

The Best of South Africa:

“Endemic Birds, Wildlife, and Spectacular Scenery”

26 Oct – 15 Nov, 2020

With Cape Town Extension: 16- 21 Nov

Itinerary

You may wish to arrive in Johannesburg the day before in order to rest before the tour starts. Just let us know your flight plans and also whether you will need a hotel room. There is a nice hotel near the airport that is very convenient and we would be happy to make the reservations for you.

Day 1: October 26 Arrival - Johannesburg

Upon arrival at O.R. Tambo International Airport we will pick up our shuttle to the Africa Sky Guesthouse, where we will stay for the night. The guesthouse is set in gardens with large trees which make for some good local birding. Some of the first birds you may see are Rameron (Olive) Pigeon, Speckled Mousebird, Cape Glossy Starling and Cape White-eye. Overnight at Africa Sky Guesthouse

Day 2: October 27 Birding around Johannesburg

After a delicious breakfast we will head out for some great birding around Jo’burg. Our itinerary for the day will be flexible and we could visit places such as Gnu River Farm, Walter Sisulu Botanical Gardens and several of the local wetlands. Doves and Pigeons are common and we could see Speckled Pigeon, Laughing, Ring-necked and Red-eyed Doves; Grey Go-away Birds are also noisy and easy to see. At the wetlands we could see White-faced Whistling-Duck, Yellow-billed Duck, Blacksmith and Crowned Lapwing and many more. Overnight at Africa Sky Guesthouse

Day 3: October 28 Drive to Mapungubwe National Park

It’s a fairly long drive north to Mapungubwe National Park, which sits south of border with Zimbabwe. This landscape of extensive savannahs is situated at the meeting place of the Limpopo and Shashe rivers. This is the land of sandstone formations, mopane woodlands, brooding baobabs, ancient floodplains, and unique riverine forests that form a dramatic backdrop for the wealth of animal life. Elephant, giraffe, buffalo, white rhino, gemsbok, and other antelope species can be found here. The bird list for park is well over 400 including such great birds as Bronze-winged Courser, Double-banded Sandgrouse, Verreaux’s Eagle, Pel’s Fishing-Owl, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, 8 kingfishers and many more. Overnight at Leokwe Camp

Day 4: October 29 **Mapungubwe National Park**

Today we have a full day exploring the park. We will do the Limpopo Tree-top boardwalk in the morning with a visit to the confluence of the rivers and one of the bird hides. The Limpopo Tree-Top Boardwalk and hide is a magnificent facility allowing the visitor into the trees alongside the birds or looking down on those that forage on the ground. Meyer's Parrot, White-crested Helmetshrike, Meve's (Long-tailed) Starling, are all fairly common. Birding from the hide in the riverbed will vary depending on water levels in the river and can be very rewarding. Pel's Fishing Owl is around, so hope for some luck. White-fronted Bee-eater breed in the river banks and are very obvious. Overnight at Leokwe Camp

Day 5: October 30 **Depart for Kruger National Park**

Early morning departure for the Pafuri Gate to Kruger National Park. The focus of the morning's birding will be on the Pafuri section of Kruger National Park. Pafuri is situated on the Luvuvu River at the northern tip of the Kruger Park. It is an exciting birding spot with a high concentration and variety of birds. Birding Big Day teams have recorded 24-hour lists of over 260 species for the area. The prime habitat is riverine forest, and this is backed up by the sandy river bed itself, patches of acacia woodland, cliffs, and all surrounded by dry mopane and baobab woodland. Some of the birds we will look for today include: Bat-like Spinetail, Crowned Eagle, and Southern Ground-Hornbill. Overnight at Punda Maria Camp

Day 6: October 31 **Kruger National Park**

After breakfast we will drive the Mahonie Loop. This is an excellent 28km circuit for a morning's birding as we pass through dense mixed woodland on red sandy soils. We will first drive through some mixed mopane woodland. The best 'sandveld' woodland is in the region of Matukwale dam on the western side of the loop. Here we should look for Gorgeous Bush-Shrike, White-breasted Cuckooshrike, African Golden-Oriole, Narina Trogon, Eastern Nicator, Thick-billed Cuckoo, Broad-billed Roller, Mosque Swallow, Grey-headed Parrot and Grey-headed Kingfisher. The rare Racket-tailed Roller has been recorded from Mopane woodland on this loop, and the few *Burkea africana* trees have attracted Southern Hylia. African Crowned Eagle breed near the dam, African Hawk-Eagle have a number of nest sites along the ridge on the southern side of the loop, and Bateleur breed near the waterhole 2 miles from the tar road. Should we wish to and subject to availability, we have the option (at our own expense) to take a night drive to search for the elusive Pennant-winged Nightjar. Overnight at Punda Maria Camp

Day 7: November 1 **Depart Punda Maria for Shingwedzi Camp**

Shingwedzi rest camp is situated in the north of the park on the Shingwedzi River and the drive there will take us about 1.5 hours- if we don't stop for birding! The surrounding habitat is Mopane woodland, but birding is very good in lush the riverine woodland. In camp, the restaurant and picnic site front onto the river and many species can be observed at close quarters, including Red-billed Hornbill and Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Cape Glossy Starling, Greater Blue-eared Starling, Natal Spurfowl, and Grey Go-away-bird. The camp area is a great birding area as Red-headed Weaver breed amongst the huts and are followed by Cut-throat Finch using their nests. Bennett's Woodpecker is also resident and the uncommon Collared

Palm-Thrush has been regularly recorded in recent years around Hut 25 in the camp and also in suitable habitat along the Shingwedzi River. Just south of the camp is a low-level causeway over the river. This is a good spot for waterbirds, including White-crowned Lapwing.

The drive to Kanniedood Dam passes through some dense riverine woodland, with many loops off the main road that allow views of the river. A variety of woodland species occur, including Woodland Kingfisher, Brown-headed Parrot, Retz's Helmet-Shrike, Broad-billed Roller and possibly Thick-billed Cuckoo. Verreaux's Eagle-Owl should be looked for in the large dense trees. Overnight at Shingwedzi Camp

Day 8: November 2 Shingwedzi Camp

We will take morning and afternoon birding excursions by vehicle from Shingwedzi camp. There are so many birds in this area, as well as good numbers of big game. Today will be a great day exploring the many side roads in this part of the National Park. Overnight at Shingwedzi Camp

Day 9: November 3 Depart Shingwedzi for Letaba

Morning departure for Letaba camp. The route will take us past Mopani camp, where we will stop for breakfast. After breakfast we will have the opportunity to visit a number of bird hides close to Mopani camp. The Engelhardt Dam is relatively close to camp and worth visiting. Look out for Dusky Lark on the roadside on the way to the dam. Collared Pratincole have bred in early summer on the south bank right next to the road. Waterbirds vary with the level of the dam and may include pelican and flamingo, African Openbill, African Spoonbill, Goliath Heron and Grey Heron. We will spend the afternoon birding around Letaba camp.

The rest camp itself is a haven for woodland birds and the parklike gardens are worth walking around. African Mourning Dove and Red-winged Starling have colonized the camp, as has Red-capped Robin-Chat. There is a paved walk along the riverfront that provides lovely views of the river. Check the swallows for Grey-rumped Swallow, Pearl-breasted Swallow, Brown-throated Martin and even Horus Swift. In winter, Red-billed Oxpecker come to roost in the camp's palms in considerable numbers at sunset. If searched for, African Scops-Owl, Pearl-spotted Owlet, African Barred Owlet (particularly the area around the safari tents) and Barn Owl can be seen in the camp. European Nightjar roost in the palms to the left of the shop in summer. Overnight at Letaba Camp

Day 10: November 4 Mt Sheba

This morning we leave early in the morning for Mount Sheba. Mount Sheba is one of Mpumalanga's premier forest-birding localities. This private nature reserve offers a good selection of typical Escarpment species and a number of highly localized specials. An excellent network of walking trails provides good access to the forest. Some of the specials for Mount Sheba include: African Cuckoo Hawk, African Crowned Eagle, Red-winged Francolin, Red-necked Spurfowl, Lemon Dove, Knysna Turaco, African Emerald Cuckoo, Cape Eagle-Owl, Narina Trogon, Olive Woodpecker, Grey Cuckooshrike, Bush Blackcap, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Orange Ground-Thrush, Buff-streaked Chat, Chorister Robin-Chat, White-starred Robin, Barratt's Warbler, Yellow-throated Woodland-Warbler, Blue-mantled Crested-Flycatcher, Mountain Wagtail, Black-fronted Bush-Shrike, Olive Bush-Shrike, Gurney's Sugarbird, and Forest Canary. Overnight Mount Sheba Resort

Day 11: November 5 Depart for Swaziland. Mlilwane Game Reserve

After breakfast we will leave for Swaziland and Mlilwane Game Reserve. This Sanctuary is Swaziland's pioneer conservation area, a shining example of what is possible if passion, vision, and action fuse. Once a highly profitable multi-purpose farm, and being labeled an "impossible dream", Mlilwane was proclaimed in 1961 and is now the kingdom's most popular eco-destination for locals and internationals alike. The name 'Mlilwane' ('Little Fire' in siSwati) was derived from the numerous fires started by lightning strikes on the Mlilwane Hill but now holds significance as the little fire that ignited the conservation movement in Swaziland. Mlilwane's diverse habitats support a surprisingly extensive species list. Endless hours of guided or self-guided exploration within the small 11,250-acre sanctuary are possible due to the relative absence of dangerous game. Afternoon birding around the main camp area.

Overnight Mlilwane camp

Day 12: November 6 Malolotja Nature Reserve

After an early morning birding walk and breakfast at Mlilwane, we depart for Malolotja Nature Reserve. Established in 1979, Malolotja is home to one of southern Africa's rarest birds, the magnificent Blue Swallow. Malolotja is arguably Swaziland's most attractive reserve, lying on the edge of the Drakensberg Escarpment and protecting a wide variety of habitats that range in altitude from above 5400 feet (Ngwenya Mountain) to below 2400 feet (Komati Valley). The bird list of over 280 species is correspondingly diverse, but don't expect to see more than 80 species in a day in spring and early summer. Return in the late afternoon to Mlilwane.

Overnight Mlilwane camp

Day 13: November 7 Mkhaya Game Reserve

Depart after breakfast for Mkhaya Game Reserve. Mkhaya game reserve is primarily a refuge for endangered species of mammals. Black and white rhino, elephant, buffalo and a range of other species such as roan, sable and tsessebe are its main attraction, and its birding potential is largely untapped. Over 7 000 ha (+-17000 acres) in extent, travel in the reserve is limited to guided game drives by open landrover, and guided walks. Visitors may walk unescorted in the proximity of the overnight camp. Some of the specials include: African Crowned Eagle, Black Sparrowhawk, Crested Guineafowl, Verreaux's Eagle-Owl, African Wood-Owl, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Retz's Helmet-Shrike, Eastern Nicator, Bearded Scrub-Robin, Pink-throated Twinspot, Green Twinspot. Overnight Mkhaya Game Reserve

Day 14: November 8**Mkhaya to Tembe Elephant Park**

Morning departure for Tembe Elephant Park. Tembe Elephant Park is a relatively large 30,000 Ha (+75,000 acre) reserve on the northern border of the KwaZulu Natal province of South Africa, situated between Ndumo Game Reserve in the west and Kosi Bay in the east. Most of the east coast specials and endemics are easily found, and good sightings of exceptionally large elephants, white and black rhinos, lion, buffalo and the rare Suni antelope are frequent. In addition, the limited number of visitors and minimal tourist development contribute a wilderness character found in very few places in South Africa. Special birds include Crested Guinea-fowl, Southern Banded Snake-Eagle, Narina Trogon, African Broadbill, Eastern Nicator, Brown Scrub-Robin, Rudd's Apalis, Woodward's Batis, Gorgeous Bush-Shrike, Retz's Helmet-Shrike, Neergaard's Sunbird and Purple-banded Sunbird, Green Twinspot and Pink-throated Twinspot, and Lemon-breasted Canary. Rarities include Bat Hawk, Ayres's Hawk-Eagle, Palm-nut Vulture, Black Coucal, Swamp Nightjar, Rosy-throated Longclaw and even Chestnut-fronted Helmet-Shrike. The rare Plain-backed Sunbird was recently found to be resident. Afternoon safari into Tembe, as well as a birding walk on the lodge property.

Overnight Royal Thonga Private Safari Lodge

Days 15 and 16: November 9 and 10**Tembe Elephant Park**

This reserve on the border of Mozambique is only just over 10,000 ha (+25,000 acres) in extent, but has a bird list which is the envy of many much larger protected areas. Over 400 species have been recorded and its proximity to Mozambique has resulted in some sightings of species normally associated only with that country.

Specials for this reserve include, African Pygmy-Goose, Southern Banded Snake-Eagle, African Cuckoo Hawk, European Honey-Buzzard, African Finfoot, Black Coucal, Pel's Fishing-Owl, Narina Trogon, Broad-billed Roller, African Broadbill, Eastern Nicator, Rudd's Apalis, Burnt-necked Eremomela, Black-throated Wattle-eye, Gorgeous Bush-Shrike, Retz's Helmet-Shrike, Woodward's Batis, Neergaard's Sunbird, Long-toed Lapwing and Pink-throated Twinspot.

Return to Royal Thonga Private Safari Lodge

Day 17: November 11 **Ithala Game Reserve**

After a morning safari and breakfast, we depart for Ithala Game Reserve. Ithala Game Reserve is a magnificent reserve, tumbling from the heights of the Ngotshe Mountains three thousand feet down into a deep valley, carved over the eons by the Phongolo River revealing the world's oldest rock formations, is a game viewers and birders paradise. Situated in the rugged, mountainous thornveld of northern KwaZulu-Natal, Ithala Game Reserve's multitude of habitats host a spectacular array of wildlife and bird species. Its scenic beauty aside, Ithala's most characteristic feature is perhaps its astonishing geological diversity. Some of the oldest rock formations in the world are found here, dating back 3 000 million years. With a topographic profile varying from 1200 feet above sea level in the north to 4350 feet near Louwsberg in the south, Ithala's terrain extends over lowveld and densely vegetated riverine valleys to high-lying grassland plateaus, ridges and cliff faces. The area has been occupied by man for thousands of years and there are many sites littered with stone age spear and axe heads dating back some 20,000 years. Special birds for this reserve include: Goliath Heron, White-backed Night-Heron, Southern Bald Ibis, African Hawk-Eagle, White-bellied Korhaan, Freckled Nightjar, Half-collared Kingfisher, Ground Woodpecker, Eastern Nicator, Mountain Wheatear, Buff-streaked Chat, Mocking Cliff-Chat, Gorgeous Bush-Shrike and Red-billed Oxpecker. The reserve is exceptionally rich in raptors, and Bat Hawk has also been reported. Overnight Ntshondwe Camp

Day 18: November 12 **Ithala Game Reserve**

Another full day with both morning and afternoon birding safaris.
Overnight Ntshondwe Camp

Day 19: November 13 **Wakkerstroom**

Morning departure for Wakkerstroom. With 33 southern African endemics or near-endemics it is easy to see why the area is a magnet for foreign as well as South African birders. Habitats range from open grassland to mist belt forest, gorges and cliffs, with extensive wetland habitat in the form of vleis (wetlands), pans and dams. The Wakkerstroom/Amersfoort area is famous among birders as the easiest area to find three highly endemic species restricted to South Africa's high-altitude grasslands - Rudd's Lark, Botha's Lark and Yellow-breasted Pipit. A total of 13 bird species are endemic or nearly so to South Africa's Grassland Biome and nine of these, including Rudd's Lark, Botha's Lark, Yellow-breasted Pipit, Southern Bald Ibis, Blue Korhaan, Eastern Long-billed Lark, Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Buff-streaked Chat and Drakensberg Prinia can easily be found here during a full day's birding in summer. Overnight DeKotzenhof BnB

Day 20: November 14 **Wakkerstroom**

A full day of birding in Wakkerstroom and the surrounding area. Overnight DeKotzenhof BnB

Day 21: November 15 Return to Johannesburg; Marievale Bird Sanctuary en route

Early morning departure for Johannesburg with birding at Marievale along the way.

Marievale Bird Sanctuary lies within the Blesbokspruit catchment and is a Ramsar Convention Wetland site. The sanctuary has a good number of wetland and grassland species, with a total list of over 280 species, and has become a magnet for twitchers as rare species are frequently reported. Specials for Marievale include: A good variety of waders, including African Rail, Baillon's Crake, African Snipe and Greater Painted-snipe are often recorded. Good highveld birds include Goliath Heron, Black Heron, Greater Flamingo, Lesser Flamingo, Marsh Owl, Long-tailed Widowbird and Fan-tailed Widowbird. The area is also famous for rarities such as Slaty Egret, Pallid Harrier, Montagu's Harrier, Western Marsh-Harrier, Spotted Crake, Pectoral Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Black-tailed Godwit and Red Phalarope, which have turned up in the recent past.

Upon arrival to Johannesburg, you will be transferred to O.R. Tambo Airport for your return flight home or you can spend the night near the airport and continue on to Cape Town.