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## TRIP REPORT: WESTERN CAPE

11 October 2013 – 18 October 2013

By Mark Harrington

### Day 1. Mostly a 'travel day', but also some birding in and around Cape Town

The day started off with an early morning pick-up of our guests at their guest house in Cape Town, followed by some Cape Peninsula birding at Kirstenbosch, Little Stream Conference Centre in Constantia, and Strandfontein Sewage Works.

While packing the bags into the van at the guest house, we were treated to a fly-over of a calling **African Goshawk**. On arrival at Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens we quickly came to grips with **Sombre Greenbul** and also enjoyed good views of an **African Harrier-Hawk** overhead. This was followed by characteristically knockout views of the resident pair of **Spotted Eagle-Owl**, while other new additions to the trip list were **Cape Spurfowl**, **African Olive Pigeon**, **Olive Thrush**, more views of **African Goshawk**, **Black Saw-wing**, **Cape Batis**, **African Dusky Flycatcher**, **Bar-throated Apalis**, **Cape Canary**, **Brimstone Canary**, **Karoo Prinia**, **Cape Sugarbird**, **Southern Double-collared Sunbird**, and brief views of **Swee Waxbill**.

From Kirstenbosch, we headed to the nearby Little Stream Conference Centre in Constantia for **Common Chaffinch**, **African Paradise Flycatcher**, and more **Swee Waxbill**, and although we saw the recently built Amethyst Sunbird nest, unfortunately no-one was at home.

While en route to our next stop at Strandfontein Sewage Works we had brief views of **African Spoonbill** feeding in an ephemeral roadside pan, which was followed by **Zitting Cisticola** and **Black-headed Heron** on the approach road to the sewage works. This was quickly followed by, among others, large numbers of **Southern Pochard** and **Black-necked Grebe**, as well as good views of **White-breasted Cormorant**, **Reed Cormorant**, **Great White Pelican**, **Great-crested Grebe**, **Cape Shoveler**, **Yellow billed Duck**, **Red-billed Teal**, **Pied Avocet**, **Grey-headed Gull**, **Hartlaub's Gull**, **Kelp Gull**, **African Pipit**, and **Cape Teal**. **Greater Flamingo** and **Glossy Ibis** were also common.

By now it was time to head for the airport to pick-up the remainder of our group, followed by the drive to our overnight accommodation at birder-friendly Afton Grove Guest House in Noordhoek. Brief views of **Jackal Buzzard** were had en-route.

After a short mid-afternoon stop to drop off bags and to freshen up, we headed for Kommetjie and Glencairn's Black Hill (Jonkersdam), but not before enjoying **Common Chaffinch**, **Red-eyed Dove**, and **Pin tailed Whydah** in breeding plumage in the garden at Afton Grove. At Kommetjie we were treated to good views of **African Black Oystercatcher**, **Swift Tern**, **Sandwich Tern**, **Common Tern**, and all of the local marine **Cormorants** (namely **Crowned**, **Bank**, **Cape**, and **White-breasted**). Distant **White-chinned Petrel** was also seen.

At the top of Glencairn's Black Hill, a short walk into the mountains produced **Orange-breasted** and **Southern Double-collared Sunbirds** and vocal and confiding **Cape Grassbird**. It was also somewhat unusual to see a **Fork-tailed Drongo** fly over the pristine montane fynbos.

Our last stop for the day was at the Silvermine River wetlands, where we saw **Little Rush** and **Lesser Swamp Warblers**, as well as **Cape** and **Southern Masked Weavers**, **Levaillant's Cisticola**, **White-throated Swallow**, and our first **Common Waxbill** for the trip.

## **Day 2. Rooiels, Betty's Bay, the Karwyderskraal Road and surrounds**

The day started off with the scenic drive along the False Bay coast to Rooiels, where Cape Rockjumper was our target bird. En route, we saw our first **Crowned Lapwings** of the trip, and on arrival we were greeted by **Rock Martin**, **Yellow Bishop** in breeding plumage, and more **Karoo Prinia**. After scanning the slopes for a while, one of the group picked out a distant **Cape Rockjumper**, which was fortunately seen by everyone as it flitted from one rock to the next before disappearing. This was followed by views of **Cape Rock Thrush**, **Grey-backed Cisticola**, **Familiar Chat**, and a pair of **Verreaux's Eagles** in flight, as well as **White-necked Raven**.

Our next stop was for the **African Penguin** at the Stony Point colony, which, as usual, provided endless photo opportunities (not only of the penguins, but also of the resident and confiding rock hyraxes, or 'dassies'). A quick scan of the beach revealed **Kittlitz's Plover** and **White fronted Plover**. Improved views of all of the local marine cormorants were also enjoyed by all, while **Cape Gannet** and more **White-chinned Petrel** were seen offshore.

Harold Porter Botanical Gardens was our next site, where we were treated to great views of **Paradise Flycatcher** and **Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher**, although no Victorin's Warblers could be heard or seen. **Cape Canary**, **Sombre Greenbul**, **Olive Thrush**, and **Cape Bulbul** were common, and we also enjoyed our first views for the trip of **Speckled Mousebird**. **African Dusky Flycatcher** and **Cape White-eye** also put in appearances.

After something to eat and after refueling the van we then headed for the Karwyderskraal Road, an often productive stretch of road traversing a good mix of habitats, including farmlands, a wetland, and some patches of alien vegetation. Things started off well enough with **Blue Crane**, **Jackal Buzzard**, **African Fish Eagle**, **Southern Red Bishop** in breeding plumage, and **Cape Crow**, which were quickly followed by **Denham's Bustard**, **Red-capped Lark**, **Greater Striped Swallow**, **Capped Wheatear**, **Spur-winged Goose**, **White-rumped Swift**, and more **Crowned Lapwing**. Raptors were also

plentiful along this road, and we enjoyed views of **Black Harrier**, **Black-shouldered Kite**, several **Yellow-billed Kites** and **Rock Kestrel**.

At a nearby wetland we found **Little Stint**, **Three-banded Plover**, **Red-billed Teal**, **Cape Shoveler**, **Grey Heron**, **Burchell's Coucal**, **Malachite Sunbird**, **Levaillant's Cisticola**, and several other species. Just as we were finishing at the wetland, a downpour forced us back into the van, but not before we were able to tick off **Fiscal Flycatcher** as well.

On our way back to Cape Town we had 'drive-by' views of **African Marsh Harrier**, and our day for raptors was rounded off with scoped views of the resident **Peregrine Falcon** at Red Cross Children's Hospital in Rondebosch. This was followed by saturation views of several **Spotted Thick-knee** at their nearby daytime roost. Our final stop for the day at Tokai Forest produced brief views of a **Forest Buzzard** in flight.

Other good birds for the day were some of our group's first views of **Cape Sugarbird** and **Malachite Sunbird**.

### **Day 3. Pelagic birding west of Cape Point and more Cape Town birding**

The winds and storms of yesterday had dissipated by now, and we got a 'green light' for the much anticipated pelagic trip from Hout Bay. New birds seen included **Northern Royal**, **Shy**, **Black-browed**, **Atlantic Yellow-nosed**, and **Indian Yellow-nosed Albatrosses**, **Northern Giant Petrel**, **Soft-plumaged Petrel**, **Spectacled Petrel**, **Great Shearwater**, **Sooty Shearwater**, **Wilson's Storm Petrel**, **Black-bellied Storm Petrel**, **Sabine's Gull**, **Brown Skua**, and a 'Wandering type' Albatross, though to be a possible **Tristan Albatross**.

After a cup of coffee at Hout Bay we then headed off to the Rietvlei and Dolphin Beach pans north of Cape Town for some late afternoon wetland birding. Our first stop near the Rietvlei wetland system saw everyone coming to grips with **Purple Heron**, **African Darter**, **Great White Pelican**, and **Common Moorhen**, among others. This was followed by a visit to the Dolphin Beach pans, which gave us **Black-crowned Night Heron**, improved views of **Great Crested Grebe**, and several others.

Our final stop for the day at Zandvlei, near Muizenberg, gave us good views of **Pied Kingfisher**, and a less than desirable **Mallard**.

### **Day 4. West Coast National Park and surrounds**

After an early start from Afton Grove, with our bags packed for our next overnight stop in Langebaan, we headed for the West Coast National Park, looking for all of the typical West Coast specials. A stop at the Darling Hills Road provided our first **European Bee-eater**, **Bokmakierie**, **Pied Starling**, distant views of **Southern Black Korhaan**, **White backed Mousebird**, **White-throated Canary**, and a tantalizingly close **Klaas's Cuckoo**, which disappointingly remained out of sight despite calling several times. Our first tickable **Ostrich** was also recorded.

Next stop was the Tienie Versfeld Wildflower Reserve just outside the town of Darling, which gave us good views of **Cape Longclaw**, **African Pipit**, and, frustratingly, two more 'heard but not seen' species in **Common Quail** and our target bird for the area, **Cloud Cisticola**.

On arrival at the West Coast National Park we quickly ticked **Karoo Scrub Robin**, **Yellow Canary**, **White-throated Canary**, **Red-faced Mousebird**, and brief views of **Grey-winged Francolin**.

A detour to Abrahamskraal waterhole gave us good views of **African Marsh Harrier**, **Black Harrier**, **Karoo Lark**, **Namaqua Dove**, our first trip views of **Banded Martin**, knock-out views of a pair of **Grey Tit**, and more **Common Ostrich** with a nursery of young of varying ages. At the Geelbek Manor House the resident **Cape Weaver**, **Yellow Bishop**, and **Cape Spurfowl** were all plentiful, while we were also treated to good views of the resident **African Hoopoe**.

The tide was still quite high on our arrival at the Geelbek bird hide, but we timed our arrival well, as the water levels were just starting to drop. **Kittlitz's Plover**, **Curlew Sandpiper**, **Common Greenshank**, **Marsh Sandpiper**, **Greater and Lesser Flamingos**, and **Little Stint** were seen on the salt marshes from the boardwalk en route to the hide, while the hide itself revealed even greater numbers of the above, as well as **Grey Plover**, **Eurasian Curlew**, **Whimbrel**, **Pied Avocet**, **Bar-tailed Godwit**, and **Caspian Tern**. However, the highlight was probably a pair of vagrant **Common Redshanks**, while a **Common Ringed Plover** was also added to our list on the walk back along the boardwalk.

From Geelbek we continued to the Seeberg hide, where we had improved views of **White-fronted Plover**, more **Bar-throated Apalis** in the car park, and **Cape Bunting** in the fynbos. Improved views were also enjoyed of **Southern Black Korhaan**.

After dropping off our bags at our overnight accommodation at Glenfinnan B&B, we proceeded to the Langebaan quarry for cracking views of the resident **Verreaux's Eagle**. Other new additions to the trip list were **African Black Swift**, **South African Shelduck**, **Black-winged Stilt**, and improved views of **Banded Martin**.

#### **Day 5. Langebaan to the Tankwa Karoo**

After overnighting at Langebaan, today was set aside mostly as a travel day to the Tankwa Karoo, but not before a search for Cape Long-billed Lark in the farmlands around Jacobsbaai. After enjoying **Red-capped Lark**, **Large-billed Lark**, **African Pipit**, and a first sighting of a family of **Sickle-winged Chat**, we were eventually treated to a lone **Cape Long-billed Lark** calling and displaying, as well as a **Cloud Cisticola** (also calling and displaying). Again **Common Quail** was heard, but not seen. As we were leaving Jacobsbaai, we were also treated to a roadside sighting of **Ant-eating Chat**.

From Jacobsbaai we headed directly for the Tankwa Karoo via Worcester and the N1. After stopping for lunch, and prolonged views of **Namaqua Warbler**, we continued through Karoopoort, birding en-route and adding **African Fish Eagle**, **Spike-heeled Lark**, **Karoo Chat**, and brief views of **Tractrac Chat** and **Rufous-eared Warbler** along the way (as well as more stunning views of **Southern Black Korhaan**). On arrival at Sothemba Lodge at the foot of the Skitterykloof we dropped our bags and were soon birding again, this time at the Skitterykloof picnic site. It didn't take long before we connected with a pale-phase **Booted Eagle**, **Steppe Buzzard**, **Fairy Flycatcher**, **Layard's Tit-babbler**, and **Black Harrier**. Another new bird for the day was **Alpine Swift**.

#### **Day 6. The Tankwa Karoo**

The next day saw an early start as we headed out on foot to the site for Cinnamon-breasted Warbler. We quickly picked up **Grey Tit**, **Southern Double-collared Sunbird**, **Long-billed Crombec**, **Mountain Wheatear**, and more **Layard's Tit-babbler**. After scouring the rocky hillside for our target species, we were eventually rewarded with good

views of **Cinnamon-breasted Warbler** – initially only a single bird showed itself as it worked its way along the rock-face, but later a pair came up to offer brief views of themselves perching on the aloes.

Our successful start to the day was followed by a hearty breakfast of bacon, eggs, freshly baked farm bread and all the trimmings, whereafter we re-loaded ourselves into the van for yet more Tankwa birding along the dusty, but always productive R355 road. New birds for the trip, such as **Karoo Eremomela**, **Pale Chanting Goshawk**, **Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler**, and **Pirit Batis** were enjoyed early on, followed by sightings of **Black-headed Canary**, and improved views of **Rufous-eared Warbler** and **Tractrac Chat**. **Greater Kestrel** also put in an appearance (albeit distantly), as well as a stunning pair of **Karoo Korhaan** with a chick. However, the highlight (arguably?) was provided by a magnificent **Black-chested Snake Eagle**, initially seen perched on a roadside telephone pole and subsequently in flight as it banked past us at close range, showing off its clear black and white underparts to good effect.

More good birds in the form of several **Namaqua Sandgrouse** and large flocks of **Black-eared Sparrow-Lark** and **Lark-like Bunting** continued to keep us busy. We eventually finished off the day with a sundowner on the plateau above Skitterykloof overlooking the Tankwa, but not before we'd added more **Namaqua Dove** and **White-throated Canary** to the day list as well.

By the end of the day the Tankwa had once again delivered the goods in terms of specials, producing no less than 33 endemic or near-endemic species.

#### **Day 7. From the Tankwa to Paarl and back to Afton Grove**

Our route back to Cape Town would see us traversing the extremely scenic Swartruggens Conservancy and the Katbakkies Pass, Gydo Pass, Mitchell's Pass, and Bain's Kloof Pass, before arriving in Paarl. Although the drive produced an immediate change in habitat, back to montane fynbos, the only 'new' bird for the first part of the trip was a **Cape Clapper Lark** that was heard, but not seen. However, despite several birding stops along the way, we had to wait until the tarred R303 before we eventually saw our first new bird of the day, namely an **African Stonechat**.

Our relative 'drought' of new trip birds continued (except for 'guide only' views of **Cape Siskin**) until our arrival at Paarl Sewage Works, where shortly after our arrival we were treated to **White-faced Duck**, **Common Sandpiper**, **Water Thick-knee**, **African Reed Warbler**, **Purple Swamphen**, **Hottentot Teal**, **Southern Grey-headed Sparrow**, **Fork-tailed Drongo**, some of the group's first views of **Black Saw-wing**, and large numbers of breeding **Grey-headed Gull**, among others. Our visit to Paarl was rounded off by great views of **Pearl-breasted Swallow**, both perched and in flight.

#### **Day 8. Kirstenbosch, 'Little Stream', and Strandfontein Sewage Works**

As part of the group was catching an early flight (after a pre-dawn transfer to the airport), the morning was to be spent visiting the various sites that the others had missed on the first morning of the trip. We started off at Strandfontein Sewage Works, which quickly gave them their first views of **Zitting Cisticola**, **Black-necked Grebe**, and **Southern Pochard**, followed shortly thereafter by a new trip bird in the form of **White-winged Tern** (a migrant, which hadn't been present at Strandfontein a week earlier). This was quickly followed by **Maccoa Duck**, **Glossy Ibis**, **Barn Swallow** (the latter being another

migrant which hadn't been present at Strandfontein a week earlier), and improved views of **Purple Swamphen**.

Our next stop was Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, where the family of the resident **Spotted Eagle-Owl** remained *in situ* on their nest, with a chick visible under the protective left wing of its mother. Although we were unable to locate African Goshawk, an added bonus and new bird for trip was a habituated pair of **Lemon Dove**.

Our final stop for the day was the Little Stream Conference Centre in Constantia, where our target birds were **Common Chaffinch**, **Cape Batis** and **Amethyst Sunbird**. All three were found relatively easily, with the female Amethyst Sunbird visible in her nest above the tea-room, while the attractive male hawked insects nearby. We were also able to enjoy saturation views of the resident **Sweet Waxbill**, which had previously only been seen fleetingly.

After a leisurely cappuccino in an otherwise 'whistle-stop' morning, it was time to head for the airport to drop off the participants in time for their connecting flight to Durban, where they'd be joining the next leg of their trip for 14 days of 'sub-tropical' birding.

Final totals for an extremely enjoyable and varied eight days of birding were 226 species recorded (including 66 endemics or near-endemics), of which four species were 'heard only', while one was seen by the guide only. Four species were seen by part of the group only on their last morning, and four species were seen by the others only on their first morning.