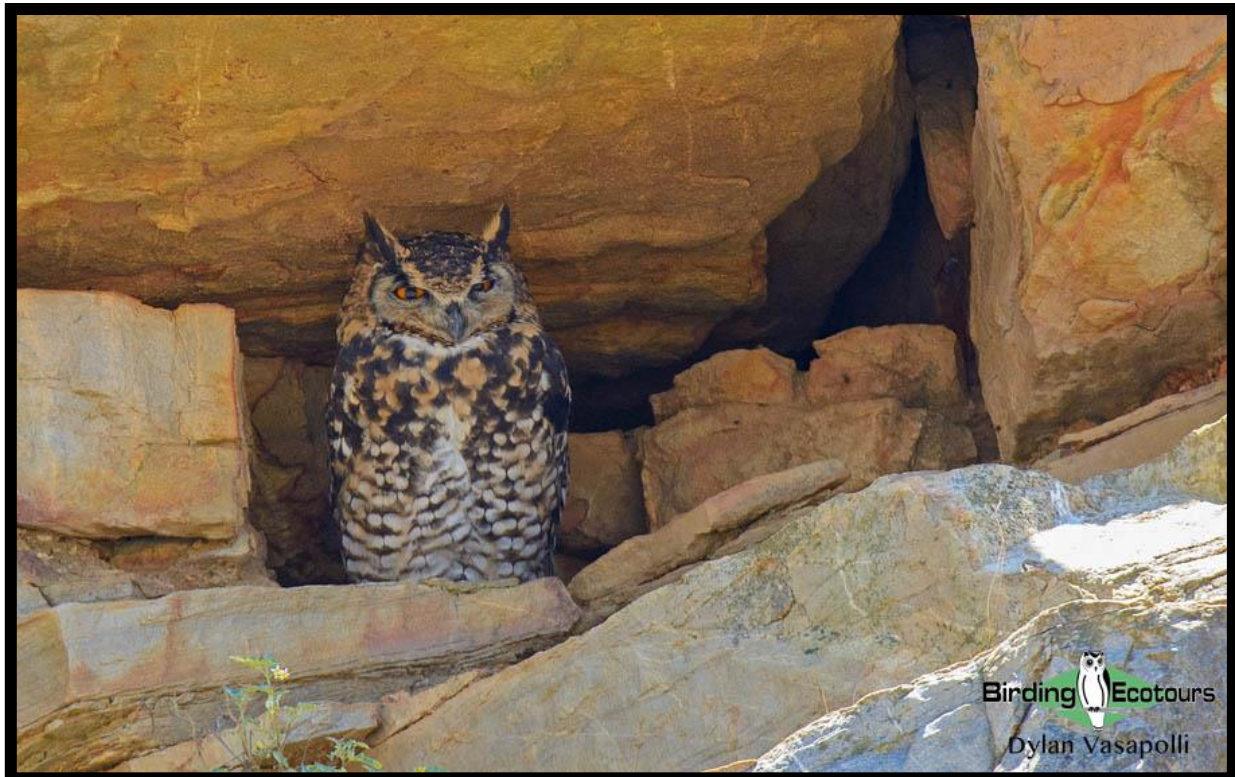




**PRIVATE SOUTHERN AFRICAN BIRDING & WILDLIFE TOUR:  
LEOPARDS, OWLS AND MORE**

**16 – 29 AUGUST 2025**



*The majestic **Cape Eagle-Owl** was seen well on the Steenkampsberg in Dullstroom.*

### Overview

This trip was specially aimed at targeting all the owl species of southern Africa, with minimal focus on general birding. Needless to say, we were quite successful in our endeavors, seeing roughly 40 owls of 10 different species (African Grass Owl and Western Barn Owl were missed). Highlights of our owl sightings included seeing the scarce **Cape Eagle-Owl** being accompanied by a fledgling at their regular haunt in Dullstroom, as well as two vocal pairs of **African Wood Owls** performing their cheerful duets. A territorial **Marsh Owl** at Verloren Vallei was also notable. **Pearl-spotted Owlet** were seen in small numbers across Kruger, while we saw singletons of **Spotted Eagle-Owl**, **Verreaux's Eagle-Owl** and **African Barred Owlet**. For the latter half of the tour, we were treated to great numbers of **African Scops Owl** and **Pearl-spotted Owlet** and another pair of **Verreaux's Eagle-Owls** at Rust de Winter, along with a few **Southern White-faced Owls** near Dinokeng Game Reserve. Finally, for our final two nights of the tour in Botswana, we were blessed to be shown two pairs of **Pel's Fishing-Owls** (one with a fledgling) at their daytime roosts while exploring the Okavango Panhandle.

The other focus of this tour was seeing big cats, for which we were based in the famed Kruger National Park for four nights. During our time in the park, we managed to connect with around 40 **Lions** between various groups, along with five **Leopards** and three **Cheetahs**, with the supporting cast of other iconic mammals such as **Spotted Hyena**, **African Savanna Elephant**, **Common Hippopotamus**, **Southern Giraffe**, **Common Warthog**, **Plains Zebra** and various antelope species. We were even lucky enough to see a group of **Lions** in the process of taking down a **Common Warthog**, quite a sight to see!



*Cheetah near Satara was our only sighting of this elegant cat.*

### Detailed Report

#### **Day 1, 16 August 2025. Arrival in Johannesburg**

Today was just an arrival day, as the clients arrived at Johannesburg in the evening, and proceeded to the nearby guesthouse for the first night.

#### **Day 2, 17 August 2025. Transfer from Johannesburg to Dullstroom**

After a lovely breakfast at the guesthouse, we departed and made our way east toward the quaint, mountain town of Dullstroom, arriving around lunchtime. We went for a short drive down to the nearby Verloren Vallei Nature Reserve, seeing both **Oribi** and **Bontebok** antelope. In the evening, we visited one of the large hills on the north side of town that has been home to a pair of **Cape Eagle-Owls** for many years. However, we only heard their fledgling's begging call this evening and would have to wait until tomorrow for visuals.

#### **Day 3, 18 August 2025. Owling in the grasslands of Dullstroom**

We were out at the same hill before first light to prime ourselves for the early morning light to hit. Fortunately, luck was on our side today as we managed to locate the **Cape Eagle-Owls** at their hillside roost. Although the parents were not very confiding, their chick was much more obliging and perched out in the open of a prolonged period of time, providing great views and photographic opportunities.

We then returned to town for lunch and to relax in the heat of the day, before heading out again in the early evening. Back at Verloren Vallei, we staked out the marshy area just north of the gate as the sun fell, waiting for our quarry to reveal itself. Eventually, at last light, we were greeted by a pair of **Marsh Owls** flying over the wetland. One of the two was particularly showy, and passed by us multiple times, emitting its strange, raspy call. Unfortunately, the scarce African Grass Owl, which also occurs in this wetland, did not show. After enjoying our time with the Marsh Owls, we turned heel and started heading back towards town. We made one stop outside the gate to Linger Longer Guesthouse, where the cophes of alien trees delivered a vocal pair of **African Wood Owls**, performing their cheery duet. The final find of the night was a **Spotted Eagle-Owl** perched on a roadside fencepost just pasted Linger Longer.

#### **Day 4, 19 August 2025. Transfer to Kruger National Park**

We were once again out early on the hillside for more views of the **Cape Eagle-Owls**. This time we managed to get perched views of one of the adults, sitting in a tree next to the adjacent dam! The fledgling was also out and about and was just as cooperative as yesterday. After having our fill of these gorgeous owls, we started on the long drive to Kruger, trading the high-altitude grasslands for hot, low-lying savanna. The drive over the Mpumalanga Escarpment provided exquisite views over the mountains and lowlands.

Once we had entered Kruger through Orpen gate, we were treated to the first of many large mammals that we would see over the coming days. Among these were **African Savanna**



**Elephant, Plains Zebra, Impala, Southern Giraffe, Common Hippopotamus and Cape Buffalo.** These were interspersed with a few interesting birds, including raptors like **Tawny Eagle, Bateleur** and numbers of soaring **White-backed Vultures**. We arrived at Satara Camp at dusk, just in time for dinner and to hear an **African Scops Owl** singing its distinctive purring call.



*Everyone thoroughly enjoyed the melodic calls of **African Wood Owls** wherever we heard them.*

#### **Day 5-7, 20-22 August 2025. Cat hunting in southern Kruger**

The next three days would see us exploring the vast expanses of southern Kruger's savanna, from Satara Camp down to Lower Sabie and Malelane. We were based at the former for two nights, around which the plains are more open and grassy than those further south. This less wooded country was where we concentrated our search for **Cheetah**, and we managed to connect with a female and her two almost-mature youngsters on our second evening, not far from the camp. The **Cheetahs** spent much of their time loafing just off the roadside before wandering off into the thickets just before dark. While this top sighting only came at the end of the day, this was preceded by a number of good sightings earlier on, most notably more views of the afore-mentioned raptors, a few **Pearl-spotted Owlets** and a brief view of our first **Lion** of the trip.

Moving south from Satara down to our second base camp, Skukuza, the landscape changed to be more wooded and less open, creating the ideal setting for **Leopards**. Indeed, we ended up seeing five different **Leopards** while based at Skukuza, some of which showed incredibly well: walking right alongside our vehicle at close range on one occasion! However, **Lions** were definitely more prolific, with many groups being seen at varying ranges. We even saw a group with cubs walking up the Sabie River just south of Lower Sabie Camp, and many sleeping during the heat of the day under trees and bushes. These cat sightings were punctuated by notable birds like the beautiful **Lilac-breasted Roller** and families of bizarre **Southern Ground Hornbills**. We also connected with a few more **Pearl-spotted Owlets** while in the park, as well as a single **Verreaux's Eagle-Owl** along the Sabie River (just after our incredible Leopard sighting!)



*We were treated to multiple **Leopard** sightings around Skukuza.*

#### **Day 8, 23 August 2025. Morning in Kruger, transfer to Johannesburg**

For our final morning in Kruger, we enjoyed the resident pair of **African Wood Owls** singing around our chalets before first light. This was followed by our southward journey towards Malelane Gate, bumping into more great mammals and birds along the way. The best sighting from this drive had to be seeing a group of seven **Lions** taking down a male **Warthog** right next to the main road. We watched these fierce cats for a while as they slowly dismembered their catch, growling all the while to stake their claim on their portion of the kill. Even an older cub got in on the action! A few stunning male **Greater Kudu** were also a highlight, their spiralled horns adding to their majesty. We saw a number of other antelope during our time in the park, including **Bush Duiker**, **Southern Bushbuck**, **Nyala**, **Steenbok** and **Blue Wildebeest**, as well as smaller mammals such as **Slender** and **Common Dwarf Mongooses**, **Smith's Bush Squirrel**, **Chacma Baboon** and **Vervet Monkey**.

On the bird front, we saw both **African Hawk-Eagle** and **Brown Snake Eagle** on our last morning in Kruger, as well as the powerful **Martial Eagle** drinking from a roadside puddle near Malelane gate. We even managed to pull in at Berg-en-Dal Camp before leaving and connected with a handsome **African Barred Owlet** in the campsite! After all the excitement of Kruger, we departed and started on the long drive back to Johannesburg, arriving at sunset. We bid farewell to Lucy and AJ, while Rob, Lorena and I continued on to our guesthouse for the first night of the tour extension.

#### **Day 9-11, 24-26 August 2025. Dinokeng Game Reserve**

We had a relaxed morning and left the guesthouse around mid-morning. Before heading to Dinokeng, we paid a visit to Delta Park in central Johannesburg, which boasts a nesting pair of

**Spotted Eagle-Owls** around the environmental center. After enjoying some good looks at the roosting male, we headed north toward Dinokeng, arriving at Golden Impalas Bush Resort around lunchtime. After a hearty meal, we relaxed for most of the afternoon, venturing out again in the evening for a stint of owling. We headed straight to the Toyota 4x4 ATV Club campsite near Rust de Winter Game Reserve, where the residents were happy to show us to a couple of roosting **African Scops Owls**, as well as the local **Verreaux's Eagle-Owls** that had been in this camp for years. We returned to this site every evening to relish the stellar viewing opportunities of both the biggest and smallest owls in southern Africa! A couple of feisty **Pearl-spotted Owlets** were also hanging around, making their presence known by their sharp, whistling calls.



*Southern White-faced Owl is one of our most handsome owls and is an Acacia savanna specialist.*

We then made our way back towards Dinokeng around nightfall, but not before making one last stop along the Uitvlugt Loop just north of the reserve gate. Here, we had multiple sightings of the handsome **Southern White-faced Owl**, once again returning to the same spot each evening to enjoy their mellow hooting and dashing appearance! While being based at Dinokeng, we didn't do much mammal watching, but there were always the resident **Blue Wildebeest**, **Impala**, **Southern Giraffe** and **Greater Kudu** to entertain us during the less exciting parts of the day.

#### **Day 12, 27 August 2025. Flight to Maun, transfer to Xaro Lodge, Shakawe**

This was principally a travel day, as we left Dinokeng early to make our flight to Maun on time. After arriving in Maun, we embarked on the long drive up to our lodge near Shakawe. Although the journey was rather arduous, we had plenty of roadside birds to entertain us along the way, including the striking **Lilac-breasted Roller** and obscene numbers of **Red-billed Spurfowl**! We arrived at our lodge in time for dinner and settled into our comfy tented chalets for the final nights of the tour.



**Day 13, 28 August 2025. Exploring the Okavango Panhandle**

We had a full day of being escorted by one of the lodge's excellent nature guides around the channels and papyrus beds of the Okavango Panhandle. However, our first task was seeing the lodge's resident pair of **Pel's Fishing Owls** that roost behind the premises. These magnificent ginger owls were our tenth and final owl species of this trip, and they performed beautifully for us! We encountered a second pair of these owls along the river near Shakawe, these two being accompanied by a fluffy fledgling! We also saw other noteworthy birds while cruising around the channels, including colorful ones like **White-fronted** and **Southern Carmine Bee-eaters** and the tiny **Malachite Kingfisher**, as well as **African Skimmers** and the impressive **Goliath Heron**. **Common Hippopotamus** were also a major feature of the Panhandle, with one mother, in particular, not being too pleased with our presence near her calf!



*We were lucky to see five **Pel's Fishing Owls** during our time in Botswana.*

**Day 14, 29 August 2025. Flight back to Johannesburg and tour conclusion**

We left the lodge early to catch our flight from Maun back to Johannesburg, where the tour ended.