

South Africa

11-27 January 2014

Participants:-

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Paula Reynosa
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David Taylor
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Leader: Michael Mills and Vaughan Ashby

Picture: Drakensburg Rockjumper

Day 1: Twelve of us boarded a plane from Heathrow to Johannesburg arriving the next morning for our connecting flight to Durban.

Day 2: The birding began even from within the terminus with White-throated Swallow, Cape Sparrow and Cape Wagtail viewable from Johannesburg airport departure lounge. An hour later we arrived in a hot and windy Durban, loaded up the minibuses and travelled the short distance to our guesthouse. Any tiredness was soon forgotten as we ventured up the approach road from our accommodation and arranged to bird a nearby garden owned by a birder, how fortunate! Familiarising ourselves with South African birds in residential Durban and with Paula appearing fresh in from the US, we soon notched up a trio of Black-collared, Crested and White-eared Barbet with the help of a young local birder, together with Bar-throated Apalis, Golden-tailed Woodpeckers, Southern Black-tit and Cape White-eye, whilst the ever vocal Hadada Ibis fed unconcerned on the lawns. Eventually, Tambourine Dove showed well as did a Pin-tailed Whydah posing near the swimming pool. It had been a great few hours birding and we retreated to the guest house for our evening meal courtesy of the pizza and burger delivery man. Michael, our local guide for the next two weeks flew in from Cape Town, introduced himself and outlined the plans for the following day; the next morning was to our first and last late start!

Day 3: The next day dawned, we were all keen and set off driving almost a quarter of a mile when we had our first stop, Dusky Indigobird, a male singing it's heart out in a residential garden that Michael had heard on his way to pick us up. A short drive of 40 minutes or so through light rain brought us to a small wildlife park, Shongweni Dam, where we birded until about 11.30. To start with the rain hampered viewing but unperturbed, we were able to see some good birds at close range in quick succession, a large breeding colony of Grosbeak Weavers, African Golden-weavers and after a short wait great views of Little Rush-warbler and Lesser Swamp-warbler. As the rain moved off the activity went up a notch, a pair of Common Zebras surprised some as they played near a children's playground, a very noisy Purple-crested Turaco, a Brown-hooded Kingfisher sat quietly watching us and a vocal Southern Tchagra that refused to reveal itself although we did see our first Willow Warbler of 2014! Nearby, the road climbed steadily and looking up to some steep cliffs we had stunning views of a perched European Honey-buzzard, for most of us our best views ever of this scarce UK breeding species, whilst below us a pair of Mocking Cliff-chats showed literally a few metres from us. Other birds seen during our short stay included Southern Black-tit, Black Crake in full view, African Black Swifts whirring overhead, Black-bellied Starling plus several African Harrier-hawks. Departing the park, we

stopped for lunch at a place with distractions for ice cream fans and a Village Weaver colony outside. Continuing along the highway towards Underberg, roadside birding gave us Red-collared and Fan-tailed Widowbirds, punk like Long-crested Eagles, Lazy Cisticola, a Brown Snake-eagle, and Southern Fiscals the first of many over the next two weeks. Nearing Donnybrook, a stop for a group of White Storks feeding amongst cattle in a field gave us one of our many highlights of the trip when Michael heard the very rare Cape Parrots calling nearby. Shortly afterwards, we located a small group in some distant trees so we moved closer and during the next hour or so were mesmerised as we watched groups of parrots in the trees and flying towards trees in the nearby town. By driving into town and parking by a local's garden, we were able to watch at close range 40 or 50 Parrots feeding noisily on some fruiting trees. As we left town we found another group in the garden of a large house by the main road feeding with Rameron Pigeons, mega stuff. The birding wasn't over yet though, with one last stop on route to our guest house a vocal and inquisitive Pale-crowned Cisticola watched together with over thirty Amur Falcons vying for our attention on wires the other side of the road. A great day could tomorrow be any better?

Day 4: Hopes were high that the weather would be kind to us as today was an opportunity to see a hat full of new birds some very localised and get another country tick, Lesotho. A trio of 4WD jeeps trundled out of the guesthouse and no sooner had it got light, a roadside stop overlooking some marshes and lakes revealed a pair of Southern Pochard together with Yellow-billed Ducks, Grey Crowned-crane and a very distant Blacksmith Plover (much closer views were to follow later in the trip). Within no time at all we bid farewell to tarmac and started our drive up the track on towards the Sani Pass and the Lesotho border. Early morning drizzle was still causing a few problems but one of the first stops produced some great birds and the hit-list of specialities began to fall. A rocky hillside had Bokmakierie (our pronunciation of this was tested frequently by Michael), Cape Grassbird singing away, a pair of jumpy Cape Rock-thrushes, Greater Striped-swallows buzzing up and down the valley and Greater Double-collared Sunbirds. One of the big prizes though was the much sought-after Bush Blackcap that put on a good show near the river as a pair performed well for their admiring crowd. Back in the jeeps, the vehicles climbed further up the mountain, stopping for a Dark-capped Yellow-warbler and another brief stop at the South African border control to get a stamp in the passport plus a Barratt's Warbler singing its heart out to the sound of the barrage of camera shutters. With so many birds to seek out the packed breakfasts would have to be given some sort of priority sooner or later so a convenient lay-by overlooking the valley below allowed us time to have a quick bite, sip of coffee/tea, bird, sip more coffee/tea, bird, watch the endemic Gurney's Sugarbirds performing well next to us and pick up another endemic the much-wanted Ground Woodpecker. Once again time to move up the mountain a little further to an area close to the summit for Drakensberg Rockjumper. Three or more of these superb birds were seen at close range bounding across the rocks and sneaking in-between the grass. Once again the memory cards got a pounding from the photographers as attention also turned to very approachable Cape Bunting and a little more flighty Cape and Yellow Canaries. We were very fortunate as it was now a clear bright morning with the views back down the pass absolutely stunning; the weather helping greatly with seeing the birds. The final push up the last steep section to the summit, a quick visit to the customs office to sort out a few formalities which Stuart and the drivers attended to whilst we birded nearby, with a photogenic Sentinel Rock-thrush on a mud hut. Formalities over and off to the highest pub in Africa for a comfort stop and more importantly Drakensberg Siskins feeding on red hot poker and grubbing around on the ground. The temperature was rising all the time as the few clouds in the sky burnt away, another layer of warm clothing was removed. Leaving the Siskins behind we carried further on into Lesotho climbing a little but mostly on the plateau stopping to see another key bird feeding on the grass near the village, the smart looking Bald Ibis, marginally prettier than its northern cousin and nearby more specialities with the snazzy wheatear-like Buff streaked Chat, the more dowdy Sicklet-winged Chat, Large-billed Larks and over a distant hillside the rare Cape Griffon with ten or so birds enjoying the thermals. Mountain Reedbuck was also a mammal tick. Mountain Pipit was our next target bird, behaving wonderfully and allowing close views and photos. A hillside soon provided another target bird, after much effort the highly mobile and at times skulking Fairy Flycatcher showing off its pink flushed breast. Our lunchtime stop complete with a full picnic out the back of the jeeps was interrupted mid mouthful of chicken drumstick with Vaughan and Sveta locating a family group of Grey-winged Francolins which showed very well much to the delight of the photographers. Meanwhile, back at the jeeps, lunch was finished with no more distractions yet still the day was young with many more key birds to locate. Several more Ground

Woodpeckers were located performing at close range, more rockjumpers, Grey Tits and Karoo Prinia whilst Layard's Warbler put up a fight but eventually everyone got cracking views of a couple of birds despite their best attempts at hiding in the scrub from us. Job done with the upper montane birds so time to retrace our steps back to the border posts with a return to the pub for a comfort stop this time with Sloggett's Ice Rats showing well by their burrows, it would have been a shame to have missed them! Travelling back down the Sani Pass we tried again for Yellow-tufted Pipit but once again no luck, in fact this was the only bird that didn't want to play ball as even towards the end of the day the birds kept coming with a very vocal Red-throated Wryneck, another Bush Blackcap and on the mammal front a distant troop of Chacma Baboons. Nearing town and the guesthouse we had another opportunity to enjoy literally hundreds of Amur Falcons in the air and on the wires plus a very confusing prinia that appeared to be a hybrid Drakensberg/Karoo, half a tick? Following a superb days birding we dined at an excellent restaurant nearby. It soon became apparent that the supply of ice creams and desserts was going to get a hammering over the next two weeks from some individuals!! What better way to end a day's birding.

Day 5: The usual early start to drive for an hour or so to the Xumeni forest, one of the few remnants of Afro-tropical forest left in the area. Unfortunately, the clear skies and warm, still morning would dampen the bird activity pretty quickly. The area held several key birds that we would only see here and despite some participants finding the birding hard going, this was typical forest birding, slow but rewarding once those shy jewels revealed themselves. Orange Ground-thrush was the first challenge and with perseverance most of us saw this superb brightly coloured *Zoothera* even if some only saw bits of the bird such as its ability to hide. Chorister Robin-chat was the next to put up a fight but slowly one by one we all connected with the bird despite its best attempts of invisibility in the canopy. Specialities aside, back up birds were Cape Batis, the smart little Yellow-throated Woodland-warbler, mega Knysna Turacos with their bright purple wings in flight and the very elusive Olive Bushshrike, another canopy lover! The heat was suddenly on the up but within the cooler forest a noisy group of Terrestrial Brownbills worked their way past us at close range in the tangles and undergrowth with an equally elusive Orange Ground-thrush maintaining its invisibility cloak. At the forest edge we managed to see Forest Canaries and Crowned Hornbills but activity had really died down by late morning as a result of the searing heat. Departing the forest, we encountered a few more birds with a 'pure' Drakensberg Prinia, a brief flyover Sweet Waxbill and a few Jackal Buzzards. The drive to Hela Hela through arable areas gave us a few Black-shouldered Kites, Yellow Bishops, Red-billed Queleas, a smart Long-crested Eagle and countless Barn Swallows. At the chalets in the gorge we were to stay in it was now incredibly hot so time to relax a little and have a cold open air shower, lovely! Once the rest was over it was time to continue our search for more specialities and this time another very rare Southern African species that locally is being studied and protected by habitat management. Back up the gorge an access road into the protected grasslands allowed us to drive to a meadow, complete with a herd of Blesbok, where a short walk revealed our target, the rare and endangered Blue Swallow. Fortunately the birds chose to feed via a circuit quite close to us giving us the opportunity to see this special bird with its long tail streamers and glossy deep blue plumage. Whilst enjoying these aerial experts a Fan-tailed Grassbird showed well, both displaying and perched whilst the Wing-snapping Cisticola was more akin to stratosphere cisticola, probably with altitude sickness! Needless to say, the views of this individual were not particularly inspiring! The grasslands held one more goodie though, Red-winged Francolin which showed to some but mostly played hide and seek with us soon moving away with one of the vans nearly leaving a bumper behind! Back at the chalets, another superb evening meal with the obligatory ice creams for dessert and, as darkness fell, some of the group were so disorientated that they walked around the chalets three times before eventually finding their own!

Day 6: During the night two of the group had been visited by a delightful Spectacled Dormouse looking for titbits. A relaxed start with a walk around camp at first light in the cool morning air. Once again new birds appeared with a distant Cape Glossy-starling, Yellow-throated Petronia, stunning views of African Emerald and Red-chested Cuckoos, White-browed Scrub-robin, Cardinal Woodpeckers, Ashy Flycatchers, Sombre Greenbills with their beady white eyes, Narina Trogon looking over its shoulder at us and more Knysna Turacos. Returning for breakfast an Ostrich appeared to want to join us, and some even wanted to tick it apparently, despite it having a pet name! Outside the park a few stops gave us incredible views of Olive Bushshrike, a cute little Red-fronted Tinkerbird 'tinked' away, whilst stopping at a suitable patch of habitat

finally paid dividends with cracking views of Southern Tchagra as a superb Crowned Hawk-eagle cruised overhead. On the road again and a stop at Umhlanga near Durban for another excellent meal plus ice cream of course before heading to Eshowe where we booked into the excellent Birds of Paradise guest house. Late afternoon, despite it still being very hot we paid a short visit to Dlinza forest but it was tough going and few birds were seen, the best being Purple-crested Turaco and a Chorister Robin-chat. A Blue Duiker, was watched feeding at close range though we struggled to see any blue tones whatsoever of this diminutive antelope! On returning to the guesthouse, a Woolly-necked Stork took a stroll across the road until a passing car caused it to fly. The evening meal was very enjoyable especially when the owner of the guest house told us that a pair of owls was on the roof of her house, an adult and juvenile Verreaux's Eagle-owl in fact.

Day 7: Operation Spotted Ground-thrush which commenced at 06.01 once the park gate at Dlinza opened. First though, a short visit to the canopy walkway where the target of Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon was eventually seen by all as was a Grey Sunbird in the trees adjacent to the platform. Once on the forest trails the distant song of a Spotted Ground-thrush was heard and off we marched deeper into the forest but the bird was very flighty and although singing above us most of us failed to get good views or even glimpse the bird. The Chorister Robin-chat put on a good show compared to at Xumeni however. Reluctantly, the 'troops' departed the forest to return for breakfast but an hour later were back for the final push on operation Spotted Ground-thrush. Trying slightly different tactics we enlisted the local bird guide at the forest who assured us he'd find them. Finally after a couple more hours walking around the reserve with good views of Green Malkoha and more Blue Duikers one was spotted by the guide and his co-helper, Mrs Security Guard! Careful coaxing of the birds allowed us to enjoy very close views of two feeding just a few metres from us, what a bird. Spotted Ground-thrush was under the belt, time to leave the area, job done. I love it when a plan comes together. Ironically, Vaughan had earlier said "we'll probably see it in the car park at 11.59 – he was wrong, it was 11.55 and 50 metres from the car park!!! Following a couple of hours driving we arrived in the coastal town of St Lucia where Rufous-winged Cisticola was added to the burgeoning list and some of the group raided the local wine merchants, for medicinal purposes of course. The afternoon was spent birding the estuary on the edge of the caravan park where signs warned 'beware of the crocs and hippos', it seemed somewhat different and more exciting than the campsites back in the UK. The estuary was pretty birdy, with the use of a 'scope Lesser Crested, Crested and Sandwich Terns were found, an Osprey dived and caught a fish, an African Golden-weaver colony was busy and bright, a huge Goliath Heron flew past, whilst a group of waders included Common Greenshank, Little Stint and Wood and Curlew Sandpipers whilst a brief Black Sparrowhawk whizzed past. Inside the caravan park (busy with holidaymakers and the smell of BBQs) the localised Rudd's Apalis was teased out into view and showed incredibly well at close range whilst Brown Scrub-robin eventually showed well in the trees. Nearby a Southern Boubou also sat up nicely but a bizarre sight was seeing an adult Diederik Cuckoo feeding a young bird, very un-cuckoo like. It evidently didn't trust another species to feed it's young! The evening was spent enjoying a superb South African BBQ or brie as its known what a great way to end a day.

Day 8: A pre-dawn start for Green Twinspot before the holidaymakers woke up at the campsite proved fruitless but we were not disappointed with great views of the localised Woodward's Batis, a close perched Banded Snake-eagle and a small group of Red-backed Mannikins feeding quietly nearby. Add to this some posy Livingstone's Turacos and you have a good hours birding pre breakfast. The estuary was alive with birds again and several more waders added to the list with distant Kittlitz's Plovers, Water Thick-knees, and a solitary Ruff. Some enormous Nile Crocodiles were seen hauled out of the water together with hippos plying the waters. The weaver colony eventually producing the much-wanted Southern Brown-throated Weaver after much searching while Bill spotted a small bird that turned out to be a cracking little Black-throated Wattle-eye, great stuff. Heading back for a hearty breakfast, we paused to look at a group of 'punk' Crested Guinea-fowl by the roadside. Then it was off to Cape Vidal for our first game drive of the tour which with the aid of the walkie talkies allowed the two vehicles to communicate as we couldn't get out of the vehicles due to the potentially dangerous wild animals. Once in the park and settled with a good view, including the floor of the vehicle, we commenced the game drive, Banded Snake-eagle, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, Lilac-breasted and European Rollers, a couple of distant Collared Pratincoles by a waterhole and Burchell's (White-browed) Coucal peering at us from its scrubby bush. Mammal wise, White Rhinoceros was an impressive beast though

probably friendlier than the Cape Buffalo, hence the need to remain in the vehicles. Common Zebras showed us how handsome they are for a stripy horse, and made the African experience all the better with Blue Wildebeest, Greater Kudu, and Impala nearby, illustrating what a great continent Africa is for birds and mammals. A comfort stop within the vague 'safe' zone allowed some of us to see an Eastern Nicator though it was clearly binocular shy, then having survived our first game drive it was off to Bonamanzi game reserve where a short spell of birding late afternoon produced excellent views of Bearded Scrub-robin before waiting near the park entrance for dusk and the hoped for nightjar show. Once again luck was on our side with very close and handy views of Swamp Nightjar spotlighted and enjoyed by all.

Day 9: Another full days birding started with the insomniacs locating a displaying African Broadbill on territory, jumping off its chosen perch and vibrating its wings to return to the same branch with the white of its back exposed in the half light of the dark forest. With a full group now we set off around the reserve trying to locate a few more species resulted in slightly better views of Eastern Nicator for most, and a laid back Chameleon in no rush to cross the road. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, just as another slice of bacon was about to be consumed, Michael found a singing Lemon-breasted Canary by the restaurant which resulted in Graham rushing from his shower in order to see it. He was fully clothed and saw the bird but some of us thought the Zulu dancing had started early! The post breakfast session eventually gave us good views of a pair of gaudy Four-coloured Bushshrikes despite their attempts to hide in dense cover plus a vocalising Streak-throated Honeyguide, another Eastern Nicator, Lizard Buzzard, and a small group of Crested Guineafowl. The afternoon session involved an hour's drive to Phinda game reserve and Mkuzi which resulted in lots of new species for the trip plus more White Rhinoceros, Giraffes and Common Zebras. Some of the group managed to get onto a brief and skulky Pink-throated Twinspot, with commoner birds seen including Striped Kingfisher, a surprise Black Coucal, Crested Barbets, several Red-backed Shrikes, Rattling Cisticola, Red-faced Mousebirds, European Bee eaters, Blue-breasted Cordon-bleus, Cape Glossy-starlings and the superb but widespread Black-shouldered Kites. A short visit to a nearby wetland produced a much wanted bird in the form of Lesser Jacana, widespread in Africa but difficult to come by, add to this Allen's Gallinule, lots of egrets, the gorgeous African Pygmy-geese, African Spoonbills and a few waders it had been another great day. The evening back at Bonamanzi culminated in a demonstration of Zulu dancing by the locals whilst we dined at our BBQ, so, not to be rude Paula and myself had a go at dancing as well though I don't think we'll be taking it up professionally, or appearing on the joint Anglo-Americas Got Talent!

Day 10: Breakfast was interrupted as an apparent 'moggy' that sprinted out of the breakfast bar turned out to be a Large-spotted Genet that then sat up a tree watching us, breakfast and mammals, the easy way. The long drive to Wakkerstroom was broken by a stop at Mkuzi Game Reserve where we were all able to savour the delights of Pink-throated Twinspots near the park entrance and enjoy this excellent little bird. Door closed, eyes peeled and into the game reserve we headed towards the sand forests habitat zone which hopefully would produce our target species. The area was excellent for birds with Common Scimitarbills, Pied Cuckoos, a Kurrichane Thrush, Yellow-breasted and Rudd's Apalis, Sabota Lark, and eventually a Neergard's Sunbird which perched up but not for the best of views and sadly our only encounter. A visit to a nearby waterhole accessed via an enclosed walkway was surely one of the most memorable places on the tour as countless mammals visited to feed much to the delight of everyone. Blue Wildebeest, Warthogs, Nyala, Impalas the views were fantastic. Every so often we would tear ourselves away to look at birds as many species came to drink at the waterhole including gaudy Green-winged Pytilia, Yellow-fronted Canaries and Emerald Spotted Wood-doves. As we left the park a pair of Crowned Hawk-eagles was located in a large tree right next to the road giving amazing views. Departing the park, we paused mid afternoon at some grasslands near Dirkiesdorp which were alive with hirundines, South African Cliff Swallows being the key species whilst further up the hill a wander into the grasslands and roadside birding provided us with a superb hour or so birding. Spike-heeled Larks in flight, Eastern Clapper Larks in their aerial display, clapping away as they dropped out of the sky, Cloud Cisticolas literally up in the clouds (I'm amazed they don't get altitude sickness and mostly seen as a dot in the sky that took a bit of searching for). Nearer terra firma we were treated to fantastic views of White-bellied Bustard or Barrow's Korhaan whilst downsizing a bit a Neddicky or Piping Cisticola perched on wires, whilst a Lanner peering down at us from pylons. We finished the day with Cape Longclaws, Pin-tailed Whydahs and Pale-crowned Cisticolas but despite heroic efforts, our grassland walk failed to reveal any

buttonquail. Our arrival in Wakkerstroom at a superb guesthouse was a real treat to another mega day finished off with a meal nearby in a local restaurant.

Day 11: A full days birding in the upland plains of Wakkerstroom with lots of key birds to target some very rare and localised with the help of our local guide Lucky, an employee of Birdlife International. Leaving town, we climbed up into the hills driving along dirt tracks with endless fields home to bishops, widowbirds and African Pied Starlings. We made a brief stop at a small lake where several birds were rapidly added to the trip list though being the only one of the trip the Giant Kingfisher was all too brief for some. A small wooded island held nesting Black-headed Herons and Long-tailed Cormorants as Whiskered Terns patrolled the lake and fields. Cape Shoveler was a welcome addition to many lists plus Yellow-billed Ducks, whilst Red-knobbed Coots were very evident but not paid attention to by all initially. Heading higher and higher along the dirt tracks we finally reached an area of rocky outcrops that unfortunately would be lost at times as the mist rolling in. The key bird here was Yellow-tufted Pipit which was certainly playing hard to get despite singing away on distant rocks. Constant scanning revealed lots of other birds including Long-billed Pipit, Southern Ant-eating Chat, African Stonechats, the snazzy Buff streaked Chats and a very distant singing Cinnamon-breasted Bunting. Finally the pipit was located and fortunately all the group managed to see this localised species through the 'scopes as it sang it's heart out from the rocks. Add to this lots of African Pipits, and a distant group of Bald Ibis and it was an enjoyable place to stop. Next stop was for another rare pipit, this time the superb Yellow-breasted Pipit which eventually gave good views on the ground for some though mostly seen in flight as it displayed high above us. Common Quail called with its characteristic 'wet my lip's call from the depths of the fields but a stately pair of Denham's Bustards stole the show happily feeding on a distant hillside giving good 'scope views. We had one more bird to target before returning for a very late breakfast: (birds always take priority over food, after all eggs and bacon are certainly not localised endemics!) Eastern-long billed Lark. Fortunately, the lark did us proud showing well at another locality so it was game on for breakfast happy knowing we had achieved part one of our Wakkerstroom bird finding mission. Breakfast was constantly interrupted by the bird table in the very birdy gardens at the guesthouse which was full of Speckled Mousebirds, Crested and Black-collared Barbets and Village Weavers; no peace for birders! As we readied ourselves for the next part of the day, a Karoo Thrush appeared being seen by most before we set off with packed lunches at the ready along another set of endless dirt tracks. We paused for a stunning pair of very smart Blue Cranes, the national bird of South Africa, feeding quietly in a nearby field. Driving off piste along a rough track, Lucky explained that our best chance of seeing Pink-billed Lark was remaining in the vehicles. The drive through the marsh was a little worrying but duly produced the goods and by carefully walking towards where the birds flew we were able to observe this tiny lark, which is reminiscent of a Lapland Longspur, while it furtively fed in the grass before breaking cover flying and out of sight. Next was the rare and localised Botha's Lark which after a fair walk across the grasslands was located at close range providing us with excellent views. A Cloud Cisticola was seen nearer to sea level this time as opposed to up in the clouds as one sat up in the grass following its aerial freefall. The larks were the key birds but the sight of numerous migrating Black-winged Pratincoles was fantastic as they appeared from all directions across the plains. Travelling to the next destination was somewhat punctuated by the very photogenic Amur Falcons that seemed to occupy every wire and post on route. We then entered the privately-owned community grasslands where we paused to have a rest and enjoy a late lunch accompanied by the sound of Common Quail singing and Barn Swallows flying overhead. We 'signed in' at the village to start our search for the critically endangered Rudd's Lark. Once again Lady Luck was on our side as a pair of these diminutive, almost mouse-like larks were watched feeding at close range before seemingly burrowing through the grass almost out of view. The protection of these grasslands have been a real success story and Luckys help was invaluable in locating these key species so, flushed with success, we could now enjoy the birds on the nearby lake which by careful scanning produced a Maccao Duck, White-backed Ducks, nesting Great-crested Grebes, hundreds of Red-knobbed Coots and some noisy Blacksmiths' Plovers. Retracing our steps, we left the grasslands only pausing to enjoy a Yellow Mongoose followed by a group of Meerkats included some cute youngsters. It was all too simple as they say. Roadside birds during the return journey towards Wakkerstroom included Spike-heeled Larks, Lesser Masked-weavers, a small group of Black-throated Canaries and another pair of stately Blue Cranes. The next hoped-for bird in the area was eventually located on a distant hillside with a group of five Blue Korhaans, another of this excellent family of birds to add to our tally. A final stop at marshes near

town as the sun started to set was home to South African Shelducks, Grey Crowned-cranes coming in to roost plus a hunting African Marsh-harrier. It really had been a long but incredibly successful day and we bid our farewells to Lucky thanking him for his help.

Day 12: A pre-breakfast visit to the marshes near town again with Purple Herons, Little Bitterns briefly in flight, a brief Malachite Kingfisher for some, African Reed-warblers singing and showing well and Cape Clawless Otters patrolling the waters, but still no African Snipe. Nearby, African Water Rail showed briefly to some as many called invisibly from the dense reeds. A petrol stop allowed us to get good views of Bokmakierie singing literally from the rooftops of the houses whilst another Red-throated Wryneck posing for the cameras was a bonus. Bidding farewell to our hosts at a guesthouse that caters superbly for birders needs and habits, we commenced the long drive to Kruger National Park, which would hopefully be another highlight of the trip and home to lots of new birds and superb mammals. Once again we passed countless Amur Falcons en route and a real bonus in the form of Lesser Kestrels. Driving through the town of Carolina a presumed African Goshawk flew across the road and into some trees but was all very brief. The scenery then changed markedly with the landscape cut up by coal mining industries and lots of factories though a group of over a hundred White Storks livened up the journey in roadside fields. Driving along the N4 to Lydenburg we ate up the miles on the quiet and excellent road network finally reaching the Numbia entrance gate to Kruger early afternoon. Lunch was the usual quick bite distracted by another bird as a group of Retz's Helmetshrikes put on a good show near the toilet block whilst a Pearl-spotted Owlet glared at us from its chosen tree and an African Paradise-flycatcher sat on its cup shaped nest. It was clear that Kruger was a very touristy spot compared to all the other sites visited so far on the tour as vehicle after vehicle full of tourists entered the park for game drives. The group of Epauletted Bats in a nearby tree seemed oblivious to all the commotion as they hung about waiting for dusk. Ongoing vehicle heating problems were a concern for one of the vehicles for its baked occupants but as we entered the well-maintained park it was quite clear that our short stay in Kruger was going to be an enjoyable experience as within no time at all a group of eight or so White-crested Helmetshrikes fed noisily near the road in a wooded area. Moving on, a pair of Spotted Eagle-owls which sat up at roost on a large rocky outcrop really stole the show affording simply superb views. Brightly marked Southern Carmine and European Bee-eaters were numerous within the park together with European and Lilac-breasted Rollers. A visit to a waterhole produced Southern Yellow-billed Hornbills, some very tame Blacksmith Plovers trying to hitch a lift in the vehicles they were so close and a tree with nesting Red-billed Buffalo-weavers in their outsized stick nests plus Southern Masked-weavers. Heading towards our camp for the night at Skukuza, a small herd of Savanna Elephants crossed the road with a cute little youngster whilst a small group of vehicles parked up ahead indicated there was something of interest being seen. Sure enough, by carefully manoeuvring the vehicles we were able to get some sort of views of a pride of six African Lions though the limited viewing didn't help as the group moved off into the bush. On nearing the camp, we could see the large numbers of vehicles heading in before the official lock in time of 18.30; we entered at 18.20 to be greeted by Michaels' parents who kindly showed us a pair of roosting Barn Owls in the reception buildings, staring down at us from their lofty perch. Following a short rest in our air-conditioned huts, we settled down for an enjoyable buffet evening meal, the chocolate sponge and custard being very popular, this birding is hard work so we deserved it I reckon!

Day 13: An early morning stroll around camp was incredibly birdy with a White-breasted Sunbird perched out, an African Goshawk, several White-throated Robin-chats initially in dense cover then more in the open, then a superb White-browed Scrub-robin. An interesting lapwing on the river was most likely a hybrid White-crowned/Blacksmith, a bit of an odd ball. Then the call came up, Natal Francolins, an incredibly noisy group showed near the electric boundary fence though less showy was an Icterine Warbler doing its best to hide in dense vegetation. Little did we know that whilst all this was going on the Vervet Monkeys had decided to raid the fridges and enjoyed an early morning picnic courtesy of some of the group, though they were evidently a bit choosy on what they consumed. At the breakfast tables a nesting Black-collared Barbet watched the world go by, its head peering out of a hole in a tree whilst a quick visit to the garage involved a ten second diagnosis or should I say lack of it from the staff so the hot second van continued on its journey. We drove towards the next camp, not a huge distance away but we had all day to get there birding all the time. The heating problem was then solved; an internal switch had got accidentally knocked on so cool air was restored once more.

Savanna Elephants, Common Zebras, Giraffes, then a bit of hot gen from another tourist found us the only ones watching an African Lioness under some bushes out of the intense sun's rays, what a fantastic sight and all to ourselves. Exploring some of the side tracks lots of birds were found including the tiny canopy-loving African Penduline-tits that were at times difficult to get views of from an enclosed vehicle, though Burnt-necked Eremomela, Black-crowned Tchagra, Burchell's Glossy-starlings and Southern Red-billed Hornbills were all much easier. A short stop at a bridge over a large river added Saddle-billed Stork and Three-banded Plover whilst overhead during the day, Bateleurs and Hooded, White-backed and White-headed Vultures enjoyed the updraughts. A large group of Magpie Shrikes put on a good show whilst another waterhole had Knob-billed Ducks and Spur winged Goose plus a few Common Greenshank. Our lunch stop in the heat of the day was not a particularly restful experience as the cheeky Vervet Monkeys decided that our lunch was far too good for us to eat so it was very much a case of eat quickly and don't let the monkeys grab your plate! An adjacent table of tourists surrendered to them as the intimidation was too much....cheeky monkeys. We departed the monkey sideshow continuing our journey to Satara and arriving at 16.20 finding our rooms complete with fridges locked behind bars; much more sensible and definitely monkey proof. We prepared for the late afternoon sojourn though not before some had hit the souvenir shops like greased lightning! Our short game drive was incredibly enjoyable with Crested Francolin for some, over fifty Red-backed Shrikes plus several Lesser Grey Shrikes. A side track saw us get very lucky when we stopped to photograph a Red-necked Spurfowl only to notice a Red-crested Bustard sneaking about. It proceeded to circle the vehicles giving stunning views and even performing its parachute display. A huge bull Savanna Elephant showed us who's boss as he slowly wandered across the track ahead of us (Vaughan had the van permanently ready in reverse gear!) with the endless savannah stretching beyond. The day had certainly been an eventful one but we still had one last birding session a night drive which lasted two hours with ours and another birding group almost filling up the vehicle. Some late arriving Portuguese non-birders having to endure a night drive stopping for nightjars instead of big cats! This was a superb experience with three bright spotlights searching out the tracks and clearings but once again the birding Gods were on our side with close up views of Square-tailed Nightjars, Spotted Thick-knees in the middle of the road, a White Rhinoceros and calf snorting in a mock charge plus a brief Porcupine and Black-backed Jackal. The real stars of the show though were when the driver suddenly sped up and we thought oh well 'shows over back to camp' but instead pulled up alongside not one but two adult male African Lions complete with manes that sauntered down the road at almost touching distance, the stuff of dreams, the Portuguese were glad they joined us after all!

Day 14: Our last morning in Kruger with the long drive to Magooebasloof ahead of us. We started with a gentle walk around camp with Natal Francolins, Bearded Woodpecker, a big and bold Grey-headed Bushshrike, and a very noisy group of Arrow-marked Babblers. Heading back for breakfast one of the gardeners pointed out a cryptically camouflaged African Scops-owl snoozing in a small tree. We said our goodbyes to Michael's parents and headed for the Palaborwe gate to Kruger but the show continued with stacks more good birds. Now as the days had gone by Jen may have mentioned once or twice that she wished to see a Secretarybird so when I glanced out of the window and saw one happily feeding close to the road the twitch was on. With radio communication made the lead vehicle which was watching a Southern Ground-hornbill did a quick three point turn and within minutes was at the scene to see the Secretarybird whilst we switched places to see the huge Southern Ground-hornbills. Smiles all round, these walkie talkies certainly come in handy. Our luck continued once more with a Lappet faced Vulture flyover followed by a miniscule Desert Cisticola, talk about little and large! An equally tiny Steenbok, a small antelope, a cracking perched male Montagu's Harrier and a pair of very close Kori Bustards followed during the next exciting hour. Nearing the exit to the park and thinking that things couldn't get any better, we found a pair of Water Buffalo wallowing in their mud hole and better still, a sleepy group of Spotted Hyenas looked on at the tourists intently from their shady bush. We had one more site to visit this afternoon, the Abel Erasmus pass famed for its Taita Falcons, a very rare raptor with very few accessible localities worldwide. We knew the chances were low as the female had not been seen for a while and the lone male now erratic in his appearances at the gorge. A local owner of a curio stall, Michael, keeps a careful eye on the falcons and helps birders in locating the birds and monitoring their most recent movements. Whilst constantly scanning for the falcons we notched up lots of hyper Alpine Swifts, a Common (Rock) Kestrel far in the distance but still no Taita Falcon. Michael's perseverance paid off with him locating a Striped Pipit that finally behaved itself with everyone seeing it well.

After all was beginning to look 'doom and gloom' on the falcon front, Bill quietly mentioned he could see a falcon high above us then got a bit more animated grabbing our attention, a very distant Taita Falcon cruised over us and away, not the best of views but none the less a Taita and in the nick of time. The drive to Magoebasloof was a winding affair on switch back roads but when we arrived at this guesthouse hidden away in the hills we were 'gobsmacked' to be greeted by accommodation that was simply stunning, fit for a king, well, for tired birders anyway.

Day 15: The penultimate day, we journeyed to Polokwane game reserve having our packed breakfast at the park gate complete with Marico Flycatcher with Spotted Flycatchers nearby for comparison. Our drive through the park was on a Saturday with lots of joggers and cyclists aware that the park has White Rhinoceros, though they are apparently friendly? A scratchy call led us to a singing Olive-tree Warbler clambering about in the acacias plus two more new birds; Chestnut-vented Warbler and the luminescent Crimson-breasted Gonolek, its loud call bellowing from the depths of the scrub. A singing Barred Wren-warbler was finally tracked down sitting out, though Violet-eared Waxbill didn't stay around long compared to the Ashy Tit and Marico Sunbirds. Black-chested Prinia was another addition to the trip list before it got hotter and the vehicles got temporarily stuck in the mud on one of the tracks. We opted for another route taking in a group of Ostrich in full stretch running away. They're huge someone said, but were they tickable, yes I think so? A flycatcher initially thought to be pied turned out to be it's lookalike southern cousin, Fiscal Flycatcher whilst snazzy Pied Barbets curiously greeted us and a super Sulphur-breasted Bushshrike finally put in an appearance after being heard several times during the trip. Another track got us the much-wanted Short-clawed Lark, a speciality of the area, together with Southern Penduline-tits singing and the equally tiny (for a dove), Namaqua Dove. Kalahari Scrub-robin sat out briefly during the lark quest whilst Scaly Weaver finally stayed put and gave good views. Out of the park, we visited a local eatery with excellent food before returning for our last few target birds at Polokwane. A chance encounter with a friend of Michaels', Derek, had hot gen with a nest site of Short-clawed Lark which we visited briefly but even better a territorial Shaft-tailed Whydah displaying from bush to bush. What a bird and to top it all a roosting male Pallid Harrier seen in flight then a displaying White-quilled Bustard, it was an exciting thirty minutes. With time getting on, Great Rufous Sparrow was eventually located, not a stunner but a nice bird to see but the impending storm saw us make a hasty retreat back to our guesthouse so as not to get stuck in the mud again. Just as we were settling down for the night, Adrian and Christine heard very noisy African Wood-owls outside their room and sure enough there they were in the garden and watched from a balcony, a fitting end to another great day.

Day 16: The final day dawned wet and windy, departure was delayed and delayed again, then as we were about to set off a flat tyre on one of the vehicles further delayed us. Tyre changed, we had a short drive to some nearby forest through the thick mist. Green Twinspots were seen by most, some better than others as they zipped about in the trees and undergrowth. Our final targets were looking decidedly unlikely with zero bird sound in the misty forest until suddenly a few sounds and eventually we all had great views of the scarce Black-fronted Bushshrike. A very brief but not very showy Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher for some and Yellow-streaked Greenbuls. Setting off for Johannesburg we had one more ace to play, though incoming news was not sounding good with regards to Grass Owls. We arranged to meet another guide Selwyn who studies owls and flufftails. He kindly took us to one of his study sites which incredibly, with a bit of gardening and tactics, gave us all good views of a calling Red-chested Flufftail in a patch of reeds. Our efforts at locating owls drew a blank despite having a good walk, falling over a few times and marvelling at Selwyn's ability to go like a galloping antelope across the uneven ground. It had been a great trip, we changed our clothes nearby and set off for the airport seeing Martial and Black-chested Snake-eagle on the way. South Africa had lived up to its expectations, Michael, Vaughan, Sveta, the other local guides and the participants on the tour had achieved seeing almost all the target birds, you can't complain at that can you. Totting up, we had seen thirty eight species of raptor, six species of bustards, eleven species of lark, thirteen of cisticolas and forty species of mammals. So good birds, mammals, food, accommodation plus some good fun and laughs on the way, it was a trip to remember. Overnight direct flight back home at the end of the tour.

BARRY WRIGHT