

SOUTH AFRICA

30TH OCTOBER – 10TH NOVEMBER 2008



TRIP REPORT

TOUR LEADERS: ASHLEY SAUNDERS & BRIAN VANDERWALT

PARTICIPANTS: MIKE & JANE STEVENS, JANET LOWNDES, VAUGHAN RYALL AND PETER CARMAN

WEATHER: BASICALLY DRY THROUGHOUT THOUGH HEAVY OVERNIGHT RAIN OCCURRED ON TWO OCCASIONS. TEMPERATURES VARIED FROM AS LOW AS 8C EARLY MORNING ON THE PLAINS TO 33C IN THE TANQUA

TOTAL SPECIES: GROUP COUNT OF 258 SPECIES

General

The holiday was very enjoyable with an excellent group, and some really tremendous birding. The hotels and guest houses used were excellent and we enjoyed some fabulous food during our visit particularly the fine dining at the Green Dolphin in Cape Town and the home cooked traditional South African Meal at Honeywood Farm. Our local guide Brian was outstanding and he consistently produced the birds for us!

Thursday 30th October

The group met at 17.00 at Heathrow airport for our Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt, where we (just!) made our connecting flight on to Cape Town overnight.

Friday 31st October

Arriving in Cape Town at around 11.30 local time, we were met by our guide Brian Vanderwalt and after a few minutes to sort our luggage and head out to the minibus, we were soon on the road heading towards our first birding destination at the Strandfontein Sewage Works! Along the motorway, Indian House Crow and Common Starling kicked off the list along with the first Hadedda Ibis. At Strandfontein, we spent a couple of hours driving around the network of pans and birding mainly from the vehicle, allowing a close approach to many water birds. Ducks were well represented with Red-billed and Cape Teal, Cape Shoveler, Southern Pochard, Yellow-billed Duck and South African Shelduck numerous. A small flock of White-backed Duck was located and a few Maccua Duck were present. Starting off our list of endemic Cormorants we noted Reed, Crowned and White-breasted and also our first examples of passerines that would become familiar over the coming days – Karoo Prinia, Cape Bulbul and Cape Wagtail. Two Great White Pelican cruised over as we picked up our first Blacksmith Plovers by the roadside, and overhead a small party of hirundines included Greater Striped, Pearl-breasted and White-throated Swallows, Brown-throated Martin and African Black Swift. All the pans held large numbers of Red-knobbed Coot and a few Common Moorhen, and the largest flock of Black-necked Grebe noted was in excess of a hundred and fifty birds – all in breeding plumage! Three Great Crested and a few Little Grebe were also seen, and as we approached the most seaward pan large numbers of Greater Flamingo came into view. Waders were represented by our first Black-winged Stilts and three Common Greenshank, though these were less confiding than the Kittlitz's Plover which was so close to the minibus that we had to lean out of the window to photograph it! We soon realised the bird had a nest and examination revealed two beautifully camouflaged eggs in the sand so we moved away from the bird. Perhaps our most exciting bird of the afternoon was the group of three Hottentot Teal, a rare and desirable species which gave us superb views on a small pool by the roadside. With notebooks filling fast we continued around the circuit, adding more birds as we went in the form of Cape and Hartlaub's Gulls, four Purple Heron, four Black-crowned Night Heron (including one photogenic bird in a ditch by the side of the track), ten Glossy Ibis, Sacred Ibis, Hadedda Ibis, Swift and Sandwich Terns, Cattle Egret and two superb Water Thick-knee which we disturbed from the waters edge. By the entrance our first Cape Turtle Dove and Speckled Pigeon were identified, and with that we headed along the coast towards Simons Town which would be our base for the next two nights. Before check in, we headed down to nearby Boulder's Beach to view the African Penguin colony at close quarters. Other species noted in the vicinity included our first two Cape White Eye. We checked into the Central Hotel late afternoon and in the evening ate at a small local restaurant on the main street, reflecting on a brilliant first afternoon in the field over a glass of cold Castle Lager.

Saturday 1st November

Today saw us embark on a nine hour pelagic from Simons Town to the western Cape trawling grounds approximately twenty five nautical miles south-west of Cape Point. We set off at round 07.00 from the quay, noting large numbers of Sandwich and Swift Terns, African Black Oystercatcher and our first Cape Cormorant around the jetty. Soon we were cruising down the western side of False Bay and though cool the sea conditions were good as we neared the point. Large colonies of the endemic marine cormorants included a few Bank Cormorants and our first Cape Gannets were noted as we neared the open sea. The first of at least one thousand White-chinned Petrels passed our boat shortly after rounding the point, a species which would become progressively more numerous as we neared the trawling grounds. Finding fishing boats was the main aim of our crew, as this would provide our best opportunity to view large numbers of seabirds at close quarters. Two long-line boats were located, and as we steamed towards these we picked up our first Great Shearwater, Sooty Shearwater, Shy Albatross and a real bonus in the form of a Soft-plumaged Petrel which performed a close fly-by. Cetaceans were also very much in evidence with Southern Right Whale the most numerous species, several animals being seen including one surfacing close enough to see the barnacles on its head! Two sightings of Bryde's Whale and a brief Risso's Dolphin were also enjoyed and three Arctic Skuas were seen well. Upon reaching the first long-liner we were greeted with a spectacle that cannot be easily translated into words. Thousands of seabirds both on the water within inches of the boat and others flying in from all points of the compass, comprised mainly of White-chinned Petrels but with a host of other species mixed in. Great Shearwaters were incredibly numerous, with around eight hundred present, while Sooty Shearwater numbered around thirty birds. The first of twenty Wilson's Storm Petrels danced within feet of the stern allowing us to see the toes projecting clearly beyond the tail tip. Smartly patterned Pintado Petrels were particularly popular and around twenty of these birds were seen, dwarfed though during feeding frenzies by the thirty or so Shy Albatross present. Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross were the next most numerous at around fifteen birds, and we also had several very clear sightings of the similar Indian Yellow-nosed with its whiter head. Most of the ten Black-browed Albatross seen were immatures apart from one very smart adult with bright orange bill and black eye markings. Sub-Antarctic Skuas filled the niche of our own Bonxie in the northern hemisphere, hanging around the boats waiting to terrorise a petrel or shearwater into dropping their catch. Even these hefty birds were outsized by the Northern Giant Petrels, with at least five of these somewhat grotesque birds seen well enough to identify the reddish brown tip to the bill.

A party of fifteen Sabine's Gulls was a real treat, and these contributed to a trip count of around twenty five of these superb seabirds. Small numbers of terns included mainly Common but also with a few Arctic, and an African Penguin was also noted. We returned to Simons Town around 16.00 and took the opportunity to enjoy a beer on the veranda of the hotel overlooking the bay before venturing down to the quayside for dinner at one of the local restaurants.

Sunday 2nd November

Heading towards Cape Town this morning we picked up our first African Darter and Alpine Swift before reaching our first destination at the national botanical gardens at Kirstenbosch on the eastern slopes of Table Mountain. This stunning location provides a unique opportunity to obtain good close views of many of the western cape endemics, as the birds here are very used to people and often feed within inches of camera lenses! Birding started immediately with numbers of Cape White-eye feeding in the fynbos vegetation of the lower slopes, and Cape, Forest and Bully Canaries were soon noted. A spectacular male Pin-tailed Whydah appeared, diverting our attention from the numerous Southern Double Collared Sunbirds, Common Waxbill, and Cape Robin Chat. Tantalising Sombre Greenbul were calling from the thickets, and perseverance led to good views of the latter, while a brood of Cape Francolin emerged to feed by the side of the path. A Rameron Pigeon showed briefly in the treetops and another unobtrusive resident of these gardens, the spectacular Spotted Eagle Owl, was located roosting in a tree right over the path. The brooding female was on the nest on the ground and allowed remarkable views! As always, the next tick was just around the corner and Brian picked up African Goshawk calling overhead. A pair of these medium sized accipiter performed an aerial chase overhead, outshining the brief Forest Buzzard which circled over. Further up on the higher slopes, a variety of flowering Protea proved particularly attractive to the nectar loving species and both Cape Sugarbird and Orange-breasted Sunbird were seen at close quarters. A male Malachite Sunbird was seen by some and our first Olive Thrush was feeding furtively at the edge of one of the lawns. On our way back down to the car park, a pair of Cape Batis gave a superb display and finally a pale phase Booted Eagle circled us to round off a productive morning. Heading east of Cape Town towards the Hottentots Holland mountains, our next destination was the stunning location of Rooiels where the mountains reach right down to the waters of False Bay. En route, we noted our first Yellow-billed Kite, African Spoonbill, Black-winged Kite, Rock Kestrel and two Southern Right Whales in the bay. A short walk here provided an excellent range of birds, with Rock Martin evident by the parking area and almost immediately, a smart male Cape Rock Thrush on the path ahead, the first of three noted. The sparsely vegetated hillside hosted Grey-backed Cisticola and Neddicky, with four Cape Siskin seen well as they fed among the rocks. A Cape Bunting was singing from a rooftop and over head White-necked Raven and a stunning Verraux's Eagle were seen, the latter dropping down onto its eyrie allowing us to scope it for a few minutes. Our real quarry here, however, was the charismatic Cape Rockjumper, and despite taking their time to appear we eventually located a small party of three birds bouncing around among the boulders, the male displaying with tail fanned. Not to be outdone, a Peregrine appeared and attempted to take out a Cormorant overhead. Needless to say this particularly ambitious hunting sortie was unsuccessful! Another speciality of these slopes is the Cape Grassbird, and we had good scope views of two singing males along the path here. Other species noted included Cape Sugarbird, Orange-breasted Sunbird, Familiar Chat and a smart Yellow-rumped Widow, looking for all the world like a giant Bumblebee as it shot across the path in front of us. A Little Grey Mongoose in one of the adjacent gardens completed the visit here, and we headed further east around the peninsula for lunch at the new visitor centre at Harold Porter Botanical Garden. A walk through the gardens and up into the ravine above gave us the opportunity to add a few more species to the list with a superb male African Paradise Flycatcher showing briefly and further views of Cape Batis, Sombre Greenbul, Cape Robin Chat and Olive Thrush. Heading up the ravine, Victorin's Warbler could be heard singing and despite an extensive search which yielded around five calling birds, no sighting was made of this most elusive warbler. An African Dusky Flycatcher showed well however, and a calling Southern Boubou eventually gave excellent views as it sang in the tree above us. Black Saw-wing Swallow was another list addition and excellent views of two Sweet Waxbill feeding on the lawns rounded off the day. We transferred to our second hotel in Cape Town this evening and enjoyed a superb meal at the Green Dolphin restaurant on the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront.

Monday 3rd November

We headed north from Cape Town this morning following the Deip River and making several stops along its length to look for water birds. By the river mouth, sandy islands mid-channel held large numbers of roosting terns, mainly Common, but with a few Sandwich, Swift and a single Caspian. A Great White Pelican was among them and we also noted Pied Kingfisher as well as our first three Little Egret and a Laughing Dove. A little further upstream by the roadside we noted two Water Thick-knee, two African Darter, Cape and Reed Cormorants and a small reed bed here hosted breeding Southern Red Bishop, Southern Masked Weaver and an elusive Cape Reed Warbler. Five Common Greenshank were also roosting on the bank and Yellow-billed Duck were feeding in the shallows. By the road bridge, looking back to the classic view of Table Mountain, a large colony of Little and White-rumped Swifts was observed at close quarters. An African Marsh Harrier was quartering the fields and the reed bed held more Southern Red and Yellow Bishop, Southern Masked Weaver and a more obliging Cape Reed Warbler. Two Whiskered Tern flew overhead and an Alpine Swift was noted among the hirundines. Two more Water Thick-knee, Cape Shoveler and Pearl-breasted Swallow were also seen before we moved on to some nearby pans intersected by the road. From here, we picked up our first Grey-headed Gull among roosting Hartlaub's and a skulking Little Rush Warbler gave brief views in the reeds. Four African Spoonbills were on one of the pools and two Purple Gallinule were observed along the reed edge. Reaching the shoreline we took the opportunity to secure our photos of Table Mountain and then set about searching for White-fronted Plover, which we duly located along with a Kittlitz's. Again large numbers of terns were in evidence with 300+ Common and 100+ Sandwich roosting here. By the parking area a female Cape Weaver showed well and our first Common Fiscal Shrike was feeding nearby. Before heading north into the Strandveld proper, we called in at the local Golf Club to look for White-throated Canary, which was singing right by the car park! Yellow Canary, Yellow-billed Kite and Cape Sparrow were also seen before we headed along to a roadside farm shop which provided us with an excellent lunch in the company of Cape Weavers and Pied Starlings! Heading north into the more arid scrubby landscape of the strandveld, a roadside stop to view a Rock Kestrel also gave us good views of our first Red-capped Lark and two White-crowned Lapwings. Nearby, the coastal dunes gave us the opportunity to connect with Bar-throated Apalis and a small group of White-backed Mousebird feeding in the bushes, as well as Yellow Canary and very large flocks of Sacred Ibis making their way out to Robben Island.

Just a short drive off the main coast road and we were soon in the extensive Wheat lands of Philadelphia and more new birds awaited. Capped Wheatear and African Pipit were soon added and a group of European Bee-eater were feeding by the road. Both Steppe and Jackal Buzzards were seen well and a large hirundine over the fields turned out to be our first Banded Martin. These were all eclipsed however by our first views of Blue Crane, the South African National bird, feeding in a field right by the side of the road. Finally in this area we visited the environs of the power station and enjoyed some excellent birding in the coastal scrub. A Three-banded Plover was feeding around a tiny pool and while watching this bird two Namaqua Doves dropped in to drink. Both Speckled and White-backed Mousebird were present as well as Cape Grassbird, Bar-throated Apalis and a Chestnut-vented Titbabbler. Amazingly Black-shouldered Kite had now become common, but the male Black Harrier which drifted directly overhead was a real bonus and the star bird of the afternoon. Heading back to Cape Town we took a trip up Table Mountain in the cable car and spent an hour exploring the plateaux. Orange-breasted Sunbird was the only notable sighting, but of course the views from the top were outstanding. On the lower slopes, perseverance gave everyone a decent view of Malachite Sunbird and we also saw Southern Double-Collared Sunbird and Neddicky here. Overnight in Cape Town with another very enjoyable evening spent at the Green Dolphin, and some free time to explore the waterfront shopping precinct.

Tuesday 4th November

We headed northwards again today with our first stop at Silwerstroomstrand to look for more Strandveld passerines. Things were initially a little quiet here apart from three Black-winged Kites, though eventually we had good views of Bokmakierie and Grey-backed Cisticola. Heading east along the Darling Road we stopped at the wildflower reserve managed by Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens. Two Jackal Buzzard were circling with a Yellow-billed Kite, Booted Eagle and an African Marsh Harrier was quartering the grasslands. Despite our first experience of biting insects, our perseverance was rewarded with a superb tally of birds, none more exciting than the Secretary Bird which was seen striding through the grass before taking to the air and circling overhead with a second bird. Typical species of this habitat such as Capped Wheatear, African Pipit and Banded Martin were noted and we were soon watching our first Orange-throated Longclaw with its vividly coloured breast and strange mewing call. Four Blue Crane and at least ten Spur-winged Goose were lingering in the fields towards the hilltop and both Cloud and Levaillant's Cisticola were noted, with Zitting heard but not seen. Moving back to the coast road we headed north again to our next stop at Langebaan lagoon in the West Coast National Park, an enormous area of Strandveld and coastal wetland famed for its large populations of wintering shorebirds. Common Ostrich were seen by the roadside on our way to the lagoon and both Yellow-billed and Black-winged Kite were hunting, an Osprey also flying by carrying a fish. Kittlitz's Plover were numerous on the salt marsh as we walked out along the boardwalk and a group of ten Barn Swallows moved through, reminding us just what an epic journey these summer visitors make each year to spend the breeding season in Britain. From the well positioned hide, a spread of shorebirds included over five hundred Curlew Sandpipers and one hundred Little Stints, along with large numbers of Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Grey Plover, Red Knot, Eurasian Curlew and around fifteen Whimbrel often giving nice side by side comparisons with the former. Single Bar-tailed Godwit and more exciting, Marsh Sandpiper, were located among the throng, two Caspian Tern were loafing around and two African Spoonbill flew overhead. Possibly the star turn was provided by the African Fish Eagle which flew across the lagoon, being mobbed by an Osprey!! Nearby, we stopped for lunch at a small restaurant in the park where the gardens provided more opportunities for good birding! Fiscal Flycatcher, Karoo Robin Chat and Acacia Pied Barbet were list additions within the environs of the car park, and lunch was accompanied by many Cape Weaver, Yellow Bishop and Southern Masked Weaver. A walk around the complex after lunch yielded an African Hoopoe, Namaqua Dove, Bokmakierie, Little Swift and four Pin-tailed Whydah, though the great views we eventually had of a pair of elusive Cardinal Woodpeckers was the icing on the cake. Elsewhere in the park, we visited the only substantial area of freshwater, a small reed-fringed pool frequented by Red-knobbed Coots and Sacred Ibis. Little Rush Warbler was seen well here, and a superb Black Crake gave everyone scope views as it fed furtively along the reed edge in typical fashion. In the scrub close by, four Cape Penduline Tit and better views of Chestnut-Vented Titbabbler were obtained, along with the usual accompaniment of Bokmakierie, Cape Francolin and our second Black Harrier. Good views of Karoo Lark moved the list forward once more and just when we thought we must be running out of ticks in this habitat, a superb Southern Black Korhaan was seen by the roadside, an adult female with chick being seen at close quarters shortly afterwards and rounding off a very successful visit here. With the day wearing on we headed north again towards the Berg River and our next overnight base. As always though Brian had a couple more stops up his sleeve, the first being a disused quarry where we had good scope views of a recently fledged juvenile Verraux's Eagle perched on the rock face. A Spotted Thick-knee by the car was almost too close to focus on and two Crowned Lapwing were also noted along with European Bee-eater and African Black Swift. Finally, nearing our destination, we stopped by the roadside not far from Veldrift to look for Cape Long-billed Lark. The area was full of Large-billed and Red-capped Lark, and eventually we had good views of our quarry species as well. Karoo Robin Chat, African Stonechat and Southern Grey Tit were also seen. We were soon enjoying a beer on the veranda of our hotel on the banks of the Berg River, accompanied by a Black-crowned Night Heron fishing in the shallows beside us.

Wednesday 5th November

The location of our hotel meant that at first light we were observing huge numbers of terns leaving their roost and heading out towards the open sea, as well as the usual spread of water birds that included Greater Flamingo and our first Common Sandpiper. However, we had a pre-breakfast agenda to search some of the local dirt roads for more larks and were successful in improving our views of Cape Long-billed Lark as well as more Red-capped and Large-billed. The desert chats are a notoriously difficult group to identify and we added three species this morning with Sickle-winged, Mountain and the large and distinctive Anteater all seen well. A family of four Spotted Eagle Owl were roosting on the rocks by the roadside and further examples of Spotted Thick-knee, Bokmakierie, Grey-backed Cisticola, Orange-throated Longclaw, Pin-tailed Whydah, Red Bishop, Three-banded Plover, eighteen Blue Cranes and Southern Black Korhaan were all seen. A tussle between two Yellow-billed Kites and a Lanner Falcon was a spectacular sight, and our final bird before heading back for breakfast was a pair of Grey-backed Sparrowlark in the road, the male displaying to the female. Following breakfast and check out, we headed over to the salt workings across the bridge to look for plovers. In Britain of course, such an industrial site would be out of bounds through 'Health & Safety' but with no such problems here we were soon scoping our first Chestnut-Banded Plover!

Kittlitz's, White-fronted, Grey and Ringed Plovers were also present with fifteen Curlew Sandpipers, thirty Little Stints and a superb flock of one hundred or more Lesser Flamingo's also noted. Heading up river, three Grey-headed Gulls were loafing with Hartlaub's Gulls and a photogenic Pied Kingfisher was perched on the end of one of the jetty's. Black-winged Stilt and Common Sandpiper were also noted along this stretch. A long drive inland then towards our next base in Ceres, though we saw plenty of birds along the way including three Blue Crane, a Booted Eagle and several Black-winged Kites. Roadside pools held twenty Whiskered Terns, Spur-winged Goose, Red-billed Teal, Cape Shoveler, Yellow-billed Duck and a real surprise in the form of four White-faced Whistling Duck with young – a species well outside its normal range here. A lunch stop by some more extensive freshwater wetland added Little Bittern to the list as well as another twenty Whiskered Terns and a Purple Heron. Once at Ceres we checked in to the Village Hotel and took a break for a couple of hours before heading out into the field again late afternoon. Up in the nearby hills, Brian took us to a drinking pool which he had created by a roadside lay-by, and we set up the scopes to see what called in for a drink and bathe. Cape Canary and Cape White-eye, Southern Double-collared, Malachite and Orange-breasted Sunbirds, Cape Robin Chat and Sweet Waxbill all paid a visit, and a smart Streaky-headed Canary came in to drink right in front of us. Our target bird, Protea Canary, proved more difficult though after a while one dropped in and perched on the fence above the pool for several minutes allowing us get good views and obtain some record shots of this elusive bird. With light fading we called in at the river in Ceres to look for African Black Duck, which we duly located feeding in the shady waters near the ford. An African Paradise Flycatcher gave itself up in the waterside trees and a calling African Goshawk was located perched in the treetops.

Thursday 6th November

Today was our full day exploring the vast Tanqua Karoo, and this entailed driving about 70 km down mostly dirt tracks into the heart of this semi-arid landscape which provides a haven for the highest diversity of succulent plant species in the world, as well as a unique selection of avian highlights. First though, we added Horus Swift to the burgeoning list with five birds over the guest house, and our first stop about 20 km from Ceres added both Grey-winged Francolin and Black-headed Canary with two of the latter perched on a roadside fence. Two Lanner were circling over the ridge and a Common Quail was calling in the distant fields. Large-billed and Karoo Larks and Malachite Sunbird were also seen though with the temperature at about 10 Celsius everyone was keen to get back in the van! Roadside pools as we continued towards the Tanqua yielded about fifty South African Shelduck, Glossy Ibis, six Pied Avocet, two Whiskered Terns and Red-billed Teal. As we passed over the ridge and dropped down into the Tanqua landscape new birds came immediately. Pausing by the roadside, a Pale Chanting Goshawk perched on a pole gave superb views, especially as it took briefly to the air to fly down and settle on a bush. The hillside scrub was alive with birds and we quickly picked up Plain-backed Pipit, Larklike Bunting and Layard's Titbabbler. A small settlement with a grove of eucalyptus and tamarisk scrub produced our first example of the distinct Karoo Thrush, much darker than the Olive Thrushes seen around the Cape Peninsula. Familiar Chat, two African Reed Warblers and very good views of two Chestnut-vented Titbabbler were had in the surrounding scrub before we moved on deeper into the Karoo to search for more of its specialities. Under the shelter of a few acacia trees in the increasing heat, we checked a vegetated rocky gully where Greater-striped Swallows and Rock Martins were nesting on the cliffs. Up to four Fairy Flycatchers were in the vicinity, and we were all pleased to add this delightful bird so early in the day. Layard's Titbabbler, Brown-throated Martin, Namaqua Dove and White-throated Swallow were also noted though there was no sign of the elusive Cinnamon-breasted Warbler here. Moving on, roadside birding continued to be good as we saw two more Pale Chanting Goshawk, a Greater Kestrel and our first Karoo Chat. Our last chat species, Tractrac Chat, was a little more tricky but we eventually had good scope views of two birds on the roadside fence. Karoo Eremomela was easier than expected with five birds giving themselves up as they moved through in a typical busy feeding party. We felt that we must have seen almost the entire population of Rufous-eared Warbler as suddenly birds seemed to appear from everywhere and perch on the fence beside the van! Two Karoo Lark and another Anteater Chat were among other species noted before we headed into the nearby foothills for lunch. A typically well-chosen location meant we were torn between eating and birding as more new species became available! Fairy Flycatcher, White-backed Mousebird and Acacia Pied Barbet were quality species seen here for which we were able to improve on our previous views. A calling Pirit Batis eventually gave itself up, sounding for all the world like a bicycle pump, and two Red-faced Mousebird gave us the run around among the bushes. Before turning back towards Ceres, we took a somewhat speculative look down one of the side tracks where Black-eared Sparrowlark had recently been seen, a highly nomadic desert bird whose movements cannot be guaranteed. Amazingly, we located a pair almost immediately and then as we drove another two hundred yards or so, saw at least another thirty of these stunning birds including numerous examples right outside the car window! On our way back, we stopped again by a small reed bed in the valley bottom where we were able to photograph nesting Cape Weaver and Southern Red Bishop. Those that decided to take a wander through the scrub also had excellent views of Namaqua Warbler and Layard's Titbabbler, rounding off a superb day in the Tanqua Karoo.

Friday 7th November

Before breakfast this morning we decided the head back into the entrance to the Tanqua to try and catch up with Cinnamon-breasted Warbler. This was not to be though our healthy early morning tally included Black-headed Canary, White-throated Canary, Large-billed and Red-capped Larks, African Stonechat, Lanner, Karoo Robin, Familiar Chat, Mountain Chat, Fairy Flycatcher, Namaqua Dove, Alpine Swift, African Reed Warbler, Common Waxbill and Bokmakierie. A new species for us was Wattled Starling, with three birds seen briefly by the side of the road before flying into the eucalyptus grove. Despite searching we could not relocate the birds and it was in any case time to head back for breakfast. Another long drive this morning saw us heading south-east towards our next base in the Grootvadersbosch forest. A scheduled stop in Bain's Kloof pass was made to look for Victorin's Warbler, though once again despite hearing three birds no sighting was made. Cape Rock Thrush and a Neddicky were some consolation. More successful though was a roadside stop to check the hillside for Ground Woodpecker, which we failed to see but instead had good views of a Giant Kingfisher perched in a dead tree along the river! As we continued our journey at least seven Booted Eagles, two Jackal Buzzard, Malachite Sunbird, Cape Crow and four White-necked Ravens were noted and our lunch stop as always proved productive with Southern Masked Weaver, Red-winged Starling, Mountain Chat and two Cape Rock Thrush competing for scraps! A Verraux's Eagle also broke the skyline briefly here. As we neared the town of Montagu a roadside 'plastic bag' turned out to be a displaying Denham's Bustard so an unscheduled stop to scope this magnificent bird was made, a second male striding into view to see off the interloper. In Montagu itself, we stopped to view the most amazing heronry in the middle of town!

Hundreds of Cattle Egret, Sacred Ibis, Grey and Black-headed Heron were nesting in a noisy [and very smelly] colony allowing unique photographic opportunities. Two Karoo Thrush and excellent views of Red-faced Mousebird rounded off a successful stop here and from then it was straight to our base at Honeywood Farm in the forest. An African Harrier Hawk halted us along the entrance track though and we had superb views of this our only sighting of the trip. A truly delightful place awaited us with friendly hosts and spacious cottage accommodation. Soon we were enjoying a beer and a stunning sunset followed by a delicious South African meal, though not before we had added Greater and Lesser Honeyguides and Fork-tailed Drongo in the gardens! After dinner one of the endearing memories of the trip came as we took a walk through the forest around the farm. An African Wood Owl called in the distance and with a bit of gentle persuasion a pair was soon duetting in the trees close by and with the help of a torch we had stunning views of these elusive forest residents.

Saturday 8th November

Before breakfast we made the most of the superb location of our accommodation by taking a stroll through the forest to look for some of its early rising birds. Some caught up with Amethyst Sunbird and Greater Honeyguide in the garden though everyone added the distinct Greater Double-collared Sunbird and Fiscal Flycatcher were very much in evidence around the cottages. Five Sweet Waxbill, two Forest Buzzard, African Hoopoe, Neddicky, Southern Boubou and African Paradise Flycatcher were other species noted around the farm this morning. In the forest, our two excursions either side of breakfast added a tremendous number of birds including all of the specialities. A Red-chested Cuckoo opened the scoring perching in the open on a dead tree and as we walked down towards the woodland edge Forest, Cape and Bully Canaries, two Speckled Mousebird, Olive Thrush and at least ten Cape Batis were noted. A pair of Blue-mantled Flycatchers showed well and a feeding party of Cape White-eye hosted two Yellow-throated Woodland-warblers. A singing Knysna Warbler then attracted our attention and a scramble along the vegetated gully where the bird was calling from allowed us to get closer to its location. The bird eventually perched very briefly in the open allowing most people to see it, and a Knysna Woodpecker gave similarly tantalising views in the treetops above. The star bird of the morning then followed as a sparkling Narina Trogon flew into the trees above us, perching typically with its back to us but long enough to get good views before it slipped away into the forest. It was subsequently heard to call and a second bird was seen briefly before both disappeared back into the depths of the woodland and were not seen again. Our second foray into the forest after breakfast was much quieter as the temperature had already started to rise, but we still managed to add a few more species notably Olive Bush-shrike by the entrance gate and superb views of our first Olive Woodpecker. Further views of Blue-mantled, Dusky and African Paradise Flycatchers were obtained and a pair of Grey Cuckoo-shrike were seen briefly in the canopy above. Unfortunately a fly through Cinnamon Dove was not seen by all. Saying our goodbyes to the folk at Honeywood we made our way out along the entrance track, noting Long-billed Pipit on the way, before heading south towards the Agulhas Plains and our next location. The highlight of the journey was an obliging roadside Brown-hooded Kingfisher which gave superb views, and a ride across the river on South Africa's only remaining working pontoon was also quite interesting! Once on the plains, large flocks of Bishops and Weavers became evident and raptors included Booted and African Fish Eagles. More good views of Denham's Bustard were had and our first Karoo Korhaan were feeding by the roadside. Two Pin-tailed Whydah, Long-billed Pipit, twenty Blue Cranes and our first Agulhas Long-billed Larks were also added, the latter singing and showing well allowing comparisons with the Cape version to be made. Our final stop today was the nearby De Hoop nature reserve, and after a walk in the quiet of the afternoon heat we thought that maybe we wouldn't add any new species for the first time this trip. This was an inaccurate assumption, as a pair of Grey-headed Sparrows were nesting in a tree by the car park as we returned and then a spectacular Martial Eagle soared overhead! What a fantastic bird! African Hoopoe, close views of two Black Saw-wing Swallows and two Jackal Buzzards rounded off our visit, and as we headed back out of the reserve a stunning Black Sparrowhawk dashed by, perching in a shrub and allowing us to get out and scope it from the road. Another great end to a successful day in the field, and now it was time to head to our accommodation in well appointed cottages on a working farm close by. Another superb meal and excellent wine meant a good nights sleep was had by all!

Sunday 9th November

Returning to the Agulhas plains this morning we once again enjoyed a good selection of steppe birds with distant views of the localised Agulhas Clapper Lark one of the highlights. Three Cape Vultures which circled over were also new trip birds and raptors were otherwise represented by Steppe and Jackal Buzzards and Lanner Falcon. Six Pin-tailed Whydah, Large-billed and Red-capped Larks, Agulhas Long-billed Lark, Karoo Korhaan and African Spoonbill were among the other species noted. Starting our return journey eastwards towards Cape Town, our final birding location was the De Mond Nature reserve on the Indian Ocean coast. The approach to the reserve provided some good roadside birding with the undoubted highlight a stunning male Black Harrier which quartered the verge ahead of us for several kilometres. A juvenile Black Sparrowhawk cruised overhead as we neared the reserve entrance and three Denham's Bustard were in the adjacent fields. We then took the footpath over the swing bridge and through the dunes to the estuary where the large flocks of resting terns were our main focus. Comprising mainly Common, Sandwich and Caspian Terns, our quarry here was the localised Damara Tern, and we located four birds among the gathered flocks. Also on the foreshore were Common Greenshank, twenty Grey Plovers, Eurasian Curlew, White-fronted and Kittlitz's Plovers, Curlew Sandpiper and four African Black Oystercatcher. Finally around the car park, Southern Boubou and Fiscal Flycatcher were noted and following lunch on the picnic tables we organised ourselves before heading to Cape Town airport. We arrived at the airport around 15.00 and after saying our farewells to Brian, we checked in for our flight back to Frankfurt at the end of a remarkable holiday.

Systematic List

Common Ostrich
African Penguin
Great Crested Grebe
Black-necked Grebe
Little Grebe
Shy Albatross
Black-browed Albatross
Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross
Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross

Northern Giant Petrel
Pintado Petrel
Soft-plumaged Petrel
White-chinned Petrel
Great Shearwater
Sooty Shearwater
Wilson's Storm-Petrel
Great White Pelican
Cape Gannet
White-breasted Cormorant
Cape Cormorant
Reed Cormorant
Crowned Cormorant
Bank Cormorant
African Darter
Grey Heron
Black-headed Heron
Purple Heron
Black-crowned Night Heron
Little Egret
Cattle Egret
Little Bittern
African Sacred Ibis
Glossy Ibis
Hadedda Ibis
African Spoonbill
Greater Flamingo
Lesser Flamingo
White-faced Whistling Duck
Egyptian Goose
South African Shelduck
Yellow-billed Duck
African Black Duck
Mallard
Cape Teal
Hottentot Teal
Red-billed Teal
Cape Shoveler
Southern Pochard
Spur-winged Goose
Maccoa Duck
Secretary Bird
Cape Vulture
Yellow-billed Kite
Black-winged Kite
Verraux's Eagle
Booted Eagle
Martial Eagle
African Fish Eagle
Steppe Buzzard
Forest Buzzard
Jackal Buzzard
Black Sparrowhawk
African Goshawk
Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk
African Marsh Harrier
Black Harrier
African Harrier-Hawk
Osprey
Peregrine
Lanner
Rock Kestrel
Greater Kestrel
Grey-winged Francolin
Cape Francolin
Common Quail
Helmeted Guineafowl
Blue Crane
Black Crake
African Purple Swamp-hen
Common Moorhen
Red-knobbed Coot
Denham's Bustard
Karoo Korhaan
Southern Black Korhaan
African Black Oystercatcher

Ringed Plover
White-fronted Plover
Chestnut-banded Plover
Kittlitz's Plover
Three-banded Plover
Grey Plover
Crowned Lapwing
Blacksmith Plover
Ruddy Turnstone
Common Sandpiper
Marsh Sandpiper
Common Greenshank
Red Knot
Curlew Sandpiper
Little Stint
Sanderling
Bar-tailed Godwit
Eurasian Curlew
Whimbrel
Pied Avocet
Black-winged Stilt
Spotted Thick-knee
Water Thick-knee
Arctic Skua
Sub Antarctic Skua
Sabine's Gull
Cape Gull
Grey-headed Gull
Hartlaub's Gull
Caspian Tern
Swift Tern
Sandwich Tern
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Damara Tern
Whiskered Tern
Speckled Pigeon
Rameron Pigeon
Red-eyed Dove
Cape Turtle Dove
Laughing Dove
Namaqua Dove
Tambourine Dove
Red-chested Cuckoo
Spotted Eagle Owl
African Wood Owl
African Black Swift
White-rumped Swift
Horus Swift
Little Swift
Alpine Swift
Speckled Mousebird
White-backed Mousebird
Red-faced Mousebird
Narina Trogon
Pied Kingfisher
Giant Kingfisher
Brown-hooded Kingfisher
European Bee-eater
African Hoopoe
Acacia Pied Barbet
Greater Honeyguide
Lesser Honeyguide
Cardinal Woodpecker
Kynsna Woodpecker
Olive Woodpecker
Cape Long-billed Lark
Agulhas Long-billed Lark
Agulhas Clapper Lark
Karoo Lark
Red-capped Lark
Large-billed Lark
Grey-backed Sparrowlark
Black-eared Sparrowlark
Barn Swallow
White-throated Swallow

Pearl-breasted Swallow
Greater-striped Swallow
Rock Martin
Banded Martin
Brown-throated Martin
Black Saw-wing
Grey Cuckoo-shrike
Fork-tailed Drongo
Cape Crow
Pied Crow
House Crow
White-necked Raven
Southern Grey Tit
Cape Penduline Tit
Cape Bulbul
Sombre Greenbul
Olive Thrush
Karoo Thrush
Cape Rock Thrush
Mountain Wheatear
Capped Wheatear
Familiar Chat
Tractrac Chat
Sickle-winged Chat
Karoo Chat
Anteating Chat
African Stonechat
Cape Robin Chat
Karoo Robin Chat
Cape Rockjumper
Chestnut-vented Titbabbler
Layard's Titbabbler
Lesser Swamp Warbler
Little Rush Warbler
African Reed Warbler
Knysna Warbler
Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler
Bar-throated Apalis
Karoo Eremomela
Cape Grassbird
Cloud Cisticola
Grey-backed Cisticola
Levaillant's Cisticola
Neddicky
Karoo Prinia
Namaqua Warbler
Rufous-eared Warbler
African Dusky Flycatcher
African Paradise Flycatcher
Blue-mantled Flycatcher
Cape Batis
Pirit Batis
Fairy Flycatcher
Fiscal Flycatcher
Cape Wagtail
African Pipit
Plain-backed Pipit
Long-billed Pipit
Cape Longclaw
Common Fiscal
Southern Boubou
Bokmakierie
Olive Bush Shrike
Common Starling
Pied Starling
Wattled Starling
Red-winged Starling
Cape Sugarbird
Malachite Sunbird
Southern Double Collared Sunbird
Greater Double Collared Sunbird
Orange-breasted Sunbird
Dusky Sunbird
Amethyst Sunbird
Cape White-eye
House Sparrow

Cape Sparrow
Grey-headed Sparrow
Cape Weaver
Southern Masked Weaver
Southern Red Bishop
Yellow Bishop
Common Waxbill
Swee Waxbill
Pin-tailed Whydah
Chaffinch
Cape Canary
Forest Canary
Cape Siskin
Black-headed Canary
Brimstone Canary
Yellow Canary
White-throated Canary
Protea Canary
Streaky-headed Canary
Cape Bunting
Larklike Bunting