Birding Trip Report

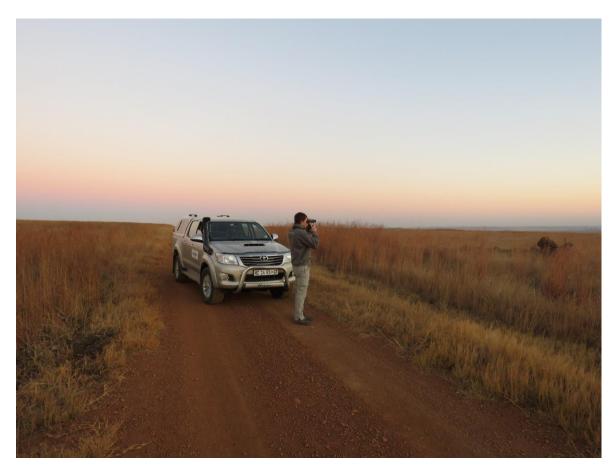
South Africa – Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve (south of Johannesburg) and Surrounds 13 July 2019



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, or 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 **s**howing 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 cheni*ana 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*:

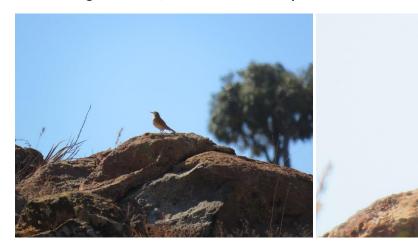


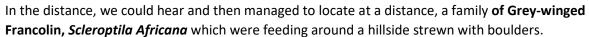
We left the lower sections of the park and climbed into the *highveld*. First up was a female **Sentinel Rock-Thrush**, *Monticola explorator*:



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:





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 <u>Sharp-billed</u> 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 <u>Tsakane</u> 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 davidwkarr@gmail.com

<u>Systematic List – Suikerbosrand</u>

- 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

