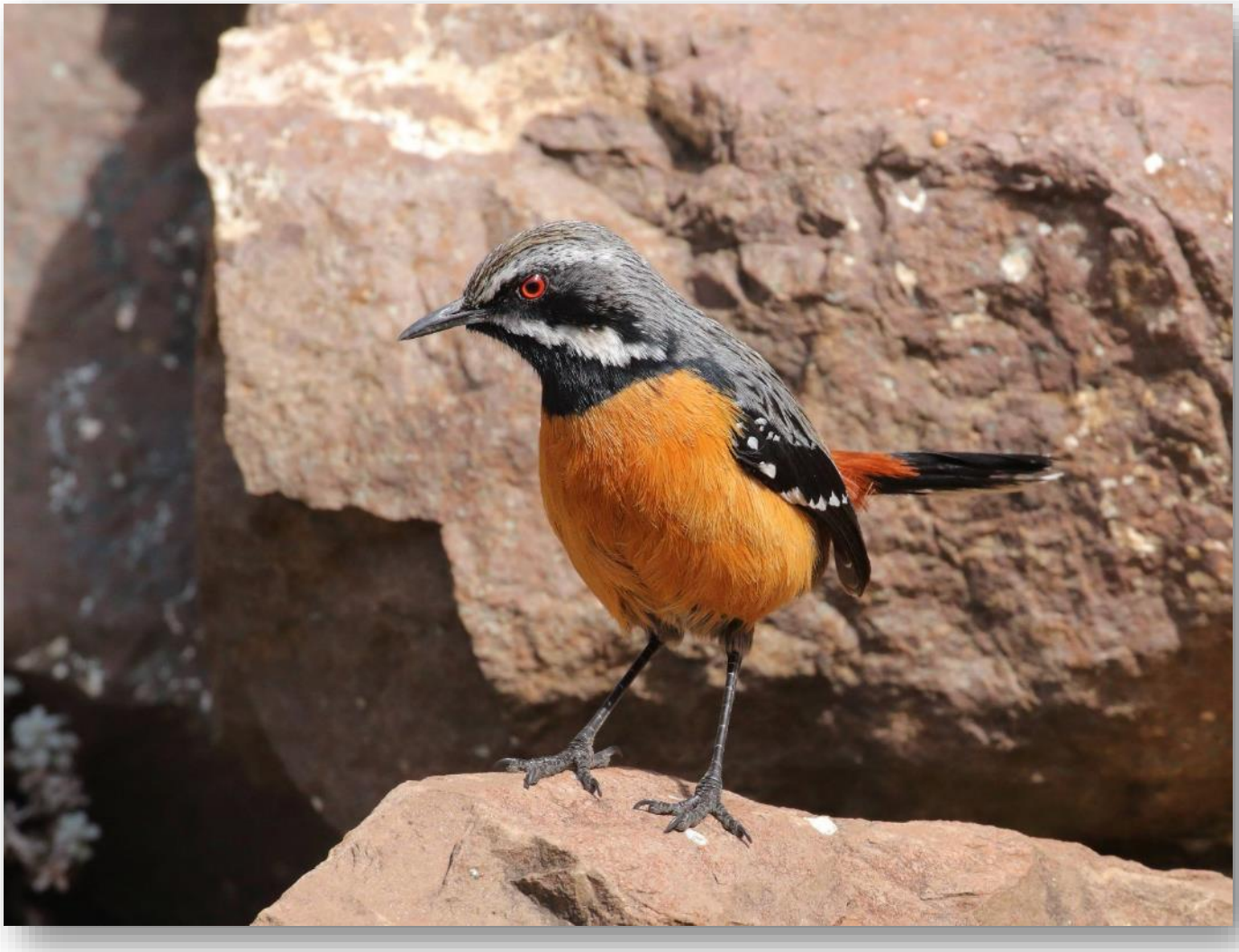
South Africa

Eastern

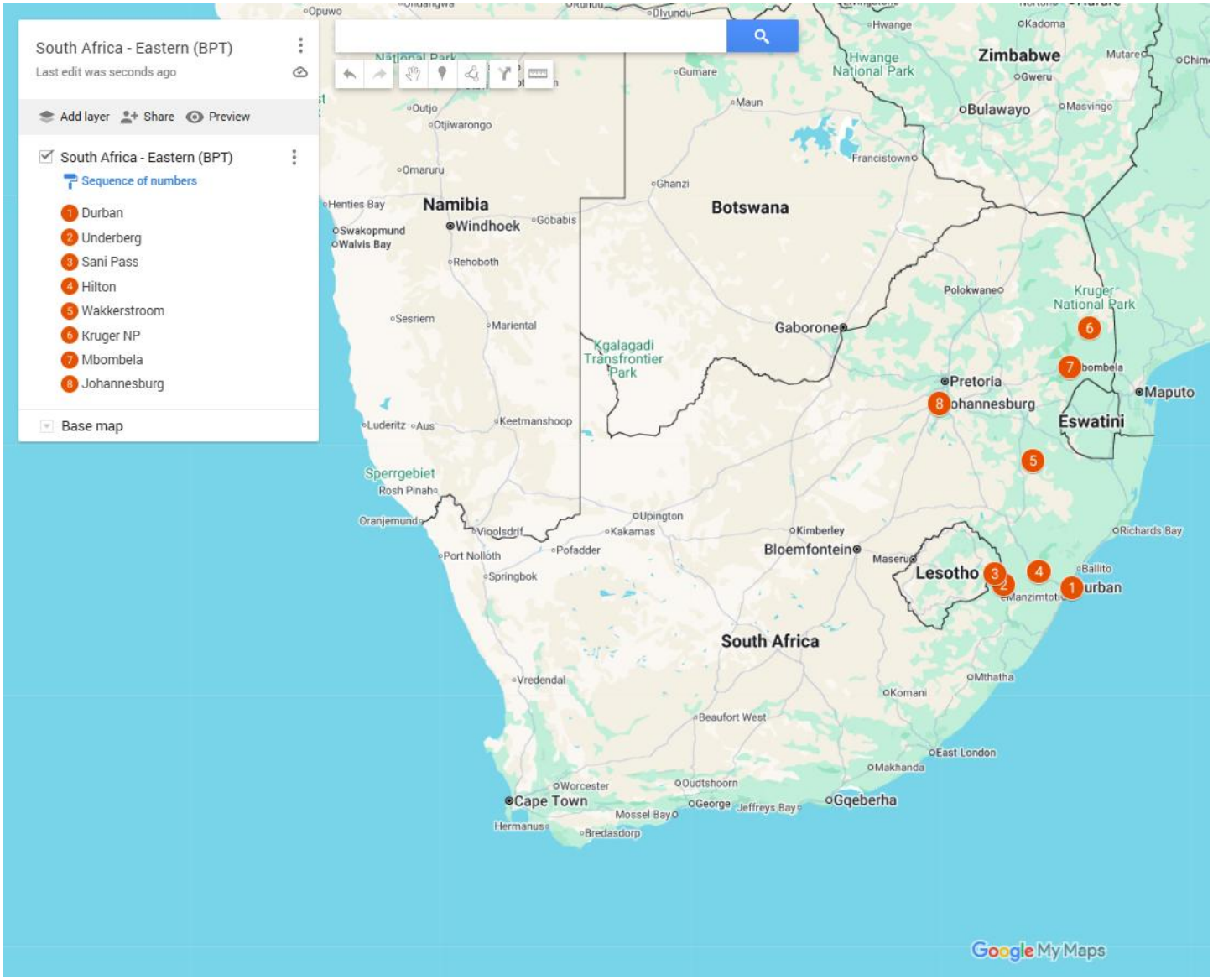
Bird Photo Tour



Drakensberg Rockjumper by Keith Valentine

The provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga on South Africa's eastern seaboard offer up some of the finest photographic opportunities on the continent and boast some of the country's best birding as well as exceptional mammal viewing. The regions incredible natural diversity, coupled with a modern infrastructure well suited to the needs of the modern traveller, makes travelling here an absolute delight. Focusing on a variety of the country's very best sites including the endemic-rich mist-belt forests of the Natal Midlands, the lofty peaks of the magnificent Drakensberg and the classic African savanna of the world-renowned Kruger National Park this unique bird photo tour of eastern South Africa offers the very best of southern African photography, birding, and game viewing!

Itinerary & Map



Itinerary Outline

Day 1	**Arrival in Durban, transfer to Underberg**
Day 2	**Sani Pass & Lesotho**
Day 3	**Mzimkulu Vulture Hide & surrounds**
Day 4	**Underberg to Hilton**
Day 5	**Karkloof & surrounds**
Day 6	**Hilton to Wakkerstroom**
Day 7	**Wakkerstroom**
Day 8	**Wakkerstroom to Kruger National Park**
Days 9 to 12	**Kruger National Park**
Day 13	**Kruger National Park to Mbombela & final departure**

Highlights

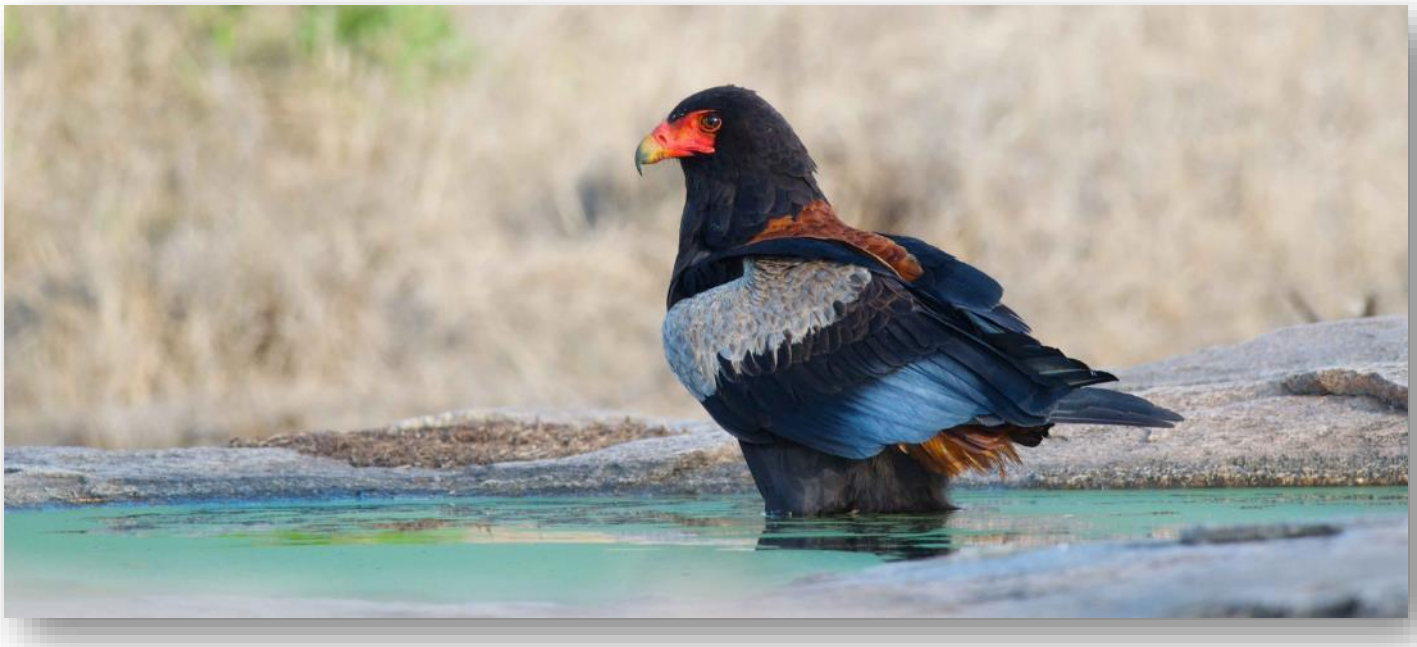
- ***Spending time exploring Kruger National Park in open air safari vehicles. Kruger is one of Africa's, and indeed the world's, largest wildlife havens***
- ***Enjoy an exhibition of big mammals with the likes of Lion, Leopard, Cheetah, African Wild Dog, African Elephant, African Buffalo, White Rhinoceros, and Southern Giraffe all likely.***
- ***Visit a dedicated vulture hide offering incredible photo opportunities, where Cape and Bearded Vultures regularly attend***
- ***Exploring Sani Pass, one of the most dramatic passes in Africa with incredible scenery throughout the day and a plethora of unique endemics to enjoy***
- ***Opportunities to see and photograph a variety of South Africa's rarest endemic, near-endemic and range-restricted species including Cape Parrot, Yellow-breasted Pipit, Bush Blackcap, Southern Bald Ibis, Blue Korhaan, Drakensberg Rockjumper, and Gurney's Sugarbird***
- ***Excellent chances of seeing the two endemic bird families to Southern Africa – Rockjumpers & Sugarbirds***

Birding sites in detail

This itinerary covers different seasons. Please note the below notations:

*** Summer migrants occurring between late October and early April.**
^ Species that undergo distinct plumage changes, best viewed between November and March.

Richmond area. The Richmond area has tracts of undisturbed montane grassland, a very rare habitat type nowadays due to the proliferation of exotic tree plantations. Here we will attempt to track down the stunning Blue Swallow*, severely threatened due to habitat loss and undoubtedly our most elegant swallow. The birds regularly breed here in the summer months and our chances of finding this rare species are very good.



Bateleur by Clayton Burne

Bulwer area. The Bulwer area has some large, remnant patches of Mistbelt forest. Here we will listen for the high-pitched screech of the rare Cape Parrot and attempt to locate flocks as they make their way into the forest to roost. Sometimes they even perch on dead trees adjacent to the forest where photo opportunities of this rare species may present themselves. Other species to keep a look-out for include Black Saw-wing and Southern Double-collared Sunbird, with additional chances for Knysna Turaco, Grey Cuckooshrike, White-starred Robin, Swee Waxbill and Forest Canary.



Bearded Vulture by Adam Riley

Sani Pass & Lesotho. We'll spend the day travelling into the tiny mountain kingdom of Lesotho in search of a handful of highly localised, highland endemics. To do this, we will transfer to 4 x 4 vehicles and make our way up the rugged and spectacular Sani Pass, photographing and birding en route. The grassy slopes and rocky outcrops on the ascent are home to family groups of the bizarre Ground Woodpecker, Drakensberg Prinia, African Yellow Warbler, Cape Grassbird, Cape Rock Thrush and Yellow Bishop^, whilst stands of protea bushes support the impressive Gurney's Sugarbird (belonging to a family endemic to southern Africa) and dazzling Malachite and Greater Double-collared Sunbirds. As we approach the crest of the escarpment, we will be scanning the rocky scree at the roadside for the stunning Drakensberg Rockjumper, African Rock Pipit, Sentinel Rock Thrush, and Drakensberg Siskin.

Atop the plateau, the steep slopes and rugged cliffs are replaced by gently undulating terrain and endless vistas of distant, blue mountains. Black Stork, African Black Duck and Southern Bald Ibis may be found alongside the mountain streams, whilst Grey-winged Francolin, Red-capped Lark, Sickle-winged Chat, African Rock, and Mountain* Pipits, Yellow Canary and Cape Bunting prefer adjacent meadows. Several birds more typical of the Karoo, such as Grey Tit, Layard's Warbler, Fairy Flycatcher, Large-billed Lark, and Karoo Prinia reach the eastern limits of their range here in the Lesotho highlands. We will also keep a careful watch skywards as the

endangered Cape Vulture, magnificent Bearded Vulture, Verreaux's Eagle, Jackal Buzzard, Lanner Falcon, and White-necked Raven are regularly seen overhead, along with fast-flying flocks of African Black and Alpine Swifts. Other animals of particular interest atop the "Roof of Africa" are the approachable Sloggett's Vlei Rat, endemic Drakensberg Crag Lizard and the colourful Southern Rock Agama.



Orange Ground Thrush by Adam Riley

Mzimkulu Vulture Hide & Surrounds. We will have the unique opportunity to visit the newly built Mzimkulu Vulture hide, which is in the southern Drakensberg. The hide is set in the scenic foothills and provides stunning views over the Drakensberg mountains. The Southern Drakensberg is an important area for two of South Africa's cliff-nesting vulture species - Cape and Bearded Vulture, and our chances of seeing and photographing these impressive birds is very good. The vultures are certainly the stars of the show but other species such as the endangered Secretarybird, endemic Jackal Buzzard, and White-necked Raven are regularly encountered. We will also keep our eyes peeled for the stately Denham's Bustard while many other specials can also be found in the general Underberg area such as Drakensberg Prinia, Cape Rock Thrush, Bokmakierie, Grey Crowned Crane, and Olive Woodpecker.

Karkloof. The Karkloof is a range of forested hills near Howick that is home to several uncommon and local birds restricted to Afro-montane forests. We will be searching for southern African endemics such as Forest Buzzard, Knysna Turaco, the highly endangered Cape Parrot, elusive Bush Blackcap, Barratt's Warbler, Olive Bushshrike, Swee Waxbill and Forest Canary, as well as many more widespread yet no less desirable birds including Long-crested Eagle, African Olive Pigeon, Olive Woodpecker, African Emerald Cuckoo, Black-headed

Oriole, the uncommon Orange Ground Thrush, Cape Batis, White-starred Robin, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Red-backed Mannikin, Red-collared Widowbird^ and Brimstone Canary.

Further up the Karkloof range, we visit a pristine area of upland grassland where breeding Grey Crowned and Blue Cranes and, if we are lucky, Wattled Crane can sometimes be found. Black-winged Lapwing, Fan-tailed Grassbird and Cape Longclaw also occur here, but the star bird is undoubtedly the striking Buff-streaked Chat, an endemic wheatear that is striking both in appearance and song. Mammal possibilities include Mountain Reedbuck and the sleek Oribi antelope.



Secretarybird by Julian Parsons

Wakkerstroom. The grasslands and hills surrounding the small town of Wakkerstroom are a centre for avian endemism and are critical for the survival of several range-restricted species. We will make a full exploration of the grasslands and a highly productive marsh at the edge of town where the photo opportunities are excellent.

The marsh is a haven for waterbirds and offers the chance of several uncommon or localised species. Purple Heron, South African Shelduck, Cape Shoveler, African Swamphen, South African Cliff Swallow, Levaillant's Cisticola and Cape Weaver are all regular, and we should also find African Snipe and the elusive African Rail. Rarely recorded species seen here on our previous trips include the secretive Baillon's Crake, Red-chested Flufftail and even Western Marsh* and Montagu's* Harriers.

Driving along the network of dirt roads radiating out from Wakkerstroom, we will explore the grasslands, rocky outcrops, and gorges of this unique area in search of some of the countries most threatened and range-restricted endemics, along with numerous other widespread but no less exciting species. These include Southern Bald Ibis, Blue Korhaan, White-bellied Bustard, Jackal Buzzard, Pink-billed, Eastern Long-billed and Eastern Clapper Larks, Ground Woodpecker, Ant-eating and Buff-streaked Chats, Sentinel Rock Thrush, African Rock and Yellow-breasted^ Pipits, Cape Longclaw, Pied Starling, the spectacular Long-tailed Widowbird^, Yellow-crowned Bishop^, Quailfinch and Cape Canary. Red-winged Francolin is common in the moist grasslands, and we may find them feeding at the roadside or sunning themselves at dawn while Grey-winged Francolin, a regional endemic, also occurs. Small mammals occurring in the grasslands include Yellow Mongoose and the rare Cape Fox. One of the more interesting denizens of these grasslands is the curious Suricate, or Meerkat, immortalized in Disney's 'Lion King'. We have a good chance of finding family groups of these unusual yet delightful animals.

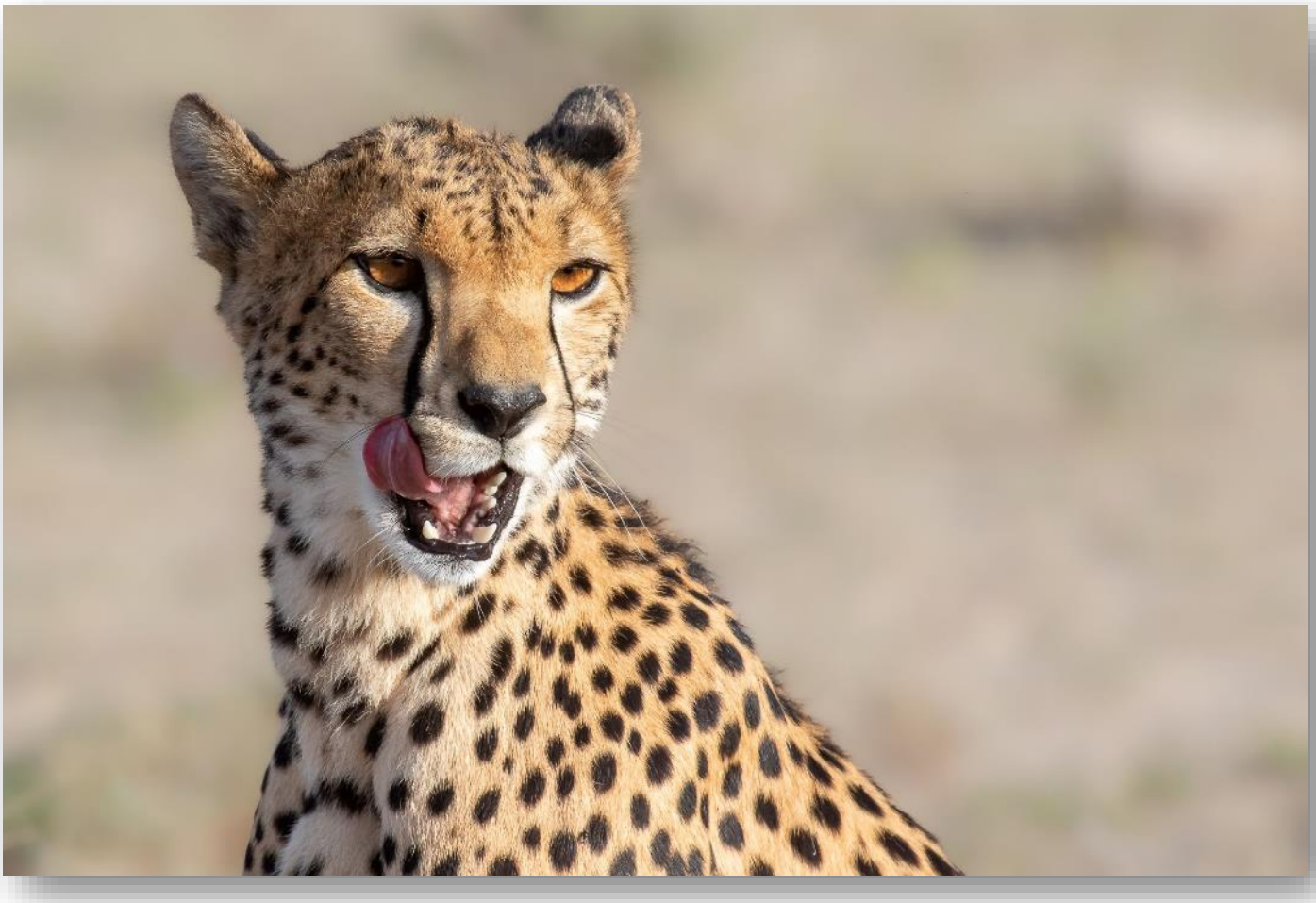


Southern Bald Ibis by Adam Riley

Wakkerstroom is justly famous as one of the best places in the world to see Amur Falcon (November to March only) on their wintering grounds. Having safely navigated their way from eastern Russia and northern China, most of the world's population ends up in south-eastern Africa. We can expect hundreds, if not thousands of these small falcons hawking over fields throughout the high-altitude grassland area. It is at dusk though, that the few tall trees in and around Wakkerstroom come alive, with up to 10 000 Amur Falcons and roughly 1 000 Lesser Kestrels* heading in to roost for the night.

Kruger National Park. The Greater Kruger conservation area includes vast areas of adjacent Mozambique and is one of Africa's most famous parks. We will explore the superb road system to try and locate big game,

including the legendary "Big 5" – Lion, African Elephant, Leopard, African Buffalo, and Rhinoceros. Kruger will be our best opportunity to photograph and watch these spectacular animals in their natural habitat and some of them we may encounter in very large numbers and at very close quarters. Other great African animals we have a chance of finding are Cheetah, African Wild Dog, Common Hippopotamus and a myriad of antelope and other mammals including Southern Giraffe, Plains Zebra, Common Wildebeest, Greater Kudu, Nyala, Impala, Klipspringer, Bushbuck, Bush Duiker, Steenbok, Common Warthog, Chacma Baboon, Vervet, and Dwarf Mongoose.



Cheetah by Daniel Danckwerts

The rich bushveld of the Kruger National Park will provide us with some of the most exciting and rewarding photography of the trip. Of special note here are species requiring vast areas of wilderness, namely Common Ostrich, Secretarybird, Kori Bustard – the world's heaviest flying bird, the incomparable Southern Ground Hornbill, Martial Eagle, Bateleur, Marabou and Saddle-billed Storks, and up to five species of vulture. The park is particularly well known for its large variety of raptors, including those over-wintering from the Palaearctic, and we hope to find Lesser Spotted*, Tawny* and Wahlberg's* Eagles, Dark Chanting and Gabar Goshawks, Shikra, and Lizard Buzzard.

The bushveld biome is famous for its diversity of birdlife and included in this suite of fantastic species are Crested Francolin, Swainson's and Natal Spurfowls, Brown-headed Parrot, exquisite Lilac-breasted Roller, Orange-breasted and Grey-headed Bushshrikes, Violet-backed Starling*, rare African Finfoot, Red-crested Korhaan, Black-bellied Bustard, White-crowned Lapwing, Southern Red-billed, Southern Yellow-billed and African Grey Hornbills, Southern White-crowned and Magpie Shrikes and Red-billed Oxpecker.

Other great birds we will look for include the bizarre, monotypic Hamerkop, African Green Pigeon, Giant Kingfisher, multiple bee-eaters and cuckoos*, Red-faced Mousebird, African Hoopoe, Bennett's, Bearded and Golden-tailed Woodpeckers, Black-collared and Crested Barbets, Brown-crowned and Black-crowned Tchagras, Spotted* and Ashy Flycatchers, Southern Black Tit, Sabota Lark, Burnt-necked Eremomela, Stierling's Wren-Warbler, Wire-tailed, Red-breasted* and Mosque Swallows, Greater Blue-eared and Burchell's Starlings, Red-billed Buffalo Weaver^ and Spectacled Weaver, among many others!



Martial Eagle by Stratton Hatfield

An **optional** night drive through the park may encounter some of the rarer nocturnal mammals such as African Civet, Common and Central African Large-spotted Genets, Side-striped Jackal, the beautiful Serval, White-tailed Mongoose and African Wild Cat, along with several species of owl and nightjar. These include Spotted and Verreaux's Eagle-Owls, African Scops and Southern White-faced Owls, and Square-tailed and Fiery-necked Nightjars.

South Africa's endemic Rudd's and Botha's Larks have undergone dramatic population declines (>90%) in the past 10 years. To limit human disturbance of the remaining population, we will not drive or walk off roads in areas that either species is known to occur, nor use playback or flush lines. Our chances of seeing either species is very low, but should we happen to spot either from a safe distance, we will not use laser pointers or spend significant time in the area. Our decision making on the ground will be led by our local guides who are part of the research and conservation efforts to save the species.

Tour Grading & Key

Photography		Good to very good. Some hides will be visited.
Overall Ease		Moderate. Suitable for all photography / birding / wildlife interest levels and most mobility capabilities. Can be a little tiring due to travel distances.
Birding Ease		Undemanding, most species provide good visuals. A small number of scarce/rare species.
Accommodation		Good to comfortable.
Walking / Trails		Walking and hiking mostly limited and over flattish ground. Some areas are uneven with rock/stone.
Vehicles / Roads		Comfortable vehicle. Some long drives on both sealed and dirt roads. Some can be bumpy, others wet and muddy depending on season.
Annoyances		Potential for malaria (low risk), typical weather variability (seasonally dependent).

Financial Arrangements and Important Notes

Tour dates, prices, single supplement, approximate flight costs and tour spaces are displayed on our website.

Tour inclusions:

- All meals from lunch on day 1 to breakfast on day 13;
- All lodgings;
- All ground transportation during the tour;
- All reserve entrance fees;
- All guiding services;
- Tips for local guides, drivers and services.

Tour exclusions:

- Visa fees;
- ANY flights;
- Any beverages (including mini-bar charges at hotels);
- Optional excursions;
- Special gratuities;
- Telephone calls, laundry and other items of a personal nature.

Single Supplement: The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

Tipping: As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc.) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader/s. If you feel that they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them at your discretion.

- **Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing. The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates.**
- **Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registrations, a small group supplement will be offered to confirm the tour.**
- **Tour prices are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.**
- **The designated tour leader/s may be changed at short due to unforeseen circumstances.**
- **The itinerary is indicative only. Changes may need to be made to the order in which the tour is conducted, or some of the venues we visit closer to departure. We will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.**

- Exiting the vehicle is prohibited in all areas and parks that contain dangerous animals.
- Much of our time is spent in vehicles, as we must cover long distances to get to the best areas for birds and animals. The more luggage you pack the less room there is in the vehicle, so it is important for the comfort of your fellow travellers that you do not over-pack. Kindly stick to 20kg for check in luggage and 8kg for hand luggage.
- Crime is problematic in certain areas of South Africa. Exercise caution as you would for any big city where crime exists. Do not unnecessarily flaunt cash and valuables and do not leave valuables exposed in the vehicle.

Bird Photo Tours

- Our Bird Photo Tours are a hybrid between our Classic birding tours and dedicated photographic tours. You don't have to be a professional photographer or have the biggest lens; this is for everyone with an interest in photography and birding. Whether you're using a bridge camera or the latest body and prime lens, our aims are the same.
- These tours are not aimed at seeing the most species possible on the route, rather taking time to photograph key targets and any other interesting species we may find. Naturally, the overall species list will be lower than a comparable birding focused tour.
- Whilst we may use blinds, feeders and hide setups on some of these tours, we will not be spending an entire day nor even several hours fixed in one spot.
- These tours are suitable for photographers who prefer opportunistic photography over entire days in a hide.
- Our leaders will assist in helping everyone secure good photographic opportunities and advise as much as they can on camera setup. However, they are not professional photographic tour leaders.

Arrival and Departure Details

The tour departs Durban on the morning of day 1 and conclude by mid-morning of day 13 at Mbombela.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your Tour Confirmation package once the tour has been officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

King Shaka International Airport, Durban (DUR) and Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport (IATA: MQP) are the main international points of entry and exit for this tour.

Visa requirements differ by country, nationality of the traveller and duration and purpose of your intended stay. It may be necessary to obtain a visa or an electronic travel authorization in advance of your travel. It is therefore vitally important that you check with your travel agent/consulate/embassy for exact visa requirements.

DO NOT book any flights until the Rockjumper Team have officially confirmed the tour.