

South Africa Ultimate Endemics Tour

September/October 2013

Report by tour leader Michael Mills

Our 2013 Ultimate Endemics tour took in the best of South African birding in 23-days. We kicked off in the west where bird breeding activity was at its peak, following excellent recent rains. After spending a couple of days around Cape Town, we swept through the west of country on an anti-clockwise loop, notching up specials and endemics as we went. The West Coast produced Southern Black Korhaan and Black Harrier, the Hottentots Holland Mountains Cape Rockjumper, Victorin's Warbler and Hottentot Buttonquail on the ground and our pelagic was memorable for Northern Royal Albatross and Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross. The Overberg held Damara Tern, Karoo Korhaan, Agulhas Long-billed Lark, Knysna Woodpecker and Grey-winged Francolin for us, the forests of the Grootvadersbosch area Knysna Warbler, Buff-spotted Flufftail and Forest Buzzard, and fynbos near Ceres yielded Protea Seedeater. Entering the more arid areas we saw Cinnamon-breasted Warbler, Layard's Warbler, Karoo Eremomela, Black-headed Canary and Fairy Flycatcher in the Koue Bokkeveld (the Karoo near Ceres), Black-eared Sparrowlark and Burchell's Courser in the Tanqua Karoo, Ludwig's Bustard in the Calvinia area, Red Lark and Sclater's Lark in the Brandvlei area and Orange River White-eye along the Orange River.

By contrast the east of the country was dry, as this year the rains were late to arrive. Still, we notched up Blue Swallow, Knysna Turaco and Cape Parrot on our way to Underberg, from where we visited Sani Pass for a day, with Drakensberg Rockjumper, Bush Blackcap, Mountain Pipit, Drakensberg Siskin, Southern Bald Ibis and Buff-streaked Chat. Leaving Underberg we tracked down Orange Ground Thrush and Chorister Robin-Chat before finding Spotted Ground Thrush at Eshowe, Rudd's Apalis, Woodward's Batis, Green Twinspot, Livingstone's Turaco and Four-coloured Bush-Shrike at St Lucia and Pink-throated Twinspot and Neergaard's Sunbird at Mkhuze. Wakkerstroom produced the goods with Rudd's Lark, Botha's Lark, Blue Korhaan and Yellow-breasted Pipit before we made our way to Kruger, where Bennett's Woodpecker, Stierling's Wren-Warbler, Coqui Francolin, African Barred Owlet and Shelley's Francolin were highlights. On the final stint we found Striped Pipit and Taita Falcon at Abel Erasmus pass, Short-clawed Lark and Bushveld Pipit at Polokwane and Orange River Francolin in Gauteng, bringing our trip total to 526 species.

Our 2013 Ultimate Endemics tour commenced with three days of endemic-filled birding based out of Cape Town, giving us the flexibility to schedule the pelagic trip on the best of three days, which given the weather was just as well. Our first day trip up the West Coast, under overcast skies, produced a great list of endemics. One of our very first birds was the striking South Black Korhaan, studied on the ground and in flight. At the same time we acquainted ourselves with Bokmakierie, Cape Spurfowl, White-backed Mousebird, Pied Starling, Karoo Prinia and Grey-backed Cisticola, species that we were to see regularly in the coming days. Once in the park itself we quickly tracked down Cape Penduline Tit at the roadside, found several displaying Karoo Lark and enjoyed some smart Grey Tits. Other species here included White-throated Swallow, Cape Weaver, Cape Bulbul,

Southern Double-collared Sunbird, Cape White-eye, Karoo Scrub-Robin, Cape Grassbird, Pearl-breasted Swallow, Jackal Buzzard, South African Shelduck and Cape Teal. Lunch in the Vredenburg area produced excellent day-time views of Bat-eared Fox and Large-billed Lark, plus the hoped-for Cape Long-billed Lark and Sickle-winged Chat. Velddrif held good numbers of both Greater Flamingo and the rarer Lesser Flamingo, but no sign of Chestnut-banded Plover which we ended up tracking down at Yzerfontein. However, the day's two most popular birds were some very elegant Blue Cranes and several very close encounters with the dapper Black Harrier.

Day two was dedicated to the Hottentot's Holland mountains. Unfortunately Cape Rockjumper stayed high on its ridge, so we had to be satisfied with somewhat distant scope views. Ground Woodpecker was also watched distantly in the scopes, a pair of Verreaux's Eagle performed well and Orange-breasted Sunbird was conspicuous. Moving on we found Cape Batis, Fiscal Flycatcher, Brimstone Canary and Sweet Waxbill, but Victorin's Warbler refused to budge. So we headed for Stony Point where African Penguin and the four pelagic cormorants (including Bank Cormorant and Crowned Cormorant) were more obliging. Our post-lunch session produced some good looks at Cape Siskin and what I consider to be the sighting of the trip: the rare opportunity of watching Hottentot Buttonquail on the ground, for at least a couple of minutes! The day ended off with our first sighting of Victorin's Warbler and a male Cape Sugarbird with a proper tail.

The next day our pelagic outing was a bit quiet as no fishing vessels were operating off Cape Point, but the day was saved by a lovely Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross that landed on the water and allowed close approach and excellent views of a Northern Royal Albatross, among the more common Cape Gannets, Shy Albatross and Black-browed Albatross. Close to shore we found African Black Oystercatcher and we ended the day with a late afternoon session at Strandfontein with Maccoa Duck, Little Rush Warbler and Southern Pochard.

Sublime Cape weather greeted us the following morning as we started out on our anti-clockwise loop through the west of the country, immediately logging excellent views of Cape Rockjumper and Victorin's Warbler. Our quick success with these two species allowed time for an unscheduled visit to De Mond, which turned up four hoped-for Damara Terns displaying to one other, presumably recently arrived from their non-breeding grounds on the central African coast. Out on the Agulhas plains highlights included Agulhas Long-billed Lark, great looks at perched Cloud Cisticola and Denham's Bustard before a short stint at De Hoop quickly produced Grey-winged Francolin at close range, several confiding Southern Tchagra and superb views of Knysna Woodpecker. En route to our accommodation we paused to admire a Cape Vulture perched on a roadside telephone pole (not a common sight)! The next morning was rather misty, but we enjoyed excellent views of Cape Clapper Lark (here the *marjoriae* subspecies, in the past split as Agulhas Clapper Lark) displaying just a few metres away, and Karoo Korhaan, before we made our way to Grootvadersbosch. Our time at Grootvadersbosch was very productive and we quickly notched up excellent views of Knysna Warbler and Olive Bushshrike, enjoyed two sightings of Forest Buzzard and found Streaky-headed Seedeater, Narina Trogon, Black Cuckoo, Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher, Tambourine Dove, Lemon Dove and Greater Double-collared Sunbird during our short stay. The biggest surprise, however, was hearing Buff-spotted Flufftail, which we managed to draw to the edge of a thicket for some great looks!

It was now time to turn our attention to the more arid areas, although not before seeing Pale-winged Starling en route, a quick detour for Protea Seedeater and stops for views of displaying nominate subspecies of Cape Clapper Lark. We were just beginning to think we'd drawn a blank on the seedeater when its clear whistles reached my ears and we were soon watching a pair of these oddly-local canaries at close range. The edge of the Karoo had seen good recent rains and the birds were very active. Without any trouble we tracked down Namaqua Warbler, Layard's Warbler, Fairy Flycatcher, Namaqua Sandgrouse, Rufous-eared Warbler, Karoo Chat and Tractrac Chat, and for once the usually tricky Cinnamon-breasted Warbler obliged within minutes, sitting on a nearby rock for us to admire at length. Black-headed Canary proved a bit more difficult but once we set eyes on our first ones more came easily. Karoo Eremomela also took a bit of work, but gave excellent views in the end. Moving north into the Tanqua Karoo we were met by a blanket of pink flowers and the welcome sight of many displaying Black-eared Sparrowlarks. Further on a "stop, stop!" duet from Mike and Rob turned up one of South Africa's most difficult specials, several Burchell's Courser, which gave good views. Further north still we enjoyed excellent fly-over views of Ludwig's Bustard and close-up views of Karoo Long-billed Lark, before entering Bushmanland. Bridge-breeding South African Cliff Swallows interrupted our journey for a short while, but soon we were in the Brandvlei area admiring a pair of smart Red Larks and later in the afternoon four Sclater's Lark were watched at length at a drinking trough.

We'd been so successful that we'd now freed up enough time for a detour via the Orange River. Heading further north we started to encounter some of the more typically Namibian species: Northern Black Korhaan, African Red-eyed Bulbul, Dusky Sunbird, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Kori Bustard, Ashy Tit, Sociable Weaver, Fawn-coloured Lark and Scaly-feathered Weaver. Along the Orange River, Karoo Thrush and Orange River White-eye were tracked down, as we turned west and then south on our long journey back to Cape Town, with Grey-backed Sparrowlark, Booted Eagle, more Ludwig's Bustard, this time on the ground, and African Harrier Hawk as some of the noteworthy birds seen along our way.

Flying to Durban, we now switched our attention to a completely different suite of birds and habitats. By contrast, the east was dry and most birds, especially seedeaters, appeared to be some time away from commencing breeding. A first, misty morning found us at the roadside in the midlands, notching up Lazy Cisticola, Knysna Turaco, Forest Canary and Drakensberg Prinia while we waited for the mist to clear. By late morning the mists still seemed to be going nowhere, so we climbed the pass where Cape Rock-Thrush and Grey Sunbird were welcome sights. Entering a local reserve we were immediately met by a group of Red-winged Francolin just a few metres from the car. After that we spent a while chasing some Striped Flufftails in the mist, which unfortunately only I managed to spot crossing the trail made for them. But this was soon forgotten as the mist cleared and we could watch several Blue Swallows at close range, plus Fan-tailed Grassbird and our first Wailing Cisticolas. Moving on a late afternoon session produced some excellent fly-by views of the very rare Cape Parrot, plus Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler and Orange Ground Thrush and Barratt's Warbler for some.

The next morning we were up early, with a big Sani Pass day ahead of us. We set off with some trepidation as we'd been told that no Mountain Pipits or Bush Blackcaps had been seen yet this season, including on our local guide's outing the day before. Our first stop turned up Dark-capped Yellow Warbler and Red-throated Wryneck, but Bush Blackcap seemed indeed to be absent from its

regular haunts. However, not much later we heard the clear, sweet song of the blackcaps coming from some thickets and not long afterwards were feasting our eyes on, first a distant and a bit later a very close, Bush Blackcap. Next on the cards was Gurney's Sugarbird near the roadside and a group of Ground Woodpecker. Barratt's Warbler gave great views and as we reached the switchbacks we located a distant, singing South African Rock Pipit and spent some time watching it through the scopes. The first biggy to fall was Drakensberg Rockjumper, with both male and female showing superbly on the verge of the road. Sentinel Rock Thrush fell before we reached Sani Top and the Lesotho border post, with Sloggett's Ice Rat giving us a stupendous welcome. We immediately focussed our attention on the two missing highland specials, first tracking down Drakensberg Siskin which was seen well several times after a bit of a chase. The pipit, however, was more concerning. Initially we flushed one but after about 30 minutes had still not relocated it, so it was with great relief that we spotted one in the distance and slowly closed in on it for much closer views. Relieved, we enjoyed lunch with Bearded Vulture dropping bones, before starting our return journey, with some close views of Southern Bald Ibis, brief views of Half-collared Kingfisher, better views of Red-throated Wryneck, African Black Duck and a lovely pair of Buff-streaked Chat as the highlights.

A short return visit the next morning to another forest quickly produced good views of Orange Ground Thrush for everyone, more flight views of Cape Parrot, prolonged looks at Chorister Robin-Chat, Olive Woodpecker and Grey Cuckooshrike, before we returned briefly to continue our losing battle with Striped Flufftail. Arriving at Eshowe later in the day we were met by dry and hot conditions. A fairly birdless walk in the late afternoon did at least turn up Green Malkoha and Trumpeter Hornbill. The next morning, as we waited for the reserve gates to open, we admired our first Black-bellied Starlings, Purple-crested Turaco and White-eared Barbets. But as soon as we could we entered Dlinza forest and immediately tracked down a singing Spotted Ground Thrush as Denzil's 7500th bird! Delayed by our admiration for the thrush we rushed to the top of the canopy tower where bird activity was already beginning to drop off. Fortunately a pair of Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeons gave close, if somewhat brief, flyby views, as after that we didn't hear a peep from them all morning. Back down on the forest floor our first Red-capped Robin-Chats were a welcome addition, before we headed "home" for a welcome breakfast. By the time we'd had our regular fare of muesli, yoghurt, fruit, toast, bacon, sausages and eggs the day was really warming up. A short visit to Entumeni produced more heard Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeons, with the only new birds as Yellow-streaked Greenbul, African Crowned Eagle and Red-fronted Tinkerbird, before making our way to St Lucia. Here, during a late afternoon session, we quickly tracked down a lovely male Southern Brown-throated Weaver in display along with many more common Eastern Golden Weavers. The rest of the afternoon was quiet, but did turn up a welcome Pale-crowned Cisticola (the only one of the trip!) and, after dark, good looks at Fiery-necked Nightjar. By contract, the following morning was very productive: initially our chasing of some Green Twinspots resulted in frustration, although we were rewarded with a close pair of Woodward's Batis, a singing Brown Scrub Robin, Rudd's Apalis, tame Livingstone's Turaco and Crested Guineafowl and several Purple-banded Sunbird. Eventually our patience paid off as we watched a lovely pair of Green Twinspot feeding at the edge of a thicket. Not long after we tracked down Four-coloured Bush-Shrike for good looks, before heading for breakfast, followed by a windy drive up towards Cape Vidal, which produced an unexpected Rufous-bellied Heron but little else on the bird front. Although first seen White Rhinoceros and minutes later having a Black Rhinoceros pass within two metres of our vehicle was certainly unforgettable.

Continuing further north, our next port of call was the Mkhuze area where an afternoon outing on the Lower Mkhuze River produced Black-throated Wattle-eye but not the hoped-for Pel's Fishing Owl. The next morning got off to a good start, with Pink-throated Twinspot seen at close range in camp and a couple of lovely male Neergaard's Sunbirds found on arrival in the sand forest. Other goodies found at Mkhuze included Bearded Scrub Robin, White-throated Robin-Chat, Eastern Nicator, Burnt-necked Eremomela, Four-coloured Bush-Shrike, more Crested Guineafowl, more Rudd's Apalis, Grey Penduline Tit, Senegal Lapwing and Pink-backed Pelican. In the late afternoon we spotted a very distant Lemon-breasted Canary near Nsumo Pan, but unfortunately it flew before everyone could have a look and we had no success at relocating it.

From Mkhuze it was on to Wakkerstroom, but not before finding Rufous-winged Cisticola and Burchell's Coucal and some further unsuccessful searching for Lemon-breasted Canary. Approaching Wakkerstroom, an afternoon session turned up a nice pair of White-bellied Bustard (the form here sometimes split as Barrow's Bustard), the eastern form of Cloud Cisticola and Eastern Clapper Lark. Despite being dry and early in the season, grassland birding around Wakkerstroom was very productive. Rudd's Lark was tracked down in short time, followed by Blue Korhaan, Eastern Long-billed Lark, Pink-billed Lark and Botha's Lark, all before breakfast. And many Long-tailed Widowbirds in breeding plumage. After breakfast we made our way to higher altitudes where a short search ended in great views of a breeding-plumage Yellow-breasted Pipit, plus more looks at Ground Woodpecker. Few goodies were left to look for but we did find White-backed Duck, Black-winged Lapwing, Cape Longclaw (for our best views), Hottentot Teal and more Southern Bald Ibis and before leaving Wakkerstroom for Kruger we enjoyed good views of African Rail and Little Bittern, although Red-chested Flufftail was at best little more than a flash.

Kruger treated us royally during our brief visit, with our arrival drive logging Stierling's Wren Warbler, Brown-headed Parrot and Bennett's Woodpecker in short succession, plus Natal Francolin, Swainson's Spurfowl and Red-crested Korhaan (our last of 10 bustards!). The next day highlights included African Barred Owlet, African Scops Owl, Purple Indigobird, Coqui Francolin and a superb pair of Shelley's Francolin, and mammals including Spotted Hyaena, Lion, Buffalo and White Rhinoceros. Next on our agenda was Abel Erasmus pass, where after a lengthy wait two Taita Falcon paid us a visit and Striped Pipit was seen well. A day in the Polokwane area added many new species, best of which were several lovely Short-clawed Lark and a surprise Bushveld Pipit. Other goodies that day included Ashy Tit, Great Sparrow, Barred Wren Warbler, African Quailfinch drinking, more Pink-billed Lark, great flight views of several Common Buttonquail, Southern White-crowned Shrike, Marico Flycatcher, Barred Wren Warbler, Jameson's Firefinch, Kalahari Scrub-Robin, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Desert Cisticola, Orange-breasted Waxbill, Violet-eared Waxbill and Black-faced Waxbill. Our journey ended in Joburg, but not before a short detour to look for a couple of Gauteng goodies. Unfortunately heavy rain had set in and remained with us for the full four hours at our disposal, although during a brief drier spell we heard Melodious Lark, located a Marsh Owl on the ground and enjoyed good looks at the tricky Orange River Francolin, completing the sweep of tricky *Scleroptila* francolins!