

# South Africa

## Birds of the Soutpansberg-Limpopo area

14<sup>th</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup> January 2006



Bateleur

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### Participants

Neil Gartshore (organiser)

Dick & Jan Brown

Kit & Jackie Ellis

Wayne Geater

Nick & Jackie Hull

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### **14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> January**

The Group met up at Heathrow at 15.00 for check-in and an 18.00 departure for Johannesburg International. The cramped flight arrived on time at 07.00 local time (+2 hours GMT) and after the formalities of customs, baggage claim and sorting out the hire cars and phone rental we were away to our first stop by 09.00 and had our first birds (**little swift**) in the bag.

Just off the R21, north of the airport, we stopped at the Rietvlei Nature Reserve where we met up with John Isom for our first birding opportunity. The reserve is an area of highveld grassland with a chance of a number of species that we probably wouldn't find further north. **Wing-snapping** and **cloud cisticolas**, **orange-throated longclaw**, **pieb starling** and **ant-eating chat**, plus decent views of **African quail finch** coming to drink at a puddle, were seen here. With John as our guide, we drove around the reserve for a couple of hours but by 12.30 needed to continue our northwards journey to Makhado. After a short stop for lunch at a service station north of Pretoria we headed north on the N1. Light rain and distant thunder kept the temperature down a touch and we reached Shiluvuvaru Lakeside Lodge, on the banks of the Albasini Dam, by 18.30. An excellent evening meal at 20.00, followed by a roll call (ca 80 species seen today), was accompanied by bright moonlight and distant thunder. On the way to bed **African wood owls** were called out giving excellent views above our heads. Finally at some point before midnight a thunder storm with heavy rain hit the camp.

### **16th January**

The plan for the day was to stay in the area to relax a little after the long journey. A planned pre-breakfast walk around Shiluvuvaru was called off as torrential downpours interspersed with lighter showers made birding near impossible. Some of the group took the opportunity to go back to bed before breakfast whilst the others watched the garden from the veranda. A respectable 30-odd species were seen in the hour before breakfast, including a very wet **African fish-eagle** sitting atop a dead tree. Over breakfast the weather began to clear a little and by the time we left at 09.00 only a few light showers remained.

Our first stop was a few miles down the road along a dirt road passing under the Albasini Dam wall. With the wet road and 2-wheel drive vehicles the driving was interesting - we got down the slope okay but weren't too sure about getting up the other side! As we birded near the dam wall the rain cleared and the sun broke through and a variety of birds began to show. Fortunately, the road wasn't too bad on the other side so we continued to the Muirhead Dams to the east of Makhado, on the R524. This little gem of a site consists of three dams on a private farm growing fruit and macadamia nuts and has been developed with the Soutpansberg-Limpopo Birding Route (SLBR) and includes a hide and trails around the dams. We headed off around the main trail and in places needed to trail blaze through the overgrown vegetation. The main attraction here is that it is one of a growing number of sites in the area where a South African rarity, the **blue-spotted wood-dove** is being found. Playing tapes to identify the calls of a number of doves in the scrub a single blue-spot flew out towards the farm buildings, giving good views as it fed on the ground. A good tick to get! Other highlights by the dams were **black crane**, **pygmy kingfisher** and **thick-billed weaver**.

Leaving the dams around 15.00, we headed back to Shiluvhari via a quick shop and fuel stop in Makhado. Before dinner Michael, our host, took us out on the Albasini Dam to look for African finfoot and water birds. Although we didn't see the finfoot we did pick up a number of new species including **Cape grassbird**, **water dikkop**, **osprey** and **crocodile**. As we made our way back the distant skies were darkening, lightening was flashing on the horizon and the smell of rain was in the air...heading our way. It was touch and go if we were going to make it back to dry land in time. The front came in very quickly and for the last 10 minutes of the boat trip we were hit by cold torrential rain and wind and had to position ourselves to keep the front of the boat down and cling on as it made slow headway back to the mooring. We eventually made it back to dry land absolutely drenched. With time to dry off before dinner we later crawled into bed again with the sound of the rain beating down on the tin roof. Over 50 new trip birds were seen today.

### 17th January

The plan today was to leave at daybreak for the Kruger Park (Punda Maria Gate). That was fine until we got along the track to find the gate locked. Hooting the horn woke up a farm worker in a plot next to the gate but he didn't have a key. Phone calls and some to-ing and fro-ing finally saw the gate opened and we were on our way albeit behind schedule. The 100km journey to the Punda Maria gate soon passed and after signing in we headed to the Punda Maria Rest Camp for a late morning coffee by which time it had stopped raining and the temperature was rising. We were staying here on the 18<sup>th</sup> so we booked a game drive and evening meal for then before continuing south to Shingwedzi Rest Camp, arriving by 15.00. With so much to see progress was slow with frequent stops along the way. The park is excellent for raptors and **white-backed vulture**, **bateleur**, **tawny eagle**, **Wahlberg's eagle** and **brown snake-eagle** were picked up. We finally arrived at Shingwedzi and spent the remainder of the afternoon 'at leisure', resting up, washing and birding around the camp, before dinner at 18.00. Birding the camps (and official rest stops) is the only way walk in the Park (unless on an escorted walk). At 20.00 we left on a two hour night game drive. Although we didn't actually drive far **spotted hyena**, **lion** and **leopard** provided an exciting mammal interest, with **giant eagle-owl**, **bronze-winged courser** and **square-tailed nightjar** the bird interest. A further 45 new trip ticks added today and a good number of mammals.

### 18th January

The camp gate opened before daybreak at 04.30 and we were on our way south heading to Mopani Camp for breakfast. Following the Shingwedzi River for the first part of the drive, and passing the Kannidood Dam, we were hoping for water birds but numbers were disappointingly few, although we saw our first **hippo**, as the river was in full flood with no exposed mud. After breakfast at Mopani we prepared to head north and realised that one vehicle had a flat tyre. Once sorted it was a slow drive back to Punda Maria ready for a 3-hour night drive at 18.00. With an hour's daylight a group of **grey-headed parrot** and **yellow-billed oxpecker** were two less common species to add to our tally. No good mammals tonight but **African barred owlet** and another **giant eagle-owl** were of interest.

### 19th January

Another 04.30 start leaving the camp at to take a pre-breakfast drive around the Mahonie Loop. A close encounter with an **elephant** caused some excitement. We pulled up to look at a small group in the adjacent bush when one gave out a little trumpet followed and began pushing over a couple of small trees. Next was an almighty 'MOVE' as Jackie in the car behind was getting impatient for us to get out of the way...don't know what was more scary the thought of the elephant coming crashing towards us or the yell from behind (certainly jumped higher with the latter!!). Saw another selection of new birds on the loop including **black-headed oriole**, **lesser honeyguide** and **golden-breasted bunting**.

After breakfast and a short walk around the camp we headed up to the Levhubu River and the Pafuri picnic site before driving along the river to Crooks Corner where the Levhubu joins the Limpopo. En route to Crooks Corner we disturbed a family of **hippo** out on the opposite bank – the female and calf splashed straight into the water, the male continued browsing providing a good opportunity for photos.

We left the Kruger Park at 14.00 through the Pafuri Gate and headed east to Mopane Bush Lodge, our next stop for two nights, calling in to Musina briefly for a supermarket and fuel. Checking out raptors on the telegraph poles and pylons between Musina and Mopane added **black-breasted snake-eagle** to our list and by 18.00 we were checking into our (luxurious) huts. An open air dinner in the boma was cut short by a downpour – the first heavy rain they had had in the area (although it had been wet further east there had been no rain here). A spectacular lightening show then followed. The day had been one of the hottest yet with the car temp gauge reaching 37°C.

### 20th January

First part of the day was a trip to Mapungubwe National Park (east) – to the treetop trail and confluence. Another entrance gate problem - the guy couldn't get it to open....elephants had pushed it off its rails we were told – oh yes! After a short wait a truck load of workers arrived and lifted it back on to its runner. As the guy didn't have a cash box we were told to pay later. Immediately in the reserve, birds began to show including **common scimitarbill**, **violet-eared waxbill** and **dusky lark** new for the trip. The reserve is a relatively new national park and our time was short as we needed to get back to Mopane by 10.00. We headed to the tree top trail where a raised walkway leads to a tree top hide overlooking the Limpopo. Highlights here were a vocal **grey-headed bush-shrike** and the back end of a **lion** disappearing into the bush. A little further on, we came to the confluence viewpoint. This is one of the most stunning views that I have seen in the country. Looking out to the north the South African border follows the Limpopo River. Below the viewpoint the Shashe River joins the Limpopo with Botswana to the west and Zimbabwe to the east. After this it was a dash back to Mopane for breakfast (with a little time to watch our first **Verreaux's eagle** and **mocking cliff-chat**)...leaving the park a little too quickly with the gate guard running after the second car for our entrance fees.

After breakfast we took one of the vehicles and followed Paul Hatty (Mopane owner) to the Den Staat Dams. This is a private farm between two sections of Mapungubwe with a number of dams feeding the surrounding farmland (in future the area may be incorporated into the Park). This has become a mecca for water birds in the area but access can be difficult (depending on how the owner is feeling). Fortunately Paul had arranged the visit for us and after going to the house to pay our entrance fees we spent the next couple of hours driving around the pans. More good birds including two **southern crowned crane**, a small flock of **orange-breasted waxbill**, **Kittlitz's plover** and **fulvous duck**. Leaving the dams we continued on into the western section of Mapungubwe. The highlight here was undoubtedly a loose flock of **Caspian plover** in an old field, probably around 30 in all. On the way out, as the light was fading, we also managed to add **dark chanting goshawk** and **lesser spotted eagle** to the trip list. Back to Mopane as it was getting dark by 18.30. A more pleasant cooler (overcast) day.

### 21st January

With a relatively short distance to travel to our next stop today we left Mopane and made a detour to the north to check out a Pel's fishing owl site on a farm at Ratho. Our first stop off the main road on to the rough road to the farm produced five new trip ticks...we had moved a little further west and were picking up some of South Africa's western species including **chestnut-backed sparrowlark**, **great sparrow**, **scaly-feathered finch** and **Kalahari scrub-robin**. The area was extremely dry, as with Mopane there had been none of the rain that we had encountered further east. Ratho is a fruit growing area and a croc farm. Close views of these creatures in their pens sent shivers up the spine. Unfortunately the owner wasn't in so we had a look around the area where I have seen Pel's in the past but with no luck. A lunch stop in the tented campsite and around the buildings produced **white-browed robin-chat** and **tropical boubou**. We managed to find the farm manager who gave us permission to drive out over the farm to the dam and the vulture restaurant. The former was very dry with little water and not too many birds and the latter had loads of **marabou stork** but no vultures.

By late morning it was back to the main road and south to Makule Makete, our base for the next two nights. On arrival we met Sarah (SLBR organiser and ground agent for this trip) and after sorting out the accommodation, lunch and resting up we took a ride around part of the reserve before dark. The camp has three huts and is built around a large baobab, set at the foot of a large koppie (hill). With not enough huts Neil & Wayne slept on a veranda under the stars. The night sounds kept waking us up, both having visions of leopards climbing up the stairs. In the end we made do with very vocal jackals and a gentle breeze to keep us cool.

### 22nd January

We spent the day at Makule Makete starting off with a three hour walk around the koppie following a baobab trail. These amazing trees are spread out through the bush with the trail following one tree to another. This was the first long walk we had had on the trip, enabling us to see a variety of small birds including **red-headed weaver**, **familiar chat**, **acacia pied barbet** and **African wren-warbler** and a **crimson-breasted shrike** was seen by some of the group. Back at camp it was hotting up again and at 11.00 the group went off with Jane (the owner) to go **cheetah** tracking. As part of an endangered wildlife scheme a radio collared female has been released on the site and guests have the opportunity to go find her. She was soon found with out too much trouble and time was spent in her company. After lunch and a rest we went off again in the afternoon by car picking up new birds along the way adding **African black duck**, **yellow-bellied greenbul**, **white-throated robin-chat**, **grey-backed sparrowlark** and **orange-breasted bush-shrike** to our trip list before arriving back at camp just after dark and ready for dinner.

### 23rd January

We left Makule Makete at around 09.00 and headed south again, then east to our accommodation at Harnham House above Makhado (situated in a valley on the top of the Soutpansberg). As it was only a couple of hours drive we took our time birding along the way with telegraph poles providing good resting spots for a variety of raptors. **Black kite**, **lanner**, **steppe eagle** and **ovambo sparrowhawk** were all seen at close quarters, along with **red-headed finch**, **shaft-tailed whydah** and **monotonous lark**, the latter giving a good vocal display. Turning east at Vivo the road follows the southern slopes of the Soutpansberg to Makhado. Two stops produced new birds - the first by the Sand River bridge where a small **Capo vulture** breeding colony is on the mountain. A few birds were flying around but views were distant. The second stop a little further on overlooked the Spies Dam (full to the brim), one of the largest water bodies in the area. The heat haze made viewing difficult but **great crested grebe**, **black-winged stilt** and **alpine swift** were added to the trip list. After a brief stop at the local shops we checked in to Harnham House. That evening we were invited to Sarah's for a meal where both **black sunbird** and **southern double-collared sunbird** were seen in her garden. Returning to Harnham House after dark we picked up a **spotted eagle-owl** in the lights along the Bluegumspoor road.

## 24th January

We were to spend the next couple of days in the immediate area, spending time around the mountain. First off was an early (04.00) pre-daybreak start to Roodewal Forest. This is a well known spot thought by many to be one of the best in the area.....I'm not sure the others thought that by the time we left. Located on a private road we were given the security code to enable us to get in early. The weather was cool and wet so we only made it part of the way off the main track to the parking area and had to leave the cars and walk in. Then it was off into the forest through the thickets and long vegetation, getting wet on the way. African broadbill was our main target but their distinctive frog like song was silent. As day broke we found the local **crowned eagle** nest, no adults but a well grown youngster. The wet soil was very heavy underfoot with thick layers of red earth sticking to our shoes. We decided to walk around the Broadbill loop to try and find the bird. A few other birds were in the canopy as we ventured further in to the scrub with Neil in the front. At one point we could hear bees. As we stopped to find a way through a small tangle of branches the bees got louder when Neil saw one of the trees moving (a mass of bees!). The first comment was 'don't panic – there are a swarm of bees ahead', the second, after the first sting it was 'panic – run'. This was the quickest we had moved on foot all trip and after what seemed like ages the buzzing of the bees was finally left behind. Panting and counting the bee stings we left the trail and went back out to a forest track. The experience could have been a lot worse if the swam had followed us. Relieved to be away from the bees we continued to walk around the conifer block but we could hear more bees everywhere. We decided to call it a day (seeing **grey cuckooshrike** as we were leaving) and went for breakfast at Khaya Guest House back along the road near the security gate.

After a leisurely breakfast we set off for another state forest at Entabeni, the experience here was to make up for this morning. After paying our entrance fee at the gate it was out along the main forestry track up into the mountain with stops along the way. At the lower levels **red-backed mannikin**, **red-faced cisticola**, **dusky flycatcher** and **mountain wagtail** were picked up. In a clearing half way up a **jackal buzzard** performed well and we finally reached our last stop for a walk in to a piece of indigenous forest. The track we went in on is a local site for orange thrush, not seen today but a little further on in a small clearing we hit a purple patch. With necks bent, looking up into the canopy, we had excellent views of **yellow-streaked bulbul**, **black-fronted bush-shrike**, **yellow woodland-warbler**, **blue-mantled crested flycatcher**, another **grey cuckooshrike** and **scaly-throated honeyguide**. This certainly made up for Roodewal. Back down the mountain we called in at Muirhead Dams, with **common moorhen** added to the trip list, before returning to Harnham.

## 25th January

After breakfast we were joined by Sarah for our final day in the area. First stop, Hanglip Forest. Leaving Harnham we continued along the Bluegumspoor road turning off on a track leading down to the forest parking area. We didn't get very far as the birds started coming thick and fast, albeit from the dense scrub either side of the track. Continuing on with our good run of bush-shrikes, **olive bush-shrike** and **gorgeous bush-shrike** were added to the trip list, as well as **terrestrial brownbul**, **sombre greenbul**, **lazy cisticola**, **peregrine falcon**, **speckled pigeon** and **white-necked raven**, all seen within a space of a few hundred metres. Dropping down into the forest we stopped at the main parking area and went tracking through the thick bush in search of other forest birds. **Chorister robin-chat** and **samango** (monkey) were of note. After this it was out of Hanglip and a short drive north along the N1 to the Inn Tea Garden for lunch.

After lunch it was back to Harnham for a break before our last trip out - to Buzzard Mountain Retreat, further along the Bluegumspoor road. Sarah had arranged keys to get us through locked gates and took us up to an area of Afromontane grassland with proteas and **Gurney's sugarbird**, also picked up **Cape rock-thrush**. We stayed here watching the sun go down with spectacular views over the flat land stretching to the south. As the sun dropped the mountain went through an array of colours – a wonderful spot to end our stay in the Soutpansberg.

## 26th January

With our last full day we left Harnham at 07.30 for the drive south and an overnight stop nearer to Johannesburg. First we stopped off at Polokwane Game Reserve, one of a few sites for the **short-clawed lark** and an area for white rhino. The former were seen but unfortunately not the latter. With the reasonable rains the grass was long that made birding a little difficult but we did add **black-cheeked waxbill**, **gabbar goshawk**, **ashy tit**, **fiscal flycatcher** and **chestnut-vented tit-babbler**, and for those that missed it before, **crimson-breasted shrike**.

Leaving the park around mid-day we continued on to our final overnight accommodation at Dinonyane Lodge (Nylsvley). We checked in and had a short rest before going down the road to Vogelsfontein (part of the Nylsvley Nature Reserve with three hides overlooking areas of water). Unfortunately the gate was locked to two of the hides but a phone call and a promise to pay an entry fee the following day we were given the combination to the lock. The area was dry and these two hides didn't produce a great deal. The third (unlocked) hide on the other side of the road held some water and **yellow-billed duck**, **southern pochard** and **African wattled lapwing** were added to the trip list.

## 27<sup>th</sup>/28th January

With our flight not due to leave until 21.30 we had most of the day to continue birding. With a late breakfast booked for 10.00 we went in to the Nylsvley Nature Reserve as it opened at 07.00. There was not a great deal about but we picked up a mixed selection of birds and mammals including a few **giraffe** and two new species, **Burchell's starling** and **olive thrush**. After breakfast we headed to our last stop to try to find a few more water birds. As we drove south along the N1 the weather continually changing and we picked up an unexpected flock of **black-winged pratincole** flying over the road, probably following the weather front, and **Abdim's stork**. Our last stop was Roodeplaat Dam, just off the N1 to the north-east of Pretoria. **Purple heron** and **grey-headed gull** were new.

By late afternoon it was time to head back to the airport.....a final bird (the 333<sup>rd</sup> of the trip) was picked up by Neil as we sped by open farmland: a **northern black korhaan**. With time to return the hire cars and check-in/last minute shopping we left promptly at 21.30 arriving back at Heathrow early the next morning.

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Mapungubwe: the confluence of the Shashe-Limpopo rivers