just sufficient time to get to our flight on to Livingstone. We arrived later morning only to find that most of our bags would not arrive until the next flight an hour later. Fortunately, our guide – Chris Lotz was waiting for us and he managed to go and buy some cold drinks for us whilst we perched on whatever we could and, by gazing out of the windows, managed to start our lists off with Pied Crow, House Sparrow and the inevitable Feral Pigeons.

As soon as the baggage arrived we went to meet our vehicles, Chris's rather splendid small bus and a rather dilapidated hire bus to take a few of us and our luggage [Driven mostly by Bo with relief on occasion by Andy]. Once loaded we drove to our accommodation stopping only to get a better view of a yellow billed kite which at first

seemed to be sporting a huge long white tail; this turned out to be a streamer of polythene! Yellow-billed Kite was the commonest bird of prey and was seen many times on most days throughout this leg.

On arrival at the Lodge we found that a Black-crowned Tchagra had taken up residence in the foyer's high, thatched ceiling... a lifer for several participants. We were dropped off at our rooms to meet later in the bar to view the gardens and chill out.

The rooms here are individual huts with high thatched roofs, attached shower-rooms and even an outside attached second shower. Dusty dirt roads connect the widely spaced cabins and the main building. The accommodation is described as rustic and this is petty accurate. Cabins were shared with a variety of insects, lizards, geckos, frogs and spiders. This is no place for arachnophobes with friendly house spiders [two to three inches across], roaming spiders [three to four inches across] and others [over five inches across]!

Meals were 'interesting'. Evening meals were all cooked by the owner [a chap of German extraction married to a local lady] on a bar-b-q – mostly steak, chicken or a large rather earthy freshwater fish. The most unusual dish was rape leaf soup a taste not acquired by any of the participants! Breakfasts were painfully slow affairs as they were cooked on a one ring camping stove. However, the hosts were friendly and helpful and shared their local knowledge freely; the bar was ever open and we all had our first taste of the beer preferred by all throughout the trip – Tafel.

That first afternoon saw all the participants notching up a few lifers from the comfort of armchairs in the open-air bar. Red-faced Mousebirds seemed to struggle to fly with their long tails hanging down, Red-eyed Doves called, Trumpeter Hornbills streamed over head going to their late afternoon roosts, Brown-hooded Kingfishers watched the lawn for grasshoppers and skinks [which sensibly stayed near our feet]. Northern Grey-headed Sparrows and their Southern cousins joined Bronze Manikins to eat the seeds in the long grass and a superb Black-collared Barbet sat in a bush showing off his vermillion plumage. On the entrance track Blue Waxbills showed their turquoise rumps, Helmeted Guineafowl abounded and an Orange-breasted Bush-shrike gave distant views.

Our first night's sleep was disturbed by most by dogs barking in the early hours of the morning whilst people whistled seemingly right outside our cabins and then off in the distance. It turned out that this was the locals noisily dissuading elephants from trampling their crops. Others of us had wee small hour encounters by not so wee small spiders – one arachnophobic participant found her worst fears made flesh by these reputedly harmless denizens of the night.

Overnight: The [Livingstone Safari Bush Lodge](#) Livingstone, Zambia.
Wheelchair access comments:

Access to the accommodation – “Andrew” cottage was basically easy with just a little help over some stony ground. The rooms were spacious so movement to the bathroom

and bedroom was easy. In the bathroom the wash basin was too high for someone in a wheelchair and, additionally, it had a wood surround which meant that I had to remove the footboards from my wheelchair to get close to the sink.

For me, personally, it was not safe to transfer from the wheelchair to either of the two showers, and with a fixed showerhead it would have been difficult and possibly dangerous to sit under the shower when it is not possible to adjust the temperature before going under it. Both shower (one inside and one outside) could, quite easily, be altered for wheelchair access, and in both cases the showerheads could be changed to flexible ones thus making them more manageable for safe use.

The toilet was suitable for wheelchair use except that the fitting of hand-rails would make life so much easier.

The longish push to the bar and dining area was also difficult because the path was quite stony and sandy. It was also steep in places. Once again with help it was all manageable.

Day 2, 30th Sep:

At breakfast we watched the lawn and the drinking bowl strategically placed in the shrubs and clocked up Yellow-bellied Greenbuls, our first Dark-capped Bulbul which showed themselves every day of the trip, and nice close views of Grey Camaroptera, Blue Waxbills, Tawny-flanked Prinias, skulking Tropical Boubous, striking White-browed Robin-chats and Red-billed Firefinches. After breakfast and birding around the Lodge we set off towards the falls stopping to look at tributaries of the great Zambezi finding such excellent birds as Rock Pratincole, African Pied Wagtail, White-rumped and African Palm Swifts and our first looks at the virtually ubiquitous Egyptian Geese and Black-headed Herons, Reed Cormorants and other Egrets. The rest of the morning was spent birding from the Zambian side of the incredible Victoria Falls. Not only is this, "the smoke that thunders", one of the most spectacular waterfalls on earth, but the birdlife is truly stunning and exceptionally diverse. The falls viewed from Zambia [unless one was intrepid enough to walk the cliff-tops] were fairly restricted and one had to imagine the true extent and magnificent of the whole falls from a fairly narrow vista... nevertheless, not a sight one would want to miss. In the gorge Rock Martins flew through the spray whilst our first African Fish Eagles soared away towards the Zimbabwe border.

Victoria falls from the Zambian Side

We headed over to Zambezi Waterfront campsite and Lodge where Chris had seen some excellent birds on previous visits... it proved not only to be brilliant for the participants giving us great views of Collared Palm Thrush, Scarlet-chested Sunbird and commoner species such as White-browed Sparrow Weavers, Lemon-breasted Canaries, and White-bellied Sunbirds but also a lifer for our guide, spotted by Hawkeye herself [Maggie] a high-flying Ayer's Hawk-Eagle along with White-necked Raven.

We also lunched at the Zambezi Waterfront overlooking the mighty Zambezi hoping to get distant views of African Finfoot but it was not to be and we had to content

ourselves with Wire-tailed, Lesser Striped and White-throated Swallows, Herons, Egrets, Kingfishers, distant vultures and a very nice close up Water Monitor. The best bird was a Western Banded Snake Eagle called excitedly by Chris & Andy as some of us had wandered away and nearly missed it.

Some of the group wanted to walk across the bridge over the deep gorge below the falls, into Zimbabwe so the rest of the party were taken back to their cabins for a rest. The walkers managed to add Grey-headed Bush-shrike to their list and a couple of commoner birds on their brief step into another country. [299]

The other participants found time to get to grips with many of the commoner birds around the Lodge such as over-flying Sacred ibis, Red-billed and Grey Hornbills as well as the recently split Bradfield's Hornbill, Lesser-striped Swallows, Fork-tailed Drongos, Pied Kingfishers and the like.

The grounds also held Collared and Amethyst Sunbirds, Arrow-marked Babblers, Red-billed Quelea and Southern Masked Weavers. When everyone got together to watch the sun go down we also saw many familiar birds of the previous day.

Overnight: The Livingstone Safari Lodge, Livingstone, Zambia.

Day 3, 1st Oct:

After final birding around the Lodge [which included a Chin-spot Batis near one of the cabins], we headed off into Namibia's stunningly bird-diverse Caprivi Strip. As we birded along the strip we added roadside raptors such as African Goshawk.

[NB For anyone who needs to know these things the Caprivi Strip is named after Georg Leo Graf von Caprivi de Caprara de Montecuccoli (1831–1899) who was a German major general and statesman, who succeeded Otto von Bismarck as Chancellor of Germany from March 1890 to October 1894. He also managed to obtain the Caprivi Strip, which was added to German South West Africa (Now Namibia), thus linking that territory with the Zambezi River.]

We made several stops along the way to stretch our legs or just to find a few more birds. One stop netted southern Black Tit, Golden-breasted Bunting, and White-winged Widowbird; at another we saw Black-backed Puffback and several vulture species.

We crossed the border into Namibia just near the town of Katima Mulilo having seen Blue-eared Glossy starlings at the Zambian border posts and as we travelled the road towards our overnight accommodation we saw our first soaring Wahlberg's Eagles.

En route we stopped to lunch at a pleasant roadhouse and were delighted by a brilliantly coloured Schallow's Turaco in a tree next to the eatery. As we left Arrow-marked Babblers chased each other around the garden.

After we left the tar-sealed road we picked up new exciting species such as Meyer's Parrots, our first Magpie Shrikes a Cardinal Woodpecker, Retz's Helmet Shrike and a Crested Barbet. The final drive down to our Lodge was through land which is marsh in the wet season. Here we saw a variety of bee-eaters [Little, European and White-fronted as well as fleeting views of Southern Carmine] as well as our only Quail finch of the trip and several cisticola species including Zitting Cisticola. Plovers flew in front of the vehicles and Lilac-breasted Rollers flew off bushes as we passed by.

In camp we spotted our first Swamp Boubou and after settling in walked the gardens and took a look at the river. Marico Sunbirds were found in bushes and gulls, skimmers and waders abounded along the river. We stayed at the Kalizo Lodge near the town of Katima Mulilo [219]. Here, the mighty Zambezi River is certainly much more tranquil than at Victoria Falls. We saw a plethora of water bird species including our first African Skimmers, more Rock Pratincoles and lots of familiar and not so familiar waders such as Greenshank and Old World Painted Snipe and many egrets and herons including our first Squaccos. Grey-headed Gulls shared sand bars with African Spoonbills and distant White Pelicans. Furthermore, Crocodiles, and hippos could be seen in and around the Zambezi, together with terrestrial mammals such as various antelope species.

In the grounds as the sun goes down the air is filled with the sound of croaking frogs as typical of Africa as the Red-eyed Doves and Laughing Doves waking you from the night.

In the Lodge grounds we searched, unsuccessfully for Shelley's Sunbird, finding only Marico sunbirds to test our ID skills. Giant Kingfishers almost lumbered by compared to the quick flash of Malachites and the obvious hovering Pieds.

Our accommodation was well appointed and comfortable although it was hot at night with power going off at 2100 and not coming on again until 0600 – difficult when dressing for an early start! Mosquito nets were provided – necessary when close to water. We had a cooling thunderstorm through the night which also gave intermittent light with the flashes of lightening.

Like many of the places we stayed at the cabins had thatched roofs and no ceilings – apparently the height of fashion and cooler than all alternatives. Those of us who were unhappy to share with arachnids and insects found this style of building particularly attractive to creepy-crawlies. Early morning Coffee was available with hot water left out in flasks so one could make it oneself in the dining room. The food was acceptable although, despite advanced warning, vegetarian provision was unimaginative. It is worth saying that, throughout the trip, many participants felt that they did not often have any variety of vegetables.

Overnight: [Kalizo Lodge](#) – Katima Mulilo, Caprivi

Wheelchair access comments:

The self-catering accommodation was accessible and large, but as ever, there were some difficulties. Access through the main door was o.k. because of a good concrete

slope. The shower was accessible but difficult for me to use safely from a wheelchair access point of view.

The toilet was wheelchair friendly but could be enhanced by suitably placed grab rails.

The wash basin was too high, so I had to wash at the kitchen sink which was the right height. There were good firm paths along throughout the grounds, but they were a little awkward for wheelchairs because the path was constructed of paving slabs with gaps between each slab. This meant that the small wheels of the chair kept getting caught in the gaps thus making pushing very slow and frustrating.

The bar and dining area was inaccessible because of a flight of steps, so I had to be lifted up and down them by willing helpers.

Day 4, 2nd Oct:

We had an early breakfast to give ourselves plenty of time to scope all over the river and to make sure we had all the birds in the gardens.

The number & variety of waders and herons was pleasing to see and, in addition to familiar waders such as Greenshanks, Sanderling, Ruff and Common Sandpipers and the like we saw Old World Painted Snipe, African Openbills, Black-crowned Night-heron, White-crowned and Blacksmith Plovers, Black-winged Stilts and Collared Pratincoles, Grey-headed Gulls and African Skimmers. The hippos kept their distance but we did get to look down upon close up crocs. We also saw Senegal Coucal and a brilliant view of an African Fish-eagle that landed in one of the trees in the gardens. Also at the Lodge was a constantly calling Swamp Boubou, Common Waxbill and Hartlaub's Babblers.

We took our time crossing the land near the Lodge as we drove out enjoying the Bee-eaters, Rollers, Hirundines and finches and on the dirt-road back into town we stopped for Red-billed Buffalo Weaver [which we had seen the day before], Magpie Shrikes and the like. In Katima Mulilo town we shopped for picnic lunch ingredients before starting the long drive to the Botswana border and our destination for the night.

We traversed the Caprivi National Park and saw our first Ostrich and a good number of raptors along the road including Tawny Eagle, Shikra, Dark Chanting Goshawk etc. but the undoubted highlight was a pair of displaying Southern Ground Hornbills spotted by Sue just off the road. We picnicked under a Baobab tree in the blistering heat before driving on seeing more raptors and other woodland birds including our first Bradfield's Hornbill.

It was quite late by the time we crossed the Mahango Game Reserve [with the entrance gate decorated with the sun-bleached skulls of some of the larger game] [215] before entering our fourth country, Botswana. We did see a few larger antelope and a soaring Bateleur but resolved to take a closer look at the reserve when we went back two days later. We slept the next two nights in Drotsky's Cabins on the panhandle [216] of the magnificent Okavango Delta with its unbelievable birdlife.

It is famed for such species such as Pel's Fishing Owl, African Wood Owl, White-backed Night Heron, Slaty Egret, Southern Carmine Bee-eater, Western Banded Snake Eagle, Brown Firefinch, Greater Swamp Warbler, Coppery-tailed Coucal, Southern Brown-throated Weaver, Meve's Starling, to name but a few of those seen by some or all of the participants.

We watched the sun go down over the river from our cabins with Anhinga, weavers and Giant Kingfisher perched on branches sticking out of the water and some were lucky enough to see Rufous-bellied Herons and others Pygmy Geese.

Drotsky's Cabins are well appointed cabins in lush grounds overlooking the river. Rooms are large and nicely decorated with the open ceilings and thatched roofs of current fashion. No nets were provided although, on request, the management went out of their way to find some and help us put them up for the participant who needed shielding from arachnids. The dining room is built out over the river giving superb views and the food was varied and very tasty with service being excellent. Coffee was always available... particularly appreciated by the early risers.

Overnight: [Drotsky's Cabins](#), Shakawe, Botswana.

Wheelchair access comments:

The first cabin allocated to us at Drotsky's was unsuitable because the bathroom door was too narrow. This was a bit of a disappointment because my wheelchair dimensions had been advised to the tour guide prior to the holiday. No matter, we were transferred quickly to another, more accessible, cabin – No.4.

Access to this cabin was solved by erecting a makeshift ramp and could easily be improved by constructing a proper, substantial slope of wood or the building of a proper concrete incline.

Once inside, the ground floor rooms were large, with an accessible shower and toilet. Once again the strategic provision of grab rails would be an easy enhancement to fit. The wash basin was also the right height for a wheelchair user.

The rest the site was accessible with good paths. The dining area was also very accessible and had good views over the Kavango River for bird watching. There was also an accessible toilet near the dining area, but this has not been adapted in anyway.

Day 5, 3rd Oct:

The grounds most typical residents seemed to be White-browed Robin-chats, Hartlaub's Babblers, Red-faced Mousebirds, Swamp Boubou, Violet-backed Starlings, Common Waxbills and Southern Brown-throated Golden Weavers.

This was one of the very best days of our entire Southern African birding trip as we took a boat trip along the Okavango River. We set out in the morning towards the

Carmine Bee-eater colony full of anticipation and, unlike most of life, the experience far outshone our imagination. To linger in front of such a colony just a few feet from such magnificent birds is what birding is all about at its best. Just next to the colony a Half-collared Kingfisher [our only one of the trip] sat beneath the bank as did Pied, Giant and Malachite Kingfishers. Grey Go-away Birds, Little Bee-eaters and White-fronted Bee-eaters and more seemed to jostle for our attention as we gently moved along the waterway. In the papyrus were many egrets and heron species and on the margins Black Crake, Night Herons, etc. and, on more open banks African Pipits and our first Cape Wagtails. On sandbanks Water Dikkops [Thick-knees] [birds we had heard for three days before seeing our first ones], Wattled Plovers, our only Long-toed Lapwing of the trip and African Jacanas were joined by African Skimmers and more familiar birds such as Common Sandpipers and Greenshanks. We also had a very brief glimpse of a Spotted-necked Otter and good views of a pod of hippos – which we wisely avoided getting too close too. Our boatman took us close to a huge tree in which roosted an open-eyed Pel's Fishing Owl – my 2000th lifer!

Carmine Bee-eater River Trip

These highlights are the mere tip of the birding iceberg [to use a singularly inappropriate analogy given the heat in the high 30s] as we saw many more species from crakes to cormorants and weavers to warblers.

After lunch the party split with the majority taking another trip on the river to an island where African Wood-owl was seen. Maggie and Bo just stayed on the deck overlooking the river sipping cold drinks and trying to keep count of the Malachite Kingfishers, Goliath Herons, Great, Little, Black and Yellow-billed Egrets, Lesser Swamp Warblers and Southern Brown-throated Golden Weavers. Constant watch did not result in any Rufous-bellied herons but did turn up a flight of no less than four Slaty Egrets! On the far bank we had poor views of Coppery-tailed Coucals.

Overnight: Drotsky's Cabins, Shakawe, Botswana.

Day 6, 4th Oct:

We birded the grounds and surrounding campsite before moving on and this netted African Goshawk, Terrestrial Brownbul, after some searching, and many common Waxbills, but no Brown Fire-finches as most of the party hoped. Before leaving Botswana we visited a small Petrol filling-station where we had been told a White-fronted Scops Owl roosted – sure enough it was there, wide awake and quite interested to see us! It was there we saw our only Shaft-tailed Whydah of the trip, albeit not in breeding plumage.

We then set off and crossed the border and re-entered the Caprivi Strip of Namibia. We began by birding the Mahango Game Reserve finding many new species amongst the open woodland and in the small but crowded wetland – several antelope species were seen here as well as many birds including our first Red-breasted Swallows that at first glance as they fly by look like small bee-eaters. Top birds in the woodland and clearings were Bennett's Woodpecker, Southern Black & Marico Flycatchers, Green-winged Pytilia, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Jameson's Firefinch, Yellow-fronted Canary and Crowned Lapwings. At the small wetland we saw our first Marabou and Yellow-

billed Storks along with stilts, herons, Hamerkop, African Open-bill, many White-faced Whistling Ducks and Spur-winged Geese with Tawny Eagles, African Fish Eagles and Kites. There were also two francolin species; Red-billed & Swainson's. On our way out we saw our first Crimson-breasted Shrike – Namibia's national bird and our only Fawn-coloured Lark of the trip.

We spent more time here than originally intended as the wildlife was so easy to see so had little time to visit other sites in the Caprivi. Our guide had somewhere in mind for lunch – Popa Falls, but we arrived to find someone locking up. However, the lady unlocked for us and very quickly produced toasted sandwiches and cold drinks. What is more we added some excellent birds whilst lunching including our only Long-billed Crombec of the trip and many Blue-eared and Meve's (Long-tailed Glossy) and Wattled Starlings, Grey Camaroptera, Tawny-flanked Prinia, and our first Red-eyed Bulbuls.

We then drove westwards to the town of Rundu bordering Angola just outside of the Caprivi. It was late when we arrived and there was little time to do anything other than get settled into our rooms and ready ourselves for dinner.

Sarasungu Lodge is an odd mixture – the grounds are very pleasant and turned up some excellent birds and, in places one can look across the Kavango river into Angola. Meals in the restaurant were excellent if rather slow in coming and the bar with its mixture of locals and guests made one feel as if one was having a more real experience of the country.

The rooms were an odd mixture. They were clean and had air con and mosquito nets, en suite showers and loads of room but had incredibly high ceilings and rather cold looking whitewashed walls and there was something rather institutional about them. There were even TV's although we did not check to see if they worked. Liberal spraying with 'Doom' [the local insecticide spray] before going to dinner netted no less than 37 large wasps when we returned. Whilst rooms were described as accessible there were problems with all the rooms. Whilst we didn't mind I am sure some guests would object to there being fixed mirrors so placed as to give anyone in the room full on views of anyone using the toilet... there being no door or even curtain to the bathroom – OK for couples perhaps but not so acceptable to those sharing a room with anyone other than their partner.

Overnight: [Sarasungu Lodge](#), Rundu, Namibia

Wheelchair access comments:

We arrived at the Lodge in semi-darkness, and we were disappointed to find our accommodation was not very accessible. After a bit of 'toing and froing' we eventually got placed in a cabin that was spacious and mainly accessible. In the curtained-off bathroom area access to the toilet, from a wheelchair, was sideways on and therefore difficult. The wash basin height was ok, but the shower was not accessible.

The paths around the site were very sandy, so it was very difficult for wheelchair pushing. Access to the dining area was o.k. with assistance.

Day 7, 5th Oct:

We spent the day birding Rundu [213] and environs; but started the morning by walking the gardens as Chris had heard an owl in the night and we tape lured it in; an African Barred Owlet. Here also Andy turned up Kurrichane Thrush hopping about giving great views; other birds were Green Woodhoopoe, Emerald Spotted Dove and many birds we had already become familiar with.

From the gardens we could see Angola across the river and were able to see a few birds to create an Angola list although an attempt to cross the border later was unsuccessful. Top bird for that list was Green-backed Heron in the reeds on the Angolan side.

After breakfast we set off to look for some of the special birds of the well-developed woodland around Rundu. On a small track between fields and open woodland we tape-lured Rufous-bellied Tit and saw many other species including Ground-scraper Thrush and Purple Rollers. Here we also saw and, more often heard, Tinkling and Rattling Cisticolas. All the time we drove slowly down this track stopping periodically we were accompanied by village children who were fascinated by being able to look through the scopes. On the fields we saw our only Sabota Lark.

We returned to Sarasungu Lodge for lunch whilst Andy tried, in vain, to find someone able to take him across the river into Angola. The rest of us took a break, had a beer and enjoyed the birds in the garden including around 7 or 8 African Paradise Flycatchers sporting tails of varying lengths. Some people took a siesta whilst others wrote up their notes and caught up with lists etc. After this break we headed for the Sewage Ponds in Rundu which are known for a variety of birdlife.

The majority of birds were waders, ducks and other water birds but there were others such as our first African Hoopoe of the trip; Lesser Swamp Warbler and a variety of hirundines. Waders included Three-banded Plover, Wood Sandpipers and waders we are used to seeing in the UK, other water birds such as Black Crake, Purple Gallinule and Common Moorhen and the only Hottentot Teal and Little Stint of the entire tour.

For the last hour before sunset we re-traced our steps and went back 40 kilometres into the Caprivi Strip hoping to find Racket-tailed Roller to no avail. However, we did see our first Acacia Pied Barbets, Striped Kingfisher, and other woodland species we had already seen such as Southern Black Tit, Fork-tailed Drongos, rollers and hornbills.

Overnight: Sarasungu Lodge, Rundu.

Day 8, 6th Oct:

We made an early start, heading southwards, for the long drive to our destination, eventually reaching the scenic Waterberg Plateau Park. The long journey was characterised by many sightings of roadside raptors sitting on poles and wires or

soaring overhead including many Black-shouldered Kites, both Pale and Dark Chanting Goshawks, we also saw the first Rock Kestrel of the trip on the road. Those in the second vehicle were lucky enough to see a Levaillant's Cuckoo land in a tree top.

Our first stop was for breakfast at a game ranch called [Roy's Camp](#) where we enjoyed the hospitality of the owner and her fresh coffee and breakfast pack. Here we also saw nesting Black-faced Babbler – our only sighting of the tour. Helping us enjoy breakfast were also Red-billed Francolins, and our first Pale-winged Starlings and also Burchell's and Cape Glossy Starlings. Stunning Crimson-breasted Shrikes also made an appearance along with a solid supporting cast of more familiar species. Some of us took advantage of the break to buy souvenirs.

When we stopped for lunch we were lucky to catch up with a number of passerines among the road-side bushes, such as Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler and Black-faced Waxbills.

We also were lucky enough to see some Secretarybirds fly over the road and land in a field giving us all excellent views.

As we came in sight of the Plateau and the National park turning on to a dirt road the bird life seemed to increase; the nearer we got to the park the more often we stopped to take in birds including new species for us such as Kalahari Scrub-robin and Scaly-feathered finches and many Common Fiscal for the first time on the trip – a bird which we then saw most days for the next three weeks. We also saw some beautiful Rosy-faced Lovebirds [which apparently breed on the impressive cliff faces] just before the entrance gate to the Lodge – Bernard De La Batt Camp; a government-run establishment with a series of solidly brick built chalets and an extensive dining room.

As we waited for Chris to complete the formalities at reception, we watched the trees around about and saw our first Pirit Batis, and African Yellow White-eyes... we returned to the entrance for a better look after settling in to our rooms.

The rooms are rather stark but very clean and perfectly comfortable, what they lack in character they make up for in being spotless, roomy and cool. Right outside are excellent views of the escarpment and a variety of birds and small mammals. We were visited by Black Mongoose and Damara Dikdik. Behind the cabins in the scrub Grey-backed Camaroptera called constantly and even showed down to three feet along with weavers, white-eyes, bulbuls and other common birds. We birded around the cabins and reception and back out along the tracks until dinner which was in the impressive restaurant. The food was very good and the service slick.

Overnight: Bernard De La Batt Camp – Waterberg Plateau Park.

Wheelchair access comments

Our cabin was accessible with a good slope to the front entrance and a small step down to the back patio area.

Inside the cabin the rooms were well laid out with a large accessible bathroom. The toilet was well sited, and with support rails. The sink was a good height with a usable mirror, but because of a tiled surround it was not possible to bend over the basin and wash my hair.

The dining area was about a kilometre away down a very steep slope so we used the vehicle to get there and back. The restaurant was very accessible and the toilets nearby were ok but not adapted for disabled use at all (i.e. had inward-opening doors).

Day 9, 7th Oct:

The park is an excellent site for Hartlaub's Francolin, Rockrunner (Damara Rockjumper), Ruppell's Parrot and all sorts of other exciting localised endemics. But some need an early start so we were up before dawn watching the Plateau and listening for Hartlaub's Francolin which most of us did manage to see. We were also lucky here to get distant but clear views of Rockrunner and Red-billed Francolin and Swainson's Spurfowl. Tapes did lure in Freckled Nightjar which we all heard well but only managed the briefest glimpse of. Fortunately, we also managed Ruppell's Parrots which flew into the trees right beside our chalets although we did not see Carp's Tit which is also supposed to be resident amongst the accommodation blocks, but did see many Bradfield's Swifts and Alpine Swifts along the escarpment.

After a leisurely breakfast we decided to relax by birding the area near reception where the laziest of us could sit and let the birds come to us. Chris had heard Pearl-spotted Owlet so played a tape to see if he could lure the bird in. Not only did one turn up but it was then mobbed by other birds such as Common Scimitarbill and Violet Woodhoopoes and a number of more common species and, nearby we saw our first Black-throated Canaries coming to drink from a dripping tap. Another Hoopoe turned up giving good views to those who had missed them at Rundu.

View of Waterberg Plateau from our accommodation

We went to the restaurant for lunch and take advantage of the superb views from the long veranda where we spotted one or two small passerines in the bushes. There was a large party of Black-faced Waxbills and a Familiar Chat was true enough to his name as to land on the veranda wall very close to us. It occurred to us that the mobbing of the owl brought in some good birds so decided to play the tape again to see if the birds would come to us. We were treated to a magical half an hour as a wave of birds appeared looking for an owl to mob including the very beautiful Violet-eared Waxbill, Melba Finch, Acacia Pied Barbet, Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, Black-chested Prinia, Pirit Batis, Marico Flycatcher, Brubru, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Marico and White-bellied Sunbirds, Red-eyed Bulbuls and Golden-breasted Bunting. What is more it also brought in the Owlet!

As we stopped to go inside for lunch, a party of 17 Banded Mongooses trooped out of the bushes on the lawn below us. After lunch we continued birding in the Waterberg Plateau Park [206] driving some of the dirt roads and tracks leading to other Lodges etc.

On the drive into [Waterberg Wilderness Lodge](#) we caught up with Carp's Tit as well as our first Verreaux's Eagle and a number of other raptors including Booted, African Hawk, Black-chested Snake and Wahlberg's Eagles and our first Lanner. We also saw many antelope species and mongooses.

We birded on into the dusk before returning to our accommodation and readying ourselves for dinner – but had time to complete our lists in comfort. Dinner was a spectacular affair as, just as we had ordered to the sound of lashing rain and spectacular lightning, all the lights went out. So a candle-lit supper ensued and we were able to go on to the veranda to see the remarkable scene as the lightning illuminated the plain beneath us... Andy remembered the opening scene of The Day of the Triffids! The lights returned before dessert and we braved the rain to get to the vehicle to take us back to our accommodation.

Overnight: Bernard De La Batt Camp – Waterberg Plateau Park

Day 10, 8th Oct:

We left after breakfast for the long drive towards the southwest, eventually reaching the true Namib Desert with its imposing desert mountains forming the Namib Escarpment. Our destination for the night was the Erongo Range.

An early stop to ID several vultures [as Lappet-faced and White-backed] led us to find Northern Black Korhaan amongst the large antelopes including Kudu and Oryx in some large open fields. There too we got reasonable views of Desert Cisticola and our first Bradfield's Lark as well as commoner species such as Rufous-naped Lark. En route we saw our second Ostrich for the trip.

We also picked up the localised Monteiro's Hornbill and a better view of Damara Hornbills than the fleeting glimpses of the previous day, with, for some of us, a catch up bird; Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill. Raptors included Brown Snake Eagle.

We stopped in the small town of Karibib to buy water in the local supermarket. At this point we discovered that the air-con in the hire vehicle had decided to leak water all over the suitcases so some hasty re-arranging had to be done with strategic use of plastic bags to stop the water getting into the luggage. Thereafter we had to make sure that the fan was set at max to drive the water past the leak. We took lunch at a local restaurant with its dark cool interior and stone tables and rather Mexican feel. After lunch we stopped ages to re-fuel as the staff fell over themselves to fill both vehicles. While we waited we spotted Rock Kestrel, Mountain Chat and other birds at the edge of town. We were speeding away some five or six kilometres on when we heard horn honking and saw lights flashing behind us and pulled over. It turned out to be some of the petrol station people showing us that we had only paid for the fuel in one vehicle. The mix up was soon sorted and we were on our way again.

We eventually arrived at Hohenstein Lodge in the Erongo Mountains to be greeted by the friendly and very helpful staff offering cooling juice and then carrying our bags to

our very nicely appointed rooms – certainly the nicest mixture of good clean and spacious facilities with charm and a truly beautiful setting.

We quickly settled in, freshened up and headed for the bar which is an open terrace with just a canopy to shield you from the sun right in front of a pool which attracts a wide variety of birds. On that first evening we saw a succession of birds many of them new for the trip including Great Sparrow, Lesser-striped Swallow, African Red-eyed Bulbul, Familiar Chat, Chat Flycatcher, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, Scaly-feathered Finch, Green-winged Pytilia, Violet-eared Waxbill, Red-headed Finch, Black-throated and White-throated Canary, Golden-breasted and Lark-like Bunting and Acacia Pied Barbet and a Dassie Rat! We also saw several new species in the scrub and rocky clearings between the pool and some small hills including Red-faced Mousebird, Mountain Wheatear, Rockrunner and Short-toed Rock-thrush. A Black-chested Snake Eagle roosted on a ridge right beside a Damara Rock Hyrax and all around we could hear the calls of Red-crested Korhaan although we never saw one here. We watched the sun go down drinking cold Namibian beers before being ushered into the dining room to be treated to a very nice dinner

Overnight: [Hohenstein Lodge](#) – Erongo Mountains.

Wheelchair access comments

Our cottage was very roomy and very thoughtfully designed. After the provision of a poolside chair I was able to manage the shower safely. The bathroom was spacious and the washbasin was a good height, but once again it had a tiled surround which made close access more difficult. The toilet was ok too, but without grab rails.

The paths to the dining area were well paved and easy to traverse, and access to the dining area was also easy.

Day 11, 9th Oct:

The day was spent exploring the arid plains and rolling hills which abut the Erongo Mountains with a series of long drives seemingly miles from anywhere apart from a stop or two at some very small towns.

Among familiar raptors we saw our first Gabar Goshawk. We were lucky to see several parties of the so-called Meercat characteristically standing on hind legs and moving in the arid country in family groups as well as ground squirrels and other mongooses. We stopped to re-fuel at the largest town; Uis, which was surrounded by spoil heaps from mining. Whilst taking a 'comfort break' we were lucky to see a party of Namaqua Sandgrouse flying by and later saw some at closer quarters on the ground.

Our first target was to get our first glimpse of the charismatic, bizarre and very striking White-tailed Shrike and when we did we found several at a spot that also turned up several other lifers including Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Barred Wren-warbler and Dusky Sunbird.

The route was a long and dusty one and involved crossing a dry river bed near the strangely strung-out town of Okombahe. When we arrived at the crossing place that Chris had used before the sand looked loose and deep but we took a chance only to bog down to our axles. Those of us who could, got out to push but it was very slow progress backwards until some locals turned up and kindly helped out. We took another route through the town and found another crossing place where the sand was firmer and caused no problem... although, when we returned later in the day it took some finding.

We took our packed lunch down to a dry river bed next to a camp site near Brandberg hoping to spot the enigmatic Desert Elephants that sometimes lurk there but were out of luck although we did see our first small groups of Springbok. We shared our lunch with a confiding Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill and also managed to find our only Southern Pied Babblers of the trip.

After lunch we targeted, and spent some time searching for, Benguela Long-billed Lark, which we eventually found along with Spike-heeled Larks and other commoner lark species. Whilst searching for all these species we had been keeping an eye out for Ruppell's Korhaan which was eventually spotted by Hawkeye. Later in the day we found Stark's Lark & Grey-backed Sparrowlark.

In that general area we also saw Red-billed Buffalo-weavers.

When we returned to the Lodge there was still time to settle by the pool and watch the passerines and hirundines come in to drink with more or less the same cast as the night before although Lark-like Buntings and Red-headed Finches seemed to predominate. Nevertheless it also tuned up a Pirit Batis.

As the sun sank we watched familiar chats using the patio where the lights of the Lodge attracted a variety of insects.

Over dinner we saw even more bizarre insects as huge beetles flew in and a hand sized grasshopper clung to the window pane. One of the staff pointed out a green and orange centipede fully eight inches long that was hiding by a potted palm in the dining room. Dinner was very good and made even more pleasant by the staff treating us to some local songs after dinner. Truth to tell each of them could have been selected for their voices as they formed a more than passable choir! When I returned to my room a Chameleon decided to walk through the door with me and tried its best to imitate the floor tile until persuaded that there was more food on offer outside.

The setting, staff, accommodation and food were all as good as the cold beer and I would heartily recommend this Lodge for any visiting birder.

Overnight: Hohenstein Lodge – Erongo Mountains

Day 12, 10th Oct:

Today we headed for the coast, via the magnificent Spitzkoppe [204]. The Spitzkoppe, or “Matterhorn of Namibia” is an impressive desert mountain that rises straight out of the desert plain. The target species here is the elusive, rare and very localised Herero Chat.

En route to this imposing batholith we once again saw several Ruppell's Korhaan, a better view of a Short-toed Rock-thrush and White-tailed Shrike as well as many familiar species and more Bradfield's and Stark's Larks and our first Karoo Long-billed Lark.

At Spitzkoppe we spent quite a time trying to locate the Chat having no luck for the first couple of hours but seeing our first Layard's Tit-babbler and other species such as Dusky Sunbird, Mountain Wheatear etc. After eating our packed lunch out of the sun at Spitzkoppe Rest Camp we tried one last time around the rocks and, at the very last second, we had allowed ourselves, driving away from the rocks, Chris tracked down the Herero Chat at long last; the time put in had not been wasted after all!

We then headed for the coast and our final Namibian destination. After miles of gravel desert, it gradually gave way to flat, off-white sandy dessert flats. [203] We stopped at one point to look for Tractrac Chat which we eventually connected with before driving on to Swakopmund where we saw our first Hartlaub's Gulls and then down the coast to Walvis Bay. We checked in to our hotel and took a well-earned rest after the long drive.

Protea Hotels are a rather modern chain of hotels with very similar rooms of a very good standard with perhaps the biggest beds I've ever seen in any hotel. The bathrooms were very modern yet suffered from the triumph of form over function with glass washbasins which leaked and had nowhere to put the soap etc. A welcome feature for me was internet access and I took the time to check my mail and delete a few thousand of those that had stacked up since I left home.

This particular Protea has a breakfast room but no restaurant so we had to eat dinner out. Normally, I much prefer hotels with restaurants as this allows a group to eat when each member wants and for some to linger and others move on quickly. However, as we had to go out we went to a superb restaurant called The Raft which is set on its own jetty where the lights attract hundreds of gulls to roost on the water and Cape Fur Seals play acrobatically in the water. What is more the food [and service] was the best of the entire trip and we all very much enjoyed the two dinners we ate there with copious quantities of Tafel beer and a few bottles of wine.

Whilst we were trying not to look at birds during or on the way to dinner, we did add White Pelican, Greater Flamingo, Cape Gull, Reed Cormorant and Grey Heron to the trip list.

Overnight: [Protea Hotel](#), Walvis Bay.

Wheelchair access comments

This was first class accommodation in a hotel sense, and after changing from room 319 to 318 with Maggie and Bo we found that we had a very good 'disabled' room. I managed to have a shower ok with the supply of a poolside chair. The wash basin and toilet were both suitable for wheelchairs. Room 319 was also suitable, but not quite so usable for me. The bed was level with the wheelchair and was plush.

The rest of the hotel – dining room, bar and entrance were all accessible

Day 13, 11th Oct:

We started the day birding around the town itself first in search of Orange River White-eyes which we had eventually in some tall reeds on the edge of town; having seen Cape Sparrow in the park with common species such as Waxbills and Red-faced Mousebirds. We spent a little time overlooking Walvis Bay itself but decided to leave a serious look until later in the day.

We then moved up the coast to the Swakopmund area where we searched in the barren flat white sand dessert areas by the sea for larks and chats but saw very little indeed. The first Cape Crow of the trip and Tractrac Chat kept us searching and we eventually did manage to find the species we sought – Gray's Lark. We then lunched overlooking the sea at the Lighthouse Restaurant.

After lunch we drove back to Walvis Bay Lagoon [201] where we followed the lagoon way out past the salt pans. Here we had Greater Flamingo, Great White Pelican, White-breasted and Cape Cormorant, and some extremely localised species such as Chestnut-banded Plover and other waders including White-fronted and Kittlitz's Plover, Black-winged Stilt and many familiar ones such as Avocet and Ruff, Little Stint and Ruddy Turnstone. We saw many Common and Sandwich terns and our target tern; the diminutive Damara Tern.

In the late afternoon we moved down into the sand dunes near the little village of Rooibank where some of the party were able to search for, and connect with Dune Lark although the deep sand made it impossible for wheelchairs... the rest of the party amused themselves watching Dung Beetles scurrying to and fro with their interesting burdens.

Overnight: Protea Hotel, Walvis Bay.

Day 14, 12th Oct:

After having seen over 300 species in the first leg of the trip most of the group had a lazy morning before driving to the airport to move on to Cape Town, whereas Andy had an early start to get his flight to Johannesburg where he met John McAllister for a few days chasing the South African specials that he had missed on his last trip there

South Africa Western Cape 2006 October

2nd Leg Western Cape

Olive Thrushes, Orange-breasted Sunbirds and Other Cape Specials...
12th to 19th October 2006 – Cape Specials with Marius Wheeler
Cape Leg Itinerary

Day	Date	Hotel/Lodge/etc
14 Cape Town	12th Oct-06	Afton Grove
15 Cape Town	13th Oct-06	Afton Grove
16 Tanqua Karoo	14th Oct-06	Tanqua Guest House
17 Tanqua Karoo	15th Oct-06	Tanqua Guest House
18 Agulhas Plains	16th Oct-06	Honeywood
19 Agulhas Plains	17th Oct-06	Honeywood
20 Cape Town	18th Oct-06	Afton Grove
21 Fly to Durban	19th Oct-06	

Overview

Notes: All photographs © copyright to Bo Beolens, Brian Anderson and Sue Sayers. **Bold numbers** in square brackets indicate the route number in Southern Africa Birdfinder. Names highlighted in yellow are eponymous names of birds explained in the addendum.

This leg was led by Marius Wheeler and the participants were Brian & Joanna Anderson, Bo & Maggie Crombet-Beolens and Sue Sayers. Andy Senior had parted company with the rest of the group in Walvis Bay to fly to Johannesburg to meet up with John McAllister. Andy had visited South Africa before so had arranged a much shorter stay with John to try to fill in the gaps of the southern African specials and endemics that he had missed first time around.

Cape Town is an impressive Garden City and the Karoo an amazing arid plain, Agulhas is fecund and wet agricultural land and De Hoop an amazing Fynbos maritime area – the Cape is a remarkable place of great contrasts.

The people are also as varied in this, the Rainbow Nation. We found many people trying to make the new South Africa attain its true potential but also found a number of better off white South Africans whose attitudes towards their fellow citizens of other hues can be a great shock to those of us who find racism frankly obscene. In this and the Eastern leg of our tour we were very saddened that this should still prevail when such magnanimity has been shown by the new power holders.

Marius Wheeler – our Guide

Detailed Daily Diary

Day 14, 12 Oct:

Our flight arrived in Cape Town and we transferred to Afton Grove B&B, Noordhoek, on the Cape Peninsula – en route we saw the first feral House Crow as well as all the common birds of the area such as Egyptian Goose, Hadada and Sacred Ibis, Cape Gulls, etc

After settling in we spent a couple of hours birding along the coast and the Constantia Greenbelt [2] to begin to pick up some of the Cape specials and get our collective 'eye in'. In the grounds we had already spotted Cape Bulbul and Cape White-eye, Cape Wagtail, Cape Robin, Cape Canary and Pin-tailed Whydah. As we left the guesthouse spotted a Spotted Dikkop [Thicknee] in the grounds of a small workshop a few doors down the road.

We soon picked up Cape Cormorant and Cape Gannet and were lucky to see a Black Sparrowhawk soaring over the seaside cliffs where there were also African Black Swifts and Greater-striped Swallows. Cape Francolins were easy to spot and on the shoreline rocks African Black Oystercatchers probed and above were Hartlaub's & Cape Gulls and Swift [Greater Crested] Terns. In the scrub areas we found Karoo Prinia and our first stunning Bokmakierie, fleeting glimpse of Malachite, Orange-breasted and Lesser Double-collared Sunbirds.

Afton Grove is a very comfortable guesthouse with spacious rooms [one newly adapted for accessibility] comprising bedroom, bathroom and sitting room/kitchen enabling one to have hot drinks or chilled at any time and to update one's bird lists in comfort. The dining room [no ramp yet] is also spacious and the food at a very high standard with generous well prepared breakfasts and particularly enjoyable dinners. The gardens are not huge but are bird rich for urban gardens.

Overnight: [Afton Grove](#) B&B, Noordhoek, Cape Peninsula

Wheelchair access comments:

This accommodation was of a high standard. Our room – No 11 – was spacious throughout, especially the bathroom, which was well adapted for disabled use. The toilet was slightly high for the level of my wheelchair, but it was generally ok with adequate grab rails. The shower had level access so it was easy to get the wheelchair close to the poolside chair provided for easy transfer. Once again adequate grab rails were provided. The wash basin was at a 'wheelchair friendly' height.

The bedroom was a little tight for front-on wheelchair access but quite manageable. The lounge area was very large and main door access was good. The way to the dining room – a short distance – was across grass and down three large steps. The property owners have indicated that they will construct a suitable ramp for use when they have wheelchair guests in the future.

Day 15, 13th Oct:

Marius fetched us from Afton Grove at first light and we spent the day visiting some of the Peninsula's top birding sites. We started with a visit to the Penguin colony at False Bay then moved on to the Botanical Gardens where we took lunch.

The penguin colony must be one of the easiest places to see an endemic in any world city. With the backdrop of the ocean one can also see a variety of passing terns, gulls and other seabirds too.

At 'Boulders' one can get up close and personal with these African Penguins and we saw them at every stage of plumage and maturity.

The Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens [1] are not only a visual delight for flower lovers but great habitat for many Cape endemics. After walking around near the entrance some of us managed to get one of the tourist golf carts take us to see some of the birds and even managed to persuade the bemused driver to stop so we could see them better.

Here we saw Cape Sugarbirds, Forest Canary, Rameron Pigeon, Sombre Greenbul, Cape Sparrow, and a variety of sunbirds including very good views of Malachite – some of us heard but did not see Knysna Warbler.

Over the mountains were Jackal Buzzard and African Goshawk.

After lunch we did the tourist thing and rode the cable car up to the summit of Table Top to experience the stunning views.

Whilst this was the only time on the entire trip that we did not concentrate on birding we can report that the top of the rock is excellent for close views of Orange-breasted Sunbird; the only other bird we saw at the top was Red-winged Starling. Other taxa were represented by lots of Rock Agamas.

The afternoon was spent at [Strandfontein Wastewater Disposal Works – Bird Sanctuary](#) [7] where we caught up with a lot of wildfowl species and waders and a number of waterside passerines. Our guide happens to be very fond of waterfowl and has been responsible for their counts as he works for the Avian Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town.

We spent several hours at this large complex of pools. The reedy margins and tall weedy banks held Levaillant's Cisticola, Karoo Prinia and Cape Reed Warblers [now Lesser Swamp Warbler] and Cape Turtle Doves. The big attraction here though is the incredible variety of waterfowl but we also saw Black-necked, Little and Great-crested Grebes, African Darter, Grey, Black-headed and Purple Heron, Great, Yellow-billed and Little Egret, and Black-crowned Night Heron, Sacred, Glossy & Hadada Ibis and Greater Flamingo, Great White Pelican, African Purple Swampphen, Red-knobbed Coot and Common Moorhen as well as African Marsh Harrier, the ubiquitous Yellow-billed Kite, African Fish Eagle and Black-shouldered Kite. The waterfowl included South African Shelduck, Yellow-billed Duck, Cape and Red-billed Teal, Cape Shoveler, Southern Pochard, Maccua Duck, and Spur-winged Goose. Waders were mostly familiar species or ones seen in Namibia.

Overnight: Afton Grove B&B, Noordhoek, Cape Peninsula.

Day 16, 14th Oct:

We started out early leaving the Cape Peninsula towards Ceres, the gateway to the Karoo [33-35]. Incidentally, the Karoo happens to be one of the greatest endemic hotspots on the entire African continent.

Our route to Ceres took us through the Bains' Kloof Pass an exciting drive gaining altitude with each kilometre and affording some wonderful views of the southern part of the Western Cape Province. We stopped wherever we could to look for birds the pick of the bunch being Malachite and Collared Sunbirds, Cape Sugarbirds, Canaries and our first Neddicky and Cape Grassbirds. The wooded slopes also held Cape & Yellow Canaries and Cape White-eyes.

A great spot for Grassbird, Neddicky, Sugarbird, Malachite Sunbird and Yellow Canary

The pass marks a real change in flora and climate with it being much drier on the northern side and agricultural land makes way for rock areas of Fynbos. Here the avifauna changed too and we started to look for some of the very special birds of the area. A number of stops produced our first Ground Woodpecker, and Cape Rockthrush and Cape Buntings.

We stopped in Ceres for a comfort break before moving on again into the dry plains of the Karoo. Just outside of Ceres was a small wetland and lake with plenty of waterfowl but also nesting Southern Red Bishops with Cape and Masked Weavers many displaying their breeding finery as well as seeing our first Pied Starlings nearby.

As we entered the Karoo we stopped at a picnic site to eat our packed lunch which had been supplied by Afton Grove – worth a mention as it was extremely tasty! Beneath a concrete bench was one of the biggest moths seen on the entire southern African sojourn! Apart from the Cape and House Sparrows our lunch was enhanced by Grey-backed Cisticolas and Fiscal Flycatchers.

We spent the whole afternoon slowly driving across the Karoo towards Tanqua Guesthouse where we stayed the night... literally miles from anywhere being 140km from Ceres – the nearest town! In the dry landscape we were ever watchful for Bustards and Coursers, Sandgrouse and Larks, Pipits and Chats although birds of prey were thin on the ground with Pale Chanting Goshawk being the commonest. We were not disappointed! Soon we had our first Ludwig's Bustard and, eventually, Burchell's Courser – a much coveted tick!.

Tanqua Karoo Guesthouse is 140km from Ceres

Before long we had not only seen Namaqua Doves but also Namaqua Sandgrouse too.

Driving and stopping frequently to quiz cryptic larks needs a lot of concentration and the heat was sapping of one's energy too as it rose into the mid-forties centigrade. Nevertheless, before we reached our accommodation, we had clocked up Spike-heeled, Red-capped and Thick-billed Larks as well as both Grey-backed and Black-eared Finchlarks. Furthermore, we had also added Capped Wheatear and Familiar,

Tractrac, Sickie-winged and Karoo Chats as well as Grey-backed Cisticola and Fiscal Flycatcher.

Overnight: Tanqua Guesthouse

Wheelchair access comments:

This was a separate building situated about a 100-yards from the main one. It provided for a self-catering environment and had three bedrooms. Our bedroom had a double bed and a single one. For me the doubled bed was too high and the single one was too low. I opted for the single bed. This proved to be soft and difficult to move in but I managed to sleep through the night even though it was very hot

The bathroom had no door so discreet toileting was difficult. The toilet itself was approachable for me only sideways on and was, thereby, very difficult to get on and off; there were no grab rails. The wash basin was ok but a little high and did not allow a close approach because it had a boxed cupboard underneath. There was also a bath which was very deep. This was a problem for me as I could have got in it, but I would have been unable to climb out.

The door to the shower had been removed for me, but I still felt unsure about using it because of the need to transfer over a wide gap, so I didn't. It was not adapted in any way for disabled use

Tanqua Guesthouse was a very interesting mixture. The building itself is very imposing in its isolation and virtually windowless exterior – it is built around a large inner courtyard with a small swimming pool and bar-b-q area with a huge, high-ceilinged living/dining room where the owner cooks extraordinary meals. She says her hobby and pleasure is in cooking and it is certainly first rate despite the fact that it must be a nightmare to get fresh ingredients so far from the nearest store. Having one's own airstrip may help with this as does the frequent lunch time visits by the local flying club members.

The outlying accommodation is well appointed [and pretty accessible] but has one huge drawback – the power is turned off from 2100 hours until 0600 hours daily. The problem for guests is that they must either broil in the immense heat the building accumulates or open all the windows to allow the desert breezes through but then suffer the company of whatever such breezes bring.

Our stay coincided on the first night with a corn cricket hatch – these beasties are around three or four inches long and rather prehistoric in appearance. Our second night coincided with a moth hatch and we watched hundreds of moths suicide around Tanqua's lighting. Two of the party [me being the principle one] simply could not cope with the heat and were, fortunately, moved into a room in the main house where the power stayed on all night and the mosquito nets allowed through all the breeze from two fans and no moths or other bugs.

Day 17, 15th Oct:

Some of us went out before breakfast to the dam on the property to look for some of the special birds which take advantage of the year round water and lush growth. The area was alive with newly arrived European Bee-eaters as we drove through the small area of fertile land near the dam. We drove along the dam wall to see South African Shelduck and grebes in the dam as well as Pied Kingfisher and, in the small wetland below the dam wall other waterfowl and reed-loving species such as weavers and bishops. We searched the area in pursuit of the elusive Namaqua Warbler which we did manage to see in the wetland scrub – rare and elusive it may be but was perhaps the least colourful bird of the tour! Here too were Grassveld Pipit, Fiscal Shrike and Bokmakerie and Streaky-headed Canary. On our way back to breakfast we stopped to watch a Puff Adder slowly make its way across the road – fascinating and beautiful but a personal fear of mine.

After breakfast we took the later risers for a quick turn around the same area so that they could catch up with us and we added a few other species such as African Hoopoe and both Kittlitz's and Three-banded Plover.

We spent the entire rest of the day birding the Karoo going as far as the new HQ of the [Tankwa Karoo National Park \[31\]](#). Even those of us normally immune to deviating from the birding quest acknowledged that the totally unique flora was strange and fascinating.

As we headed onto the vast flat plains in search of Karoo Korhaan, we once again saw many chat and lark species including Tractrac Chat, Sickle-winged Chat, Karoo Chat, and our first Karoo Robin. Larks included Karoo, Cape Clapper, Spike-heeled, Red-capped and Thick-billed Lark, Karoo Long-billed Lark, Southern Large-billed Lark, Spike-heeled Lark and Lark-like Bunting as well as both Black-eared and Grey-backed Finchlarks. Small water tanks proved particularly good and several such vicinities held breeding birds as we were occasionally thrown by immature birds such as Southern Boubou. One river bed which was not quite dry attracted Pearl-breasted Swallows and White-backed Mousebirds.

We were lucky enough to eventually locate Karoo Korhaan. During the drive we also connected with our first Booted Eagle in South Africa.

At Tankwa Karoo HQ we ate our [very impressive] packed lunch having used the brand new 'facilities'. Whilst we did so a Lesser Honeyguide called constantly from a tree overhead and we eventually managed to locate it and get reasonable views. Here too another Hoopoe called all the time and some of us managed a glimpse. Around the new buildings were Cape, House and Southern Grey-headed Sparrows.

We spent the afternoon working our way back to base in search of more specials and managed, eventually, to get a glimpse or two of Karoo Eremomela and very good views of Rufous-eared Warbler and Layard's Tit-babbler.

Overnight: Tanqua Guesthouse

Day 18, 16th Oct:

A look at a map of South Africa might lead you to believe that the Agulhas plain [or Overberg Region] is only a short distance from the Karoo – in fact it is a long drive which took us all day, albeit a drive often interrupted by stops to look at birds.

We had to retrace our steps to Ceres [where we lunched in the main shopping area] before taking a different pass to the coastal plains.

The Karoo still held good birds for us including a group of no less than 6 Ludwig's Bustards. We also saw lots of Ostriches – although it was not always clear whether they were farmed, wild or feral birds. We also saw our first Steppe Buzzard of the trip and these became familiar sights throughout South Africa.

Halfway between Tanqua Karoo and Ceres we stopped at Skitterykloof Pass and followed a small tarmac road to a pull off where there were bushes and, in the background a hidden pool. This was an excellent place for birds and we saw Mountain Chat, Long-billed Crombec, Pirit Batis, Fairy Flycatcher, Brimstone Canary & Pied Barbet as well as a Grey Heron and some Cattle Egrets and other common species.

En route after we passed back into the lush agricultural lands we began to come upon small parties of Blue Cranes – very beautiful if rather oddly shaped.

We arrived at Honeywood in fine penetrating rain and unloaded. There was enough light to look for birds from the veranda although there were not very many about and most were heard but we did clock up a Black Sparrowhawk that drifted over the trees behind the Lodge. We also heard the plaintive and frankly annoying call of the Red-chested Cuckoo saying "it will rain" over and over again for the next two days... by the time we left there were three birds calling.

Honeywood Farm was a strange mixture. The setting gives great views over the valley but one has to appreciate that the lush vegetation needs rain to grow and boy did it show us it could rain. We were put in what had been the main house years before which had a kitchen and large sitting room with an open fire with a poorly constructed flue so that smoke invaded the room. The bedrooms were a mixture, one had an en suite toilet but no bathroom. Opposite the other rooms at the other end of the house were a bathroom and a shower room but the lack of locks meant we had to have a convention of closed doors in occupation, open ones when free... a feature we coped with OK but one that will be off putting, particularly for some mixed sex groups.

The rooms were comfortable and the kitchen made it easy to make tea and coffee etc. However, one either had to brave a slippery grassy slope to enter through the French doors or somehow get a wheelchair down a steep flight of 7 or 8 steps!

The grounds were difficult to traverse in the wet and would not have been easy even when dry. It was necessary to drive to the dining room in the main owners' residence.

Sumptuous meals were had with breakfast being particularly appreciated with the freshest honey from the thousand hives kept in the area! Wine and other drinks could be had with meals for a 'donation' – an artifice to get around not being licensed and actually making the process a bit embarrassing. As a vegetarian I was pretty unimpressed with the dinners.

Laundry was done by members of the staff which is always handy for travellers and this too was for a donation 'to the girls' meaning the adult black staff members – the suggested [by the owners] donation was so paltry that we immediately quadrupled it and still felt we had the best of the deal.

It is worth mentioning here that a patronising or even downright hostile attitude from whites to blacks is still something we came across a lot in South Africa. For someone whose student days were often spent on Anti-Apartheid marches this does not sit well. I was pleased to see that most young people seemed not to retain this attitude but it did at times make one uncomfortable. Lucky for us our guide Marius Wheeler was of a generation that has transcended this nonsense as had Chris Lotz who guided the first leg of the tour.

Another aspect of the trip worth a mention is the habit of B&B and Guesthouse owners to join guests for meals. Many people really enjoy this whilst others find it intrusive. Our group was split with some feeling this was part of getting to know the country and others feeling that they would like to just spend the time with other members of the group, especially when there was very little time to relax on the trip. I was one of those who much preferred not to be 'en famille' but later in the trip I much enjoyed meeting some other guests so can see both points of view.

Overnight: Honeywood Farm, Grootvadersbosch, Agulhas Plains.

Wheelchair access comments:

The farm accommodation was spacious and our bedroom was large with plenty of room to get round the large double bed. In our part of the building there was a bathroom without a toilet, a shower room with a toilet both of which were used communally. This worked out ok but the bathroom with the toilet could not be locked. The wash basin and toilet were manageable. The toilet had no grab rails. Once again the bath was too deep for me.

The accommodation had a log fire and a large kitchen area for making tea/coffee. To get in and out of the building I had to be lifted up seven large steps, and Joanna had to have a little help because of no banister rail. So access in and out of the building was very difficult. It was possibly to be pushed along a grass area to the rear of the building, but this proved to be unsuitable because on the day it was very wet and the wheels of the chair got very muddy, so the option of being carried up and down the stairs was easier.

Day 19, 17th Oct:

The entire day was spent birding the Agulhas Plains [36] culminating in a visit to De Hoop nature reserve for lunch then following the loop back to base. Being the

stronghold of the world's Blue Crane (South Africa's national bird) population and we saw many of this species.

Early on just after turning on to the Buffelsjag to Malagas road, we stopped to look for larks. We were lucky that many were displaying and we saw numerous species of larks including two extremely localized lark species Agulhas Long-billed & Agulhas Clapper Lark, as well as Red-capped and Large-billed Lark. Here we also saw Cloud and Grey-backed Cisticola and Bar-throated Apalis for the first time and our guide flushed Common Quail; a brave move considering the other local fauna.

We saw a pair of Southern Black Korhaan on the road between Buffelsjag and Malagas; it was pouring with rain and they were in a field hiding behind small bushes. We then made our way to Malagas where we crossed the Breede River via the hand drawn pontoon ferry.

Between Malagas and De Hoop we travelled across the agricultural landscape and were very lucky that a Cape Vulture flew low right across the road in front of us and we could stop and get great views. [This area is just next to the Potberg Mountain, where the Cape Vulture Colony is situated].

We reached De Hoop in time to enjoy our packed lunch which we shared with Weavers, Francolins and a Southern Boubou and were entertained by other birds around us including Hoopoe, Bokmakarie, Water Dikkop [Thicknee] and others. On our way on to the reserve we saw a variety of mammals such as Bontebok, Springbok and Cape Mountain Zebra. Overhead we saw our first White-throated Swallows. We searched the cliff top for other species and scoped the lagoon where Pelicans, Spoonbill, Herons, Egrets and many waterfowl fed. Here we also saw Long-billed Pipit.

The de Hoop Nature Reserve [37] is one of the best places to see the stunning, endangered, endemic Black Harrier, which quarters low over the coastal Fynbos. We were extremely lucky to see two different birds.

The main target for the drive home was Denham's Bustard which we got decent views of too, then took the road from the reserve back to Swellendam. Here too we saw Grey-winged Francolins.

In the late afternoon the weather got much worse as we climbed back from sea-level to the hills surrounding Honeywood farm and, not far from base we had to take a three quarter of an hour detour all the way to Heidelberg to avoid two washed-out roads but managed to arrive safe and sound.

Overnight: [Honeywood Farm](#), Grootvadersbosch, Agulhas Plains.

Day 20, 18th Oct:

Today we embarked on yet another spectacularly scenic drive back to Cape Town, but we started by looking in on the Grootvadersbosch Nature Reserve close to Honeywood Farm. Despite wet weather and not being able to walk into the reserve we did manage some very special species including Knysna Warbler, [down to four feet making this otherwise unremarkable warbler very special] Dusky Flycatcher, Chorister Robin, Sweet Waxbill as well as more familiar species like Olive Thrush and

Cape Robin. We dipped on Cape Batis as we had the previous day although it was heard on both occasions by our guide.

Our main target on the return journey was to try and see Cape Rockjumper so we took the main road (N2) back towards Cape Town, but we turned off at a small town called Botrivier and went towards Kleinmond / Rooi Els [12]. Here we searched in vain at a number of sites for Cape Rockjumper but did hear Victorin's Warbler singing from the side of the stream – but we did not manage a view of this notorious skulker. While looking for the rockjumper, we also found Orange-breasted Sunbird, Cape Rock-thrush and Ground Woodpecker. We had lunch in Rooi Els.

We ended the day with further spectacular driving along the False Bay coast, until we reached Afton Grove B&B again. We managed to spot Southern Right Whale at Gordon's Bay and pull over to get excellent views of three whales and a number of Cape Fur Seals.

Overnight: Afton Grove B&B, Noordhoek, Cape Peninsula.

Day 21, 19th Oct:

Early morning we transferred to Cape Town airport for our flight to Durban via a very enjoyable scenic drive.

3rd Leg Eastern South Africa

Livingstone's Turaco, Rudd's Lark, Narina Trogon and Other South African Specials...

19th to 30th October 2006 – Eastern Specials with John McAllister

Eastern Leg Itinerary

Day	Date	Hotel/Lodge/etc
21 Durban – Creighton	19-Oct	Smithfield Guest Farm
22 Lesotho	20-Oct	Sani Top Chalets
23 Lesotho and Creighton	21-Oct	Smithfield Guest Farm
24 Xumeni Forest	22-Oct	Smithfield Guest Farm
25 Richards Bay	23-Oct	Protea Hotel Richards Bay
26 Eshowe	24-Oct	Protea Hotel Richards Bay
27 eNseleni River	25-Oct	Bonamanzi Game Ranch
28 Bonamanzi Game Ranch	26-Oct	Bonamanzi Game Ranch
29 Mkhuze Game Reserve	27-Oct	Bonamanzi Game Ranch
30 Wakkerstroom	28-Oct	Wakkerstroom Country Inn
31 Wakkerstroom	29-Oct	Wakkerstroom Country Inn
32 Johannesburg	30-Oct	Homeward Flights

Overview

Notes: All photographs © copyright to Bo Beolens, Brian Anderson and Sue Sayers. **Bold numbers** in square brackets indicate the route number in Southern Africa Birdfinder. Names highlighted in yellow are eponymous names of birds explained in the addendum.

Our guide for this leg of our Southern African sojourn was John McAllister – a friend who guided many of us on the Kenya dba trip some years ago. It was terrific to re-make his acquaintance and meet his wife Elise after many years of correspondence.

All five of those who took part in the Cape leg [Maggie & Bo Beolens, Joanna & Brian Anderson and Sue Sayers] continued on to this leg. In the meantime Andy Senior who had accompanied us on the Namibia leg had spent some days with John chasing specials that he had missed out on, on his previous visit to South Africa.

Whilst the idea was to continue to increase our tally of Southern African endemics it was not at a break-neck speed and we moved from place to place less often.

Whilst most time was spent in the State of Kwa-Zulu Natal we also spent some time in Mpumalanga and the last day in Gauteng, although we also drove through a corner of Swaziland and three members of the party drove up Sani Pass into Lesotho where they spent a night.

There were manyspecies seen on this leg that had been seen previously but there were also many new birds found.

In addition to John's guiding we were also shown several sites by other people that John had brought in to help because of their local knowledge or to overcome the extra problems consequent to our limited mobility.

Detailed Daily Diary

Day 21 – 19th October:

We flew from Cape Town to Durban arriving at Durban airport late-morning. Once we had completed all the airport formalities we met John and drove south along the coastal highway to Park Rynie , before turning inland towards Ixopo and the village of Creighton [92], which was our base for the next two nights.

As we left the airport we saw our first House Crows of the trip and, when we stopped for fuel we saw our first [but by no means last] Common Myna.

Lunch was to have been a picnic affair overlooking the Indian Ocean but John phoned on ahead and Gail kindly agreed to put on some drinks and sandwiches for us and we were able to head off straight for Creighton. We arrived in Creighton in time for a late lunch and were able to spend the rest of the afternoon birding locally before sitting down to one of Gail's sumptuous dinners. In the garden we saw Amethyst Sunbird, Village Weaver, Pin-tailed whydah, Speckled Mousebird, Green Wood-hoopoe, Common Waxbill, & Red-billed Quelea.

Malcolm took us out into the lanes around the village specifically to a spot where there are Broad-tailed Warblers which he taped out into the open for most of us to see; oddly Cape Grassbird also responded to the tape. In the area raptor sightings were confined to Yellow-billed and Black-shouldered Kites, Jackal Buzzard but we also saw our first Long-crested Eagles sitting on a telegraph pole close enough for photo silhouettes against the sky. In the fields there were also Fan-tailed, Red-collared and Long-tailed Widows, Cape Canary, White-throated Swallow, White-breasted Cormorant, Grey-crowned Crane and African Wattled Lapwing. He took us to a farm where he has regularly seen Black-bellied Korhaan and we got great views. Whilst looking for the Korhaan we also had a distant view of a magnificent Lanner Falcon.

Commoner species abounded such as the usual Ducks, Herons, Egrets, Ibises and Hammerkop, the ubiquitous Cape Gull, Common Doves, Swifts, Hirundines, both Guineafowl, Corvids, Cape Robinchat, Levallant's Cisticola, Cape Wagtail, Common Fiscal and Southern Boubou, Common & Red-winged Starlings

Creighton lies near the South Eastern border of KwaZulu-Natal on the Umzimkulu River. It was originally known as "Dronkvlei" (Drunk Marsh) from 1842 to 1905, because the cattle that grazed the lush plants on the river banks and became disorientated or "drunk". In 1905 the Cape-Natal Railway Line was opened and a village was laid out and re-named "Creighton" – the maiden name of Lady McCallum, wife of the Governor of Natal at the time.

Today Creighton serves the dairy farming community of the district and is the seat of the Ingwe Municipality. The beautiful fertile Creighton valley has been called the 'Milk Bowl' of Natal. Forestry has also become an important industry on the surrounding hills. Nearby is a truly beautiful Roman Catholic Mission called Centocow. The mission was established in 1888 and includes two magnificent red-brick churches – one in the process of restoration and the other with a very beautiful altar and stained glass windows.

In 1898 Matthew Henry Smith, a transport rider, came to investigate business prospects in the Dronkvlei settlement. He bought the farm now known as Smithfield from a Charles Crookes for the sum of £20 plus his transport wagon. Matthew died at the age of 92 on Smithfield and his daughter, Annie Maud Alborough inherited the farm and passed it on to her son, Raymond Matthew Alborough. Malcolm and Gail Gemmell bought the farm in 1980 – Malcolm was a dairy farmer until 2000 when he leased out the farming operation and became a full time birding tour guide and the rambling old homestead was turned into a guest house.

The approximate distance travelled for the day was 200km.

Overnight: [Smithfield Guest Farm](#) Hosts: Gail and Malcolm Gemmell of [Button Birding](#)
Wheelchair access comments:

Special efforts were made to provide Brian with suitable disabled facilities. Entrance to my room was level access and the rooms were very large. The shower was provided

with a sort of double stool (which was new to me) with a back support set in the middle, and an armrest at one end only. The legs were adjustable which meant that I could bridge the gap between the shower and the wheelchair. This also meant that I could set the shower temperature without scalding myself. The wash basin was the correct height and so was the toilet. Our bedroom was roomy although the space between the beds made it a little difficult to position the wheelchair in my normal way to slide on to the bed, but this was no great problem,

The paths to the dining room were gravelled and firm and were easy to push over, but final access was through the kitchen.

Congratulations are due to the owners, Malcolm and Gail Gemmell for making great efforts to adapt the accommodation for disabled use. The shower bench provided was of a design that I had not seen before and I think it helps to solve the problem of transferring from a wheelchair to a shower seat as the legs are adjustable for height, and so the levels of the shower floor and the bathroom floor can be compensated for. The bench can be viewed on the [CE Mobility](#) website and I thoroughly recommend that accommodation owners in South Africa provide this product if they are interested in disabled access issues. I intend to find out if this product is available in the UK]

Day 22 – 20th October:

The intention had been for the whole party to rise early and drive up Sani Pass into Lesotho birding all the way. However, I had been having back problems for sometime after three weeks travelling on rough roads etc. so Maggie and I decided not to take what was described as a very rough road difficult even for 4x4s. So Brian, Joanna and Sue set off before dawn whilst Maggie & Bo slept on and had a very leisurely late breakfast and sat around the garden watching the birds, soaking up the sun and thoroughly enjoying the break.

We heard Greater Honeyguide in the garden for the next two days before sighting one and also saw Southern Olive Thrush, Cape and Southern Grey-headed Sparrows, a Cape Weaver and African Paradise Flycatcher there. John had caught a cold & cough so also welcomed the break. In the late morning John and I drove around the area seeing if they could locate more birds in a totally lazy manner.

We saw lots of Steppe Buzzards which were very common for the rest of the trip and Red-necked Spurfowl were seen for the only time. I had heard Diederik Cuckoo in Kenya when with John, this time I managed to change the 'H' in my world list to a tick when we came across two males fighting and displaying on a telephone wire with the sun almost reflected off their luminescent green plumage and shining white markings. I spotted a bird disappearing into a hole in a dead tree across a field and got the scope on the spot in time for a Red-throated Wryneck to emerge – the only one seen by me on the trip. Several Black Saw-wings were seen high overhead and African Pipits in the fields. Violet-backed and Cape Glossy Starlings were common in hedges and scrub and after a little searching we also saw Cape White-eye of the race *virens* [sometimes split as Green White-eye]. We also heard, but could not visually locate a Grey-headed Bushshrike.

In the afternoon we went out again with Maggie as she wanted to see Broad-tailed Warbler which she had missed the day before. African Stonechats were everywhere as we drove the lanes and when we stopped at the same place as the previous night we not only connected again with the warbler but, as we watched I spotted another type of warbler on a fence which turned out to be the only Dark-capped Yellow Warbler of the trip. With a little searching we managed to find Yellow-fronted and Streaky-headed Canaries too and, at various places along our route we added African Hoopoe, Fiscal Flycatcher and Orange-throated Longclaw. At one point we stopped at the roadside as we saw several weavers and Pin-tailed Whydahs as well as several bishops very close to us on the bank. We soon saw that they are attracted to an ant's nest where hundreds of ants were taking to the wing. There followed one of the most enjoyable 30 minutes birding I have ever experienced as different birds came to the spectacle. Out of nowhere the air was full of swifts, martins and swallows feasting on the sudden banquet of insects. They flew really close to us and it was soon very easy to pick out Greater-striped from Lesser-striped Swallows by virtue of their more Rufous rumps. Apart from weavers and Red & Yellow Bishops the top bird to visit the scene was our only Jacobin Cuckoo of the entire Southern African adventure.

Gail's usual superb meal was even further enhanced by the presence of several other guests; young women who were preparing for the Presidents' visit in the locality. We spent an hour or so in debate with them learning much about the new South Africa and I for one felt very impressed with their attitudes, abilities and vision... and hope that all they wished to achieve comes to fruition. It also made me realise how little the rest of the world knows about the extraordinary achievements which have already taken place post-apartheid. The incredible housing provision and bringing power, water and sanitation to many millions seems to have gone unnoticed by the rest of the world.

Sani Pass itself has been used by humans wanting to reach the highland fastnesses of the present-day Lesotho for many centuries now. The many examples of rock art in the area attest to the presence of Khoi San people here and they were probably the first people to use the pass. Until the mid- 1950s the pass was a trail for pack animals to carry goods from South Africa to the isolated town of Mokhotlong in Eastern Lesotho. Now the road carries 4x4 vehicles along the only road link between KwaZulu-Natal and the mountain kingdom of Lesotho. The Pass starts at an altitude of 1540 m (5000 ft) above sea level and follows the deeply incised valley of the Mkhomazana River to reach the summit at 2 873 m (9 350 ft) climbing almost 1000 m (3 250 ft) in the last 8 km (5 miles) between the South African and Lesotho border posts. We shall continue on into Lesotho to the summit of Black Mountain Pass at around 3 000 m (9 800 ft).

Brian on the Sani Pass trip: Joanna, Brian and Sue were up at 4.30am to drive up the Sani Pass [91] into Lesotho. Our objective was to climb the steep pass and stay overnight at Sani Top chalets at the height of 9,400 feet. We drove up the Pass in Malcolm's four-wheeled drive vehicle.

Our drive up the Pass was magnificent. We were blessed with full sunshine which enabled crystal clear views of the mountain scenery and wonderful views of each bird

species we saw. Malcolm's driving of the 4WD vehicle and his continuous commentary of the natural history of the Pass made our drive a memorable experience. The wonderful light conditions enabled superb views of every species of bird and mammals we saw on route. Amongst the magnificent birds we saw were Lammergeyer, Cape Vulture, White-necked Raven, Gurney's Sugarbird, Drakensberg Siskin, Wailing Cisticola, Buff-streaked Chat, Red-capped Lark, Drakensberg Rockjumper, Rock Martin, Ground Woodpecker, Karoo Prinia, Grey Tit, Rock kestrel, Sickle-winged Chat, Layard's Tit-Babbler, Thick-billed Lark, Rock Thrush, Mountain Pipit, and Greater-striped Swallow and many others.

We also saw Slogget's Ice Rat directly below the viewing platform at Sani Top and Drakensberg Crag Lizard

After some lunch at Sani Top we drove further up the pass to the Black Mountain, about 10,000 feet, and saw Lammergeyer and met with a local herdsman who was kind enough to pose for us. He looked as if he was quite used to these photo opportunities.

Overnight: Sani Top Chalets for some and Smithfield Guest Farm for others
Host: Jonathan Aldous at Sani

Day 23 – 21st October:

Maggie and I had another really lazy morning when I, courtesy of Gail's computer, dealt with three weeks' worth of E-mails and Maggie caught up with sleep and some light reading, really charging our batteries. Of course we birded the garden and were lucky to see an Olive Woodpecker when it flew into the garden to peck a while on a dead tree limb.

We waited for lunch and the return of the other members of the party from their side trip to Lesotho.

Brian on the Sani Pass trip:

We slept well and, after breakfast, drove down the Pass back to Creighton and Malcolm's place. The bird watching and scenery were equally as stunning and we were able to have repeat performances of some great species of birds and mammals except that, try as we might, we could only hear the Barratt's Scrub-Warbler at the South African border post, but not see it.

Wheelchair access comments:

Our accommodation at 9,400 feet was Spartan but comfortable enough. Our bedroom was large enough to get the wheelchair by the side of the bed, and access to the wardrobe etc. was easy. There were no en suite facilities so use of the toilet, wash room and showers were shared. The shower was, once again, not usable, but access

to the narrow rooms, to toilet and wash basin were ok because the door opened outwards. We had a gas heater in our room so we kept comfortable despite temperatures being just above freezing.

Access in and out of the building was level, though a little bumpy, and the bar and dining areas were accessed easily.

In the mid-afternoon the re-united group went in search of the very rare and endangered Blue Swallow which has been a special study for Malcolm. He guided us to an area where we were able to watch two pairs of these beautiful birds. We also sought-out Brimstone Canary and I heard, but could not locate either Croaking or Wailing Cisticolas. On our way back to base I noticed a large raptor away across a field and scoping confirmed my suspicion that it was a Martial Eagle. Under Malcolm's guidance we spotted a Denham's Bustard displaying on a hillside giving us wonderful displays. Malcolm said that it must be displaying to another male out of our sight and he drove us to a spot perhaps two kilometres away where he showed us the other displaying male!

Dinner back at Malcolm's guesthouse was another excellent meal and, at table we were joined by two other guests – one of whom seemed to take instant offence at our attempts to dissuade him of his belief that the CITES convention prevented the culling of elephant in Northern Botswana where he had told us many thousands were causing huge destruction.

Overnight: Smithfield Guest Farm

Day 24 – 22nd October:

We had considered a pre-dawn visit to Xumeni Forest [92] looking for the highly threatened Cape Parrots as they leave their forest breeding grounds on their daily foraging route to the surrounding areas. However, we decided, instead, to head out before breakfast for Ntsikeni Vlei Wetland a new reserve with a unique highland wet grassland area favoured by several very special species and we were not disappointed. En route through the many small Zulu villages we picked up more common species and our first Pied Starlings.

As we drove up into the higher land we were very lucky to have several Southern Ground Hornbills fly over us giving great views in an area of plantation which had been partly logged. A little further on we had terrific views of Red-breasted Cuckoo calling and sitting in full view on the branches of a dead tree. Here too were Eastern Black-headed Orioles and Greater Honeyguide. As the woodland lessened and we approached the reserve we came upon a party of at least 30 Sweet Waxbills putting on a fine show for us.

Once we reached the reserve proper the trees gave way to high grasslands and we began to look for Yellow-breasted Pipit which we quite quickly saw along with a number of Orange-throated Longclaws... the immature individuals of which can be confused with the Yellow Pipits.

As we moved further on we began to spots larks and chats with the star being Eastern Long-billed Lark. Whilst scoping a Long-billed Lark I saw a skulking grey and rather dumpy pipit amongst the rocks which John identified for me from my description, and I later confirmed from the field-guide, as the rare and barely studies Short-tailed Pipit. Other pipits seen were Mountain, Long-billed, Plain-backed, and African Rock Pipits and Orange-throated Longclaws. Among the familiar birds Familiar Chats and Mountain Wheatears we soon started to see the less common Buff-streaked Chat. A variety of familiar cisticolas were also seen or heard.

We saw several Denham's Bustards including one very close male. As we reached a very low-lying area of wet grassland we stopped to scope some distant Wattled Cranes one of the real specialities of the valley; I also spotted a Black Stork in the far distance. Here too were several Grey-crowned Cranes.

We made our way to the far end of the valley where we opened up some nice chalets and used the tables to have our long-awaited breakfast! After breakfast, during which we had a very distant view of a Sentinel Rock Thrush and a good view of a roosting Jackal Buzzard we retraced our steps. Part way back we looked at a Sparrowhawk site to find the desiccated corpse of one but no living specimens. No more species were added to the list as we birded our way back through the reserve.

We then drove to Franklin Marsh an area of reed-beds and open water with a wide variety of waterfowl, waders, herons and other water loving birds. Our main target here was African Rail and Malcolm heard one call so we tape lured for a while whilst having our picnic lunch and were treated to a glimpse of red bill sticking out from reeds near a small pool at the roadside. Further tape playing got the bird to show head and breast as well and, eventually everyone managed to see this skulker. During the course of watching this pool, luring the rail, a Baillon's Crake flew across the same pool... tape luring produced return calls but not another visit.

Whilst watching the marshes we also had a variety of waterbirds including African Gallinule, Red-knobbed Coot, Hammerkop, Spoonbill and many commoner ducks, herons, ibis, grebes and cormorants. African marsh Harriers quartered the marsh and in the distance, we spotted some Blue Cranes.

Amongst the reeds were several warbler species and Cisticolas and we got good enough views to really get to grips with African Reed Warbler, Lesser Swamp Warbler, Little Rush Warbler and LeVaillant's Cisticola

After exhausting the possibilities of this site we made our way back to base.

Overnight: Smithfield Guest Farm

Day 25 – 23rd October:

We rose early to bird in woodland close to Creighton and were fortunate to connect with the elusive Forest Buzzard, which we actually followed for a while as it flew along the un-metalled road into the forest. We were followed in by an American ornithologist [also staying at Smithfield] who was undertaking a study of Barratt's Warbler – a

species which we heard constantly throughout this visit but never got a view of. Emerald Cuckoo was also heard virtually continuously but never seen. Here under Malcolm's guidance we stopped and birded then moved on and birded again deeper into the woodland. We heard our only fluff-tail of the trip as a Buff-spotted Fluff-tail seemed to get closer and closer then fade away again – but we were told these birds are notoriously difficult to see as they are natural ventriloquists. However, we did see a number of specialities here including the imposing Knysna Turaco, African Green-pigeon, Black Cuckoo, Grey Cuckooshrike, Bush Blackcap, Sombre Greenbul, Yellow-throated Woodland warbler, African Dusky Flycatcher, Southern Double-collared Sunbird, Cape White-eye as well as more common species. Most of us heard, but only one person saw, White-starred Robin. En route back to base we also saw Spectacled and Southern Masked-weaver.

When we returned to Smithfield we were greeted by a fabulous al fresco breakfast and then packed and said our farewells.

We then drove on to the northern KwaZulu-Natal harbour town of Richards Bay [114], our base for the next two nights to visit various reserves which are part of [Greater St. Lucia Wetland Park](#). We arrived late afternoon and rested until dinner. However, the hotel car park is home to two species of weaver with a fine notice board next to their nesting tress pointing out the differences between the two; Village and Lesser Masked-weaver.

The bustling town of Richards Bay began life as a makeshift harbour set up by the British Royal Navy during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. It was named after Sir Frederick W Richards who was then Commodore of the West Africa Station of the Royal Navy. While no development took place at the time a small settlement offering good fishing and boating eventually grew up on the northern side of the lagoon. In the 1950s and 60s it became apparent that South Africa needed a deep water harbour to export its ores and coal on the large bulk carriers that were being built or planned at the time. Richards Bay harbour was developed as a deep water port and opened in 1976. Initially the port almost exclusively handles South Africa's fast-growing coal export industry. It is still the only port in Africa capable of handing ships of up to 200 000 ton capacity, but now handles a wide range of goods and a number of large industries sprang up around the port facilities. Today the town is vibrant and fast becoming an important coastal holiday destination, offering spectacular scenery and unspoilt beaches.

Approximate distance travelled for the day: 350 km

Overnight: [Protea Hotel](#), Richards Bay
Host: Errard Sullivan

Wheelchair access comments:

This hotel was of a similar design to the Protea Hotel in Namibia and our room – no 210 – was adapted for disabled use. It was generally ok i.e. it was a large bedroom but the shower was not as well designed as their hotel in Walvis Bay. Despite this I was able to use it, but rather precariously with the loan of the usual poolside chair.

The toilet was of a good height – wheelchair-wise – and had adequate grab rails. The wash basin was wheelchair friendly in height. The main areas of the hotel were all accessible and a well designed incline into to the hotel entrance was a pleasing feature.

Day 26 – 24th October:

This morning we rose early and drove a short distance inland to the southern Zululand town of Eshowe.

[Eshowe](#) [110] gets its name from the description of the sound of the breeze rushing through the [Dlinza Forest](#) in the heart of the town – at least this is the romantic explanation for the town's name. The more scientific explanation is that it is a corruption of the isiZulu word ishongwe, or milkbush shrubs' which are prominent in the area. Zulu kings and chiefs lived here to escape from the summer heat. The British settlers established their capital here for the same reason. The town lies on a plateau overlooking the Zululand coastal plain and is thus protected from the subtropical humidity of surrounding areas. It was proclaimed a magistracy in 1887 upon annexation of Zululand by Britain and became the capital of newly formed colony of Zululand. It has since lost this status but has grown to support a 1800km² agricultural district.

After quickly reaching the aerial boardwalk in the Dlinza Forest we waited a short while to meet a friend of John's, Hamish McLaggan who lives in the town and knows the forest very well. As soon as we met up we moved on to the start of the walkway; there we ate our packed breakfast on a platform overlooking this beautiful relict forest patch. We spent several hours birding the forest and, whilst we did not see either a great variety of birds nor huge numbers we did see some very special ones including Cape White-eye, Eastern Olive Sunbird, Paradise Flycatcher, Black-bellied Starling, Black-backed Puffback, Grey Cuckoo Shrike, Lesser Honeyguide, White-eared and Black-collared Barbets, Trumpeter Crowned Hornbill, Speckled Mousebird, Square-tailed [as well as the ubiquitous Fork-tailed] Drongo, and the very beautiful Purple-crested Turaco which, when it flies shows its brilliant vermillion under-wings. For me though the top bird, and close to the best bird for the trip as a whole, was Narina Trogon perched at nose height only a few yards away!

We also heard Green-backed Cameroptera, both Red-fronted and Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, Emerald Cuckoo and Chorister Robin and saw Gymnogene for the second day running and our only view of an African Crowned Eagle. Sue was able to walk a less accessible track to see nesting Spotted Ground Thrush.

By the Interpretation Centre were a number of very large grasshoppers.

We stayed in the Eshowe area and took a look around the town for other birds including Southern Black Flycatcher and then lunched at a restaurant near the historic

fort and a museum which displays some wonderful examples of Zulu basket work. It was a very hot day and we rather lingered over lunch and the cold drinks with Hamish and his wife before resuming birding; returning to the coast to spend the late afternoon birding in [Umlalazi Game Reserve](#) before returning to our lodgings at Richards Bay. This is near [Mtunzini](#) which has an area of palms [Raffia Palm Monument] famous for Palmnut Vultures but we failed to see any as we passed by.

Umlalazi Game Reserve mainly consists of mangroves and mudflats seemingly alive with at least two different varieties of brightly coloured fiddler crabs. On these mud flats were a few waders including Common Ringed Plover & Three-banded Plover, Common Sandpiper and a small party of Whimbrel. We also saw a lone Woolly-necked Stork here and had an African Fish Eagle fly over us.

The name Mtunzini [112] is derived from the Zulu word eMthunzini meaning ‘at the umthunzi (milkwood tree)’ or ‘in the shade of the umthunzi’. In the case of the town of Mtunzini it refers specifically to John Dunn’s Indaba Tree, a large milkwood *Mimusops caffra*. The earliest inhabitants of the area were the Khoi-Khoi and Khoi-San people. They were later displaced by Nguni-speaking tribes who had migrated to southern Africa from further north in the continent. The area became a magistracy in the Natal Colony on 1 October 1895.

John Dunn, an interesting and colourful character in the history of Zululand, once lived near Eshowe and Mtunzini. Dunn was one of a group of six Englishmen, who established themselves in Port Natal (Durban Harbour) in 1824 with the express purpose of trading in ivory and hides with the Northern Nguni. He established himself as a hunter, trader and shopkeeper and soon became prosperous through his trade in ivory, hides and other Western merchandise. Through his daily contact with the Zulu people Dunn was fluent in the Zulu language and customs, many of which he adopted in his daily life.

The Zulu king, King Mpande, died in 1856 and civil war broke out in Zululand between the supporters of his two eldest sons, Cetshwayo and Mbuyazi. Dunn tried to mediate between these two contenders for the Zulu throne. In spite of his efforts Mbuyazi was attacked by Cetshwayo’s warriors and was convincingly defeated near the place he later named Gingindlovu (meaning ‘the swallower of the elephant’).

After being installed as King of the Zulus Cetshwayo offered Dunn the post of his diplomatic advisor. He was granted control of a large tract of land in the coastal region of southern Zululand. He established his authority in the region by 48 Zulu women (in addition to Catherine Pierce who remained his head wife) for whom he paid lobola (bride price) of between 10 to 15 head of cattle for each. Cetshwayo offered him two women from his own isigodlo (court), in addition he also married five women from the Mzimela clan, four women from both the Nzuza and Dube clans, and three women each from the Mthethwa, Shandu and Mdletshe clans. Traditionally marriage was an easy way of assuring political and economic bonds between clans.

Overnight: Protea Hotel, Richards Bay; Host: Errard Sullivan

Day 27 – 25th October:

We left the Protea early morning to drive to St Lucia be we had a superb breakfast courtesy of Marth du Buisson at [Kingfisher Lodge](#) a place we had considered staying had there been accessible rooms. The grounds of the Lodge produced another new species Red-capped Robinchat – an excellent accompaniment to an excellent breakfast!

We spent an hour enjoying the grounds where a number of passerines eluded us but many common species were more obliging including Yellow-bellied Greenbul and Dark-capped Bulbul.

We had planned to embark on a boat trip along the eNseleni River [115] but this is not currently available so, instead we birded a little around the St Lucia Estuary first visiting a reed-bed where we saw our only African Golden Weavers of the trip nesting alongside Southern Brown-throated Weavers. Whilst scanning the far bank I happened to stop on a bush and find a Green-backed Cameroptera in my scope – a relief to actually see one after hearing so many. Here were also Pied & Brown-hooded Kingfishers and a Squacco Heron as wells as more common herons, and egrets and Water Dikkop.

We stopped closer to the estuary mouth and got out the scopes and viewed the river with its pod of hippos and a small island covered in crocodiles. Most especially around this crocodile-infested island were many common waders, such as Wood & Curlew Sandpipers, Greenshank, Little Stint, Sanderling and Ruff, and the less common Terek Sandpiper and White-fronted Plover, and some superb Pink-backed Pelicans and a Yellow-billed Stork. Some of the party saw Caspian Tern further up-river.

St. Lucia, once a fishing resort frequented mainly by unruly fishermen with four-wheel drive vehicles and a high beer-guzzling capacity, has developed into a resort town of international significance. This has come about primarily as a result of it's location within the Greater St. Lucia Wetland Park which has risen to international prominence since its declaration as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance and World Heritage Site. Four-wheel drive vehicles are now restricted to a small portion of the beach only and present-day visitors are far more environmentally friendly than they used to be.

We lunched in a Greek Restaurant before driving toward Cape Vidal; another fishing and snorkelling resort some 35 km north of St Lucia town. The resort is sandwiched between the Indian Ocean to the east and Lake St Lucia to the west. [The only accommodation here is operated by KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife Services but it is not wheelchair friendly]. The Cape was named after Lieutenant Vidal of the HMS Leven who apparently surveyed the coast in this area.

To access [Cape Vidal](#) one passes through an enclosed Game Park where one is not supposed to stop nor get out of vehicles because of the game. We tried our best to drive quickly through promising ourselves we would linger longer when we came back but we still stopped periodically seeing such species as Broad-billed Roller, Rufous-naped Lark, Rattling Cisticola and Tawny-flanked Prinia before reaching the camp site for some very special birds. The prize birds here were undoubtedly Brown Scrubrobin & Woodward's Batis; the former surprised us be being on the road as we drove in to

the camp and the latter was in the trees at the same spot as we drove out! In the camp site we also saw Southern Boubou for the only time on this part of the trip and our first decent view of Green-backed Cameroptera.

On the drive back through the game reserve we saw Wahlberg's Eagle and our only European Honey Buzzard of the trip. We stopped to get good views of a superb Burchell's Coucal and Sue caught a glimpse of Rhino which seemed to disappear but we re-located them not far off in a dip behind some scrub and were able to get good long looks. Here we also saw Southern Banded Snake-Eagle.

We then set off for Bonamanzi our home for the next three nights.

At over 4,000 ha [Bonamanzi Game Ranch](#), [118] a South African Natural Heritage site, is one of the largest private wildlife and birding parks in Zululand. Bonamanzi is a Zulu name which means: "Look! Water!" The densities and diversity of birds heightens dramatically during summer and regular birding trips here can produce in excess of 120 species on a good summers' day.

Overnight: [Bonamanzi Game Ranch](#)

Maggie & I, as well as John, stayed in one of the 'Tree Houses' which were very nice accommodation up a flight of stairs so well out of the reach of most critters except Baboons and Monkeys and we were told to keep windows closed because of possible incursion.

The 'house' consisted of a bedroom with either a double bed or two singles, incorporated in the room was a dining table with comfortable chairs and a kitchen area as well as an en suite shower room. There was both a ceiling fan and a very effective air-con unit. Generally, it was comfortable and clean and a great place to wake up and watch the wildlife albeit being rather hemmed in by trees for the most part.

The facilities of the ranch were generally good with a large [if rather hot and noisy when full] dining room, a bar area, accessible toilets etc. In the cabin area where Brian, Joanna and Sue stayed there was also a very nice bar overlooking a large pool which was great for birds. My only criticism would be of the dinners [breakfasts were great]. There was not a great deal of choice [hardly anything for vegetarians] and not up to the high standards we had become used to elsewhere. Our tree house came into its own when we went into the nearest decent supermarket and bought food to cater for our main meals. Pre-breakfasts snacks were terrific on the early morning safaris around the ranch where we were driven by Richard a knowledgeable and affable Zulu who was tireless in his search for the most special birds.

Wheelchair access comments:

The cabin provided was accessible because of the construction of concrete slope. This was a little steep but manageable.

Once inside we found the bedroom large with plenty of room to get the wheelchair alongside.

The bathroom was large and accessible, but I found that the shower was difficult to use because it had a fairly high metal seat and a fixed shower head. I did have a shower but I had to hang on for grim death because my feet did not touch the floor and there were no side arms to lean against. The fixed showerhead was a problem because of the need to adjust the water temperature before sliding along the seat to shower. The wash basin was a good height and the toilet was ok but had no grab rails to assist getting on and off. There was also a separate bathroom etc. which my wife was able to use even though it was a very deep one.

There were good concrete paths around the site and access to the covered dining area was very easy

Day 28 – 26th October, 2006:

An early start gave us maximum birding time on Mkhuze Game Reserve [120], arguably one of southern Africa's top birding spots – unfortunately the accommodation here is not very accessible so we were restricted to a day visit to the reserve. We stopped for breakfast at a fast food outlet in Mkhuze village before entering the reserve.

Situated in northern Zululand, the 40,000 ha Mkhuze Game Reserve was proclaimed a protected area in 1912. It was de-proclaimed and run for 15 years by the State Veterinary Department to get rid of Tsetse flies which cause the livestock disease "nagana". During this time in the 1940's and 50's 38 000 head of game were destroyed, large tracts of bush cleared and tons of DDT and BHC insecticides sprayed to rid the area of Tsetse flies. There was further threat of de-proclamation in the 1960's which was met by great public resistance. Mkhuze has survived all these trials to survive as one of KZN Wildlife's most popular wildlife parks. It now constitutes the north western spur of the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park, a recently declared World Heritage Site.

A place of great beauty and high contrasts, Mkhuze is renowned as a Mecca for bird lovers with more than 420 bird species on record. The Mkhuze River curves along the reserve's northern and eastern borders with a fine stretch of fig forest along its banks. The reserve has an astonishing diversity of natural habitats, from the eastern slopes of the Lebombo Mountains along its eastern boundary, to broad stretches of acacia savanna, swamps and a variety of woodlands and riverine forest. A rare type of sand forest also occurs in the reserve.

The name [Mkhuze](#) is thought to come from the isiZulu word for "place of reconciliation". In the park is a small lake; Nsumo Pan, which has some good birds, hippos and crocodiles. Here we saw hippos and a variety of waterbirds including gallinules, herons, spoonbills, pelicans, storks such as African Openbill, egrets and some waders such as stilts and jacanas and our first Caspian, Whiskered and White-winged Terns and our only Glossy Ibis of the trip.

We birded a number of spots around the reserve and eventually managed to catch up with Neergaard's & White-bellied Sunbirds by looking for areas with flowering trees.

We spent a good deal of time around a toilet block where there was an open area with scrub where we could hear a number of bush shrikes calling. Here we saw Black-crowned Tchagra, Brurbru, Black-backed Puffback and a beautiful Orange-breasted Bush Shrike as well as hearing Grey-headed Bush Shrike but the real prize was Gorgeous Bush Shrike which called continuously from a large bush which we surrounded but still only managed a few short views of although we are pretty sure that a pair was nesting there. Here too were Violet-backed as well as Red-winged and Cape Glossy Starlings. We had great views here of African Hoopoe, Cardinal Woodpecker, Golden-breasted Bunting, Blue Waxbill and Black-collared Barbet and Red-fronted Tinkerbird and Green-winged Pytilia [Melba Finch].

At various locations around the park we also saw African White-backed Vulture, Bateleur, our first Crested Guineafowl, Black-bellied Korhaan, Purple-crested Turaco, Klaas's Cuckoo, Red-faced Mousebird, Common Scimitarbill, Green Wood-hoopoe, Crowned Hornbill, Southern Black Tit, and our first White-browed Scrub Robin, and only Yellow-throated Petronias of the entire trip and our only Thick-billed Weavers.

Mid-afternoon we used the heat of the day to return to Bonamanzi where we caught up with some commoner species including Emerald Spotted Dove. After leaving the park we had good views of Livingstone's Turacos in roadside trees near Musi Pan.

Overnight: Bonamanzi Game Ranch

Day 29 – 27th October:

Our day started with what we all agreed was one of the real highlights of our southern African birding adventure – a pre-breakfast drive in Bonamanzi's four-wheel drive vehicle to the Hluhluwe River floodplain [117]. We left the camp at around 6 a.m. and returned around 10:30 for a full breakfast.

The vehicle is high up so that one had to duck as we brushed through trees along the tracks down to the plain. The first highlight was Pink-throated Twinspot – albeit rather brief looks at a small flock flitted about in low bushes in front of the vehicle. In more open scrubland we saw Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird.

When we were out of the forested part of the reserve we went out of the park proper into a small area of fishponds owned by the local villagers some of whom were quietly fishing here. Amongst the reeds and pond-side bushes we saw both Croaking and Rufous-winged Cisticolas and Lesser Swamp Warblers; over the ponds flew Wire-tailed, Lesser-striped and Barn Swallows. Here too were Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and several species of herons and egrets, Hadada Ibis, Egyptian and Spur-winged Geese.

We drove down on to the flat floodplain and made our way to the edge of the river – or rather the almost dry mudflats stretching hundreds of yards to the last remaining water. Here we saw a few common waders including Black-winged Stilt, Greenshank, Common and Wood Sandpiper, Little Stint, Three-banded Plover, Blacksmith and Wattled Lapwings as well as Kittlitz's Plovers and several Collared Pratincoles.

Our main targets here were longclaws and we spent much time circling the flatlands searching for these colourful but surprisingly cryptic birds. Soon we had found many Yellow-throated and Orange-throated Longclaws as well as commoner pipit species. Eventually we triumphantly saw the very beautiful and rare Rosy-throated Longclaws.

We celebrated our success by having a very welcome cup of coffee and snack next to a small area of bushes amidst the flowering plants [such as the wonderfully-named 'Grandfather's Balls']. A Black-shouldered Kite roosted in the bushes and African Marsh Harriers quartered the plain.

Moving off the plain we entered an area of scrub and virtually circled the ranch picking up species as we went. Our only Crested Francolin of the entire trip was closely followed by a Black-bellied Korhaan. Then we saw a small group of Senegal Lapwings. As we turned away from the rushy banks of part of a river Maggie and I saw an Africa Grass Owl drift away over the reed-beds and quickly out of sight. We then saw a large party of the strange and exotic White-crested Helmet Shrikes which Richard informed us were thought to be signs of good fortune by the local people. Finally, we caught up with a quite large flock of Lemon-breasted Canaries.

We returned to camp having had at least an hour more than we had agreed and, moreover, an excellent birding jaunt. We agreed to take the opportunity to have a leisurely time for a few hours and most people returned to their cabins. I spent a short while birding down by the pool watching the warthogs wallow and the various birds coming and going, African Jacanas running across the lilies, African Pied Wagtails teetering at the water's edge, huge fish coming to the surface to take flies, a Pied Kingfisher hovering then plunging into the water and a Brown-hooded one fishing from a secluded perch. Sue came by and told me she had seen a Thick-billed Weaver by the small pool directly behind the dining room so I went to take a look before going back to my tree-house for a rest.

At around 4.00pm we all got together to drive the paths around the cabins and the old camp site. This proved to be an excellent decision and we saw a lot of birds not seen elsewhere including Bearded Scrub-Robin, Rudd's & Yellow-breasted Apalis, White-starred Robin, White-browed Scrub-Robin, Ground-scraper Thrush, Red-capped Robin-chat, Green-backed Cameroptera, Southern Black Flycatcher, and various doves, turacos, weavers and the like. It was also a very good time for the mammals and we saw at one point no less than 31 Banded Mongooses cross the road en masse as well as the beautiful Nyala with his orange sock, warthogs, baboons, monkeys, kudu, duiker etc.

We also scanned the roads when it was dark and tried to tape lure night-birds but only succeeded in hearing the distant calls of Fiery-necked Nightjar.

When we returned to camp we found that the staff had begun to lay out our food in the pool-side bar... as the upper enclosed part is not wheelchair accessible they were laying it out in the lower part open to the air and the pretty candles in paper shades they had set out had attracted hundreds of moths, flies and other flying insects which now covered the cutlery, plates and tablecloths. Reluctantly we helped the re-locate

the food to the dining room which was rather cooler than before having a nice breeze coming through the mosquito screens.

Overnight: Bonamanzi Game Ranch

Day 30 – 28th October:

We had decided the previous evening that the best possible use of the next morning before needing to leave for Wakkerstroom would be to take another drive with Richard in the high vehicle. This once again proved to be very enjoyable. As we had seen all the flood-plain specials we drove around the wooded part of the reserve and the more open scrubby areas.

I spotted one of the highlights of the outing, a pair of very smart African Cuckoo-hawks [Bazas] sitting just above us only a few yards away and we all had tremendous views. Other highlights included Brown Snake Eagle, Crowned Lapwing, brief views of bronze-winged Coursers, Red-chested Cuckoo, several fine Burchell's Coucals, Black Saw-wing and lots more Lemon-breasted Canaries, Little & Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and various barbets. We also saw Giraffe here much to Sue's delight as we had not caught up with them elsewhere.

After a leisurely breakfast we left the low-lying coastal plains of the East Coast Littoral Zone and climbed up the African Escarpment to the high altitude grasslands surrounding the small town of Wakkerstroom for a two night stay. Our route took us through the South Africa-Swaziland border and we managed to get enough common species such as the ubiquitous Common Fiscal in the 45 or so minutes we were there to justify creating a Swaziland list! After leaving Swaziland we stopped in the town of Piet Retief to re-fuel and buy snacks before resuming the drive to our destination. Along the route we picked up more birds including our only White-winged Widow of the tour and our only Swainson's Spurfowl.

As we entered the Wakkerstroom area we lucked upon some Secretary Birds getting a really good close view of these enigmatic birds. John also stopped at a spot he knew would be good for a local special; South African Cliff Swallow and we saw many flying around and under a road bridge which is a favoured nesting site.

We arrived in Wakkerstroom and checked into our accommodation which was a little cramped but otherwise well appointed. The view from the window is a pretty uninspiring patch of bare earth facing a newly constructed house but someone puts out feed which attracted various weavers, sparrows, starlings etc. and, surprising for so small a yard, Hadada!

We were joined for dinner by John's wife Elise whom none of us had met before.

Unluckily dinner turned out to be a bit of a disaster, we waited well over an hour for our first course and another half an hour for the second and even then one order was delayed so Brian sat and watched everyone else eat before his arrived. Some people had ordered vegetables that never arrived at all and those eating fish decided against finishing the meal as the fish was most certainly well passed its best.

We complained to the owner who was not very helpful giving the excuse that the restaurant was very busy as was the bar where meals were also served. Whilst we could understand him giving priority to locals it is not a great idea to treat your paying guests poorly as they may well tell the truth to the world in their on-line trip reports! Needless to say we did not dine there the following night.

Wheelchair access comments:

The bedroom area of our room was large except, once again, for an inadequately narrow space for the wheelchair by the sides of the bed. The bathroom was not disabled friendly because of an inward opening door. This meant that I had to take the footboard off the wheelchair to make the chair smaller so that I could get in the room. Once inside I could not use the bath and the wash basin and toilet were a little high – but I coped. There were no grab rails.

Getting to the dining room meant being lifted up and down three steps, and more steps had to be negotiated in and out of the building.

[Wakkerstroom](#) [131] was founded in 1859 as a town on the border of the then Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (South African Republic or ZAR) and the British colony of Natal. The town plans were laid out by Dirk Uys whose instructions were to find a site for the new town between Potchefstroom (then the capital of the ZAR) and Port Natal (now Durban) in an area where there was sufficient water and grazing for the inhabitants' livestock. Although officially named Marthinus Wesselstroom, from its founding the town has been known as Wakkerstroom – “lively stream” – in an apparent mistranslation of the Zulu name (uThaka) of the stream that runs past it. The name uThaka probably refers to the Red-collared Widows which are common in the area. After a promising start the town's economy entered a century-long downturn when the city fathers refused to allow the railway line from Port Natal to the recently discovered goldfields around Johannesburg to pass through the town. The local town economy is on the upswing again, but the town is now heavily reliant on avitourism for its survival. Nowadays Wakkerstroom is no longer a separate Municipality, but is part of the Pixley ka Seme Municipality which incorporates the towns of Wakkerstroom, Volksrust, Amersfoort, Perdekop and Daggakraal.

Approximate distance travelled for the day: 350 km

Overnight: [Wakkerstroom Country Inn](#) Host: Paula and Danny Leahy

Day 31 – 29th October:

The endemic rich high altitude (1,800m or 6,000ft+) grasslands around the small town Wakkerstroom are still in a relatively pristine state thanks largely due to the prevailing climate. The mild summers and cold, frosty winters make the growing season too short for commercial crop farming. Extensive livestock ranching (mainly cattle and sheep) are the mainstay of the agrarian economy here. This has proved to be reasonably compatible with the needs of the many rare and often highly localised species occurring naturally in the area.

So we were literally up with the lark for a pre-breakfast start meeting a local birding guide who was to help us find the two very rare and special larks of the area. Norman Mncube rode with us to the best fields for the larks and, when we were searching he walked on ahead and beckoned the vehicle forward so we could all get views of first Rudd's then Botha's Lark as well as several commoner lark species and Wing-snapping Cisticola. In the same area we also saw the very localised Blue Korhaan with views of several Grey-crowned Cranes too. We had a welcome coffee whilst watching Red-capped Larks in the foreground and Botha's Larks in the background. We drove back into Wakkerstroom past the local lake where, as well as lots of other waterfowl we saw Hottentot Teal and, best of all, Spotted Eagle Owl – an adult roosted on the branch of a large willow whilst a baby came out of the nest in a hollow broken trunk and sat atop it in all its glory. We dropped Norman off near his home and went back to the inn for breakfast where Maggie joined us after her lie-in!

As Norman cannot be contacted over the web its worth adding his contact details in here as he is a fine birder and guide and a most interesting chap who I am sure will one day figure prominently in local if not national politics: Norman Mncube, PO Box 185, Wakkerstroom 2480, Mpumalanga, South Africa – Cell Phone: 082 584 1542

After breakfast we took Maggie to see the Owls and then, accompanied by Elise in the family car, explored the Wakkerstroom area in search of other new birds. We first drove around the wetlands in search of African Snipe which we eventually saw having seen many water-associated birds too. Amongst the passerines were Red Bishops, Fan-tailed, Red-collared and Long-tailed Widows and Cape Canary.

We then drove to the higher areas around a huge reservoir and stopped at a gorge which has had reports of Cape Eagle Owl feasting on Rock Hyrax. Whilst we saw the hyrax we saw no owls, on the other hand we did get excellent views of as many as 4 different Ground Woodpeckers and could even see evidence of their excavations in the soft sandstone. In this higher, rocky area we also saw Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Mountain Wheatear and Buff-streaked Chat, as well as African Stonechat and Southern Ant-eating Chat, Drakensberg Prinia and Orange-throated Longclaw.

On the banks of the reservoir we saw four Heron species including good views of Goliath Heron. We also added Grey-winged Francolins to our growing list. Somewhere en route we added Banded Martin to the Eastern South African list.

On the way back to our accommodation we stopped off for a coffee and some people had a late lunch.

That evening we sat in Paddy's Pub part of the '[Weavers Nest Country Lodge](#)', on the outskirts of Wakkerstroom whilst an electrical storm thundered around the valley. Our meal in their 'Two Crane Restaurant', was as good as the previous night's had been bad! Three delicious courses served by a genial host; Mark Devenney in a room full of old bird paintings and the like. It made for a memorable farewell meal.

Overnight: Wakkerstroom Country Inn

Day 32 – 30th October:

After some final birding at [Suikerbosrand](#) we drove to Johannesburg International Airport, arriving in time to check in for the evening flight to the United Kingdom.

En route to Suikerbosrand John told Maggie to look out for Southern Bald Ibis as we had only had poor views on the other legs of our journey... true to form she found a couple feeding on the edge of a field close to the road so we were able to get great views of this interestingly ugly bird. We saw several other birds on the road which were new for this part of the trip such as Grey-headed Gulls when we stopped for gas and Barn Owl over fields bordering old gold mine tailings close to the airport.

Our motivation for going to Suikerbosrand was the possibility of Lazy Cisticola which, despite some searching we never found. Nevertheless, there were some really good birds there including one we had seen before but only fleetingly, Crested Barbet, the one here came out of a tree to feed on close cropped grass very close to where we parked affording excellent views. However, we also saw several birds which were not only new for this part of the trip such as good views of Bar-throated Apalis, but for most of us new for ever. These were Karoo Thrush, Fiscal Flycatcher and Black-throated Canary. It was good to still be picking up lifers even although we were on our way home!

We stopped off at a Mall in Johannesburg to buy some souvenirs then headed off to the airport where John said his goodbyes.