

Birding Trip Report

South Africa – Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve (south of Johannesburg) and Surrounds

13 July 2019



Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Monticola explorator (male) - an emblematic bird of the South African highveld

Synopsis: With a one-day layover in Johannesburg *en route* home to Australia, I contracted Dylan Vasapolli of Birding Ecotours to take me birdwatching on my layover. Based on the list of wanted species I provided, Dylan put together an itinerary that focused in and around the Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve, located approximately 50kms south of Johannesburg.

We enjoyed an excellent day's birding with 116 species recorded, of which 16 were personal lifers (entries in bold type). Highlights were seeing Grass and Marsh Owls at close range and coming to grips with some of the highveld specialties of the Gauteng area.



A pre-dawn start from Jo'burg's Oliver Tambo Airport had us on the road driving south of South Africa's commercial capital. It was zero degrees. In the darkness, we stopped on an unsealed lane where Dylan spotlighted a single **African Grass-Owl, *Tyto capensis***. The contrast between the dark back and light underwing was striking.

Not long afterwards, as dawn broke, we were onto a group of four individual **Marsh Owls, *Asio capensis*** which were hunting over the damp grassland.

Birding in the grasslands by the roadside, we soon found a number of **Cape (Orange-throated) Longclaw, *Macronyx capensis*** - the males showing an intense colouring:



Buzzing around us were great flocks of African Quailfinch, *Ortygospiza fuscocrissa*. Common Fiscal, *Lanius collaris* (left) were also common in the area, as were Capped Wheatear, *Oenanthe pileate* (r):



After some coaxing, Dylan pulled out a few responsive **Melodious Lark, *Mirafra cheniana*** which would fly up and disappear into long grass in quick succession:



In some recently burned fields, we saw a small covey of 3 **Swainson's Spurfowl, *Pternistis swainsonii***:



Just outside the Suikerbosrand park entrance, Dylan located several **Orange River Francolin, *Scleroptila levaillantoides levaillantoides*** (which were quite distinct from the paler form ssp. *jugularis* which I had seen in Namibia):



Once inside the park, we spent a good hour exploring the lightly wooded hills around a visitor and picnic centre. Here, we encountered a very vocal Rufous-breasted Wryneck *Jynx ruficollis*:



In acacia trees, rather appropriately, we saw a pair of **Acacia Pied Barbet**, *Tricholaema leucomelas*:



and a lone Black-collared Barbet, *Lybius torquatus* (left), but the highlight for me here was the South African endemic, **Fairy Flycatcher**, *Stenostira scita* (more closely related to the *Elminia* family) (right):



As the morning wore on and the temperature rose, the birding slowed. We did however catch nice views of White-bellied Sunbird, *Cinnyris talatala* – the only sunbird species seen on the tour:



Before leaving, we found two very southern African birds: a lone Neddicky (Piping Cisticola), *Cisticola fulvicapilla* feeding on the ground in short grass (left) and a Cape Grassbird, *Sphenoeacus afer*:



We left the lower sections of the park and climbed into the *highveld*. First up was a female **Sentinel Rock-Thrush, *Monticola explorator***:



Mountain Wheatear (Chat), *Oenanthe monticola*, were common, including the rather striking grey morph.

Eastern Long-billed Lark, *Certhilauda semitorquata* showed well in the hill country:



In the distance, we could hear and then managed to locate at a distance, a family of **Grey-winged Francolin, *Scleroptila Africana*** which were feeding around a hillside strewn with boulders.

As we descended from the escarpment, the surrounding countryside had been burned back. An African (Grassveld) Pipit, *Anthus cinnamomeus* showed well (left); and a **(Southern) Ant-eating Chat, *Myrmecocichla formicivore*** – was seen close to termite mounds (female right):



Cisticolae were common in the area, but especially shy and difficult to pin down. Dylan later pronounced a clear sighting of **Wailing (Churring) Cisticola, *Cisticola lais*** – which is distinguished by its long tail, rufous head and is resident in grass on rocky hillslopes in moister areas.

We were both pleasantly surprised to see a Secretarybird, *Sagittarius serpentarius* which is listed a vulnerable status in South Africa:



Close by, we were lucky to happen upon the somewhat enigmatic **Brown-backed Honeybird**, aka: Wahlberg's and Sharp-billed Honeyguide, ***Prodotiscus regulus***:





At a picnic spot, our attempt to find Ashy Tit, *Parus cinerascens* was unsuccessful, but we did have fun with Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler (or Rufous-vented Warbler), *Sylvia subcaeruleum* and Bar-throated Apalis, *Apalis thoracica* (just peeping into the frame on right):



As the later afternoon rolled around, the birding picked up again. Nice views were had of several Kalahari Scrub-Robin, *Erythropygia paena*:



We encountered a large flock of the subtly beautiful, Black-faced Waxbill, *Estrilda erythronotos*:



A panorama of some of the distinctive vegetation of the lower altitudes of the reserve

Our last bird before leaving the park was an obliging Bokakierie, *Telophorus zeylonus* – endemic to arid areas of SW Africa:



Knowing my particular interest in seeing **Maccoa Duck, *Oxyura maccoa*** (stiff-tail), (my last duck species for Africa), we high-tailed it to a dam at Tsakane where Dylan expected it to be reliably found:



The dam was an abundance of avifauna, including large flocks of Greater and Lesser Flamingos:



In the grasslands around the dams, we also picked up two final lifers: **Spike-heeled Lark, *Chersomanes albofasciata*** – with a diagnostic upright posture; and **Cloud Cisticola, *Cisticola textrix*** (right):



And with that, we high-tailed it to the airport for my flight back to Australia. I am most grateful to Dylan for his good company, expertise and excellent tour arrangements.



My guide, Dylan Vasapolli



David Karr, Kinshasa, 27 July 2019

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Systematic List – Suikerbosrand

1. Grey-winged Francolin
2. Orange River Francolin
3. Swainson's Spurfowl
4. Hadada Ibis
5. Western Cattle Egret
6. Black-headed Heron
7. Secretarybird (VU)
8. Black-winged Kite
9. Northern Black Korhaan
10. Blacksmith Lapwing
11. Crowned Lapwing
12. Rock Dove
13. Speckled Pigeon
14. Red-eyed Dove
15. Ring-necked Dove
16. Laughing Dove
17. African Grass-Owl
18. Marsh Owl
19. African Palm Swift
20. Little Swift
21. Speckled Mousebird
22. White-backed Mousebird
23. Red-faced Mousebird
24. African Hoopoe
25. Green Wood Hoopoe
26. Common Scimitarbill
27. Acacia Pied Barbet
28. Black-collared Barbet

29. Crested Barbet
30. Brown-backed Honeyguide
31. Red-throated Wryneck
32. Cardinal Woodpecker
33. Rock Kestrel
34. Bokmakierie
35. Southern Fiscal
36. Fairy Flycatcher
37. Spike-heeled Lark
38. Eastern Long-billed Lark
39. Sabota Lark
40. Rufous-naped Lark
41. Melodious Lark
42. African Red-eyed Bulbul
43. Dark-capped Bulbul
44. Brown-throated Martin
45. Rock Martin
46. Cape Grassbird
47. Wailing Cisticola
48. Levaillant's Cisticola
49. Neddicky
50. Zitting Cisticola
51. Cloud Cisticola
52. Black-chested Prinia
53. Bar-thoated Apalis
54. Cape White-eye
55. Common Myna (I)
56. Cape Starling
57. Pied Starling

58. Karoo Thrush
59. Kalahari Scrub-Robin
60. Fiscal Flycatcher
61. Cape Robin-Chat
62. Cape Rock-Thrush
63. Sentinel Rock-Thrush
64. African Stonechat
65. Mocking Cliff Chat
66. (Southern) Ant-eating Chat
67. Mountain Wheatear
68. Capped Wheatear
69. Familiar Chat
70. White-bellied Sunbird
71. House Sparrow
72. Cape Sparrow
73. Southern Grey-headed Sparrow
74. White-browed Sparrow-Weaver
75. Thick-billed Weaver
76. Southern Masked Weaver
77. Red-billed Quelea
78. Southern Red Bishop
79. Red-collared Widowbird
80. Long-tailed Widowbird
81. Green-winged Pytilia
82. Common Waxbill
83. Black-faced Waxbill
84. Orange-breasted Waxbill
85. Quailfinch
86. Cape Longclaw

- 87. African Pipit
- 88. Long-billed Pipit
- 89. Black-throated Canary
- 90. Yellow Canary
- 91. Cape Canary
- 92. Cape Bunting

Tsakane Dam

- 93. White-faced Whistling Duck
- 94. Spur-winged Goose
- 95. Egyptian Goose
- 96. South African Shelduck
- 97. Hottentot Teal
- 98. Cape Shoveler
- 99. Yellow-billed Duck
- 100. Cape Teal
- 101. Red-billed Teal
- 102. Southern Pochard
- 103. Maccoa Duck (VU)
- 104. Little Grebe
- 105. Black-necked Grebe
- 106. Greater Flamingo
- 107. Lesser Flamingo
- 108. African Sacred Ibis
- 109. Common Moorhen
- 110. Red-knobbed Coot
- 111. Black-winged Stilt
- 112. Pied Avocet
- 113. African Wattled Lapwing

- 114. Common Sandpiper
- 115. Helmeted Guineafowl
- 116. Reed Cormorant

