South Africa

Northern Birds & Big Game (Relaxed)

29th May to 9th June 2025 (12 days)



Lilac-breasted Rollers by Clayton Burne

South Africa is quite simply one of the most pleasurable countries in which to travel, offering fantastic birding, exceptional wildlife viewing, and breath-taking photographic opportunities, along with world-class infrastructure. This relaxed tour of northern South Africa takes us birding in the Highveld grasslands around Johannesburg, the open Acacia woodlands of Zaagkuildrift and cool montane forests of Magoebaskloof for a series of endemic and near endemic species.

We'll then head to the the bird- and game-rich lowlands and the world-renowned Kruger National. Here we will enjoy several days in this spectacular reserve enjoying the classic African savanna and the many superb birds and mammals associated with this massive conservation area.

Itinerary & Map

Day 1	**Arrival in Johannesburg**
Day 2	**Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve & Marievale Bird Sanctuary**
Day 3	**Johannesburg to Rust-de-Winter**
Day 4	**Zaagkuildrift**
Day 5	**Rust-de-Winter to Magoebaskloof**
Day 6	**Magoebaskloof**
Day 7	**Magoebaskloof to Kruger National Park**
Days 8 & 9	**Central Kruger National Park**
Days 10 & 11	**Southern Kruger National Park**
Day 12	**Southern Kruger National Park to Mbombela & final departure**



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.**

Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve. The Suikerbosrand offers great birding in pristine "highveld" grassland and acacia-studded hillsides. About 30 minutes south of the city, this site is a great introduction to the birds of Southern Africa and a number of unique and special species occur including some endemics. Among the regional specials that we look for are Sentinel and Cape Rock Thrushes, Fairy Warbler, Grey-winged and Red-winged Francolins, stunning Black-faced and Violet-eared Waxbills, Eastern Long-billed and Eastern Clapper Larks. The highly sought-after Red-throated Wryneck is often seen here and we have an excellent chance of encountering this species.



Crimson-breasted Shrike by Adam Riley

Ashy Tit, Chestnut-vented Warbler, Fiscal Flycatcher, Chinspot Batis and noisy Crested and Black-collared Barbets are all fairly easily seen in the reserve. This is also the habitat of the gorgeous Crimson-breasted Shrike, Marico Flycatcher, Kalahari Scrub-Robin, Black-chested Prinia, Cape Grassbird, Wailing Cisticola, Mountain Wheatear and an array of showy widowbirds^ and bishops^. The area around the reception is a good place to find Familiar Chat, African Red-eyed Bulbul, striking Mocking Cliff Chat and Cape and Cinnamon-breasted Buntings. If we are lucky we may find the scarce Orange River Francolin early in the morning and even the uncommon and nomadic Pink-billed Lark. Several species of mammal may also be seen and these include Blesbok, Plain's Zebra, Black Wildebeest and Mountain Reedbuck.



Scaly-feathered Finch by Clayton Burne

Marievale Bird Sanctuary. This wetland is productive year-round as the bird sanctuary holds permanent water. It supports a wide variety of waterfowl and wetland associated species and we stand a good chance of finding many of these in addition to some fine examples of grassland associated species. The impressive Goliath Heron, African Darter, gorgeous Great-crested Grebe, Spur-winged Goose, Fulvous Whistling Duck, the uncommon White-backed Duck, Blue-billed Teal, Cape Shoveler, Southern Pochard and African Snipe are possible waterbird highlights. The sanctuary is one of the best places to see the elusive African Rail. Mammal highlights include the handsome Blesbok and Yellow Mongoose and the lucky birder may even see the rarely-encountered Cape Clawless Otter or Serval.

Rust de Winter. This area of rich bushveld is easily accessed via the well-known Zaagkuildrift road. Included in the bounty of bushveld specials are a host of delightful species typical of the dry west, most of which we are unlikely to encounter elsewhere.

Possible highlights include the outrageous Crimson-breasted Shrike, Violet-eared and Black-faced Waxbills, Scaly-feathered Weaver and Red-headed Finch, as well as more widespread species including Abdim's Stork*, Gabar Goshawk, Ovambo Sparrowhawk, Purple Roller, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Kalahari Scrub Robin, Marico Flycatcher, Southern Pied and Arrow-marked Babblers, Groundscraper and Karoo Thrushes, Ashy Tit, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, Cut-throat Finch, Great Sparrow, beautiful Green-winged Pytilia, Blue Waxbill, Red-billed Firefinch, White-winged Widowbird^, gorgeous Shaft-tailed Whydah^ and Cinnamon-breasted Bunting.



Swee Waxbill by Adam Riley

Magoebaskloof. The pristine mist-belt forests are home to the increasingly scare, endemic Cape Parrot, as well as Orange Ground Thrush, Chorister Robin, Crowned Eagle and Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher. These forests can be rather lively with bird activity and the key here is to locate mixed feeding flocks. Other specials of the area include the seldom-sighted Bat Hawk, Forest Buzzard, lovely Swee Waxbill, small flocks of Red-backed Mannikin, skulking Barratt's Warbler, the splendid Black-fronted Bushshrike, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Grey Cuckooshrike, Forest C anary and Green Twinspot.



Crowned Eagle by Keith Valentine

We'll also spend some time birding around our accommodation, where we have further chances for the above species, as well as the likes of Knysna Turaco, Southern Double-collared Sunbird, Olive Bushshrike, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Cape Batis and African Olive Pigeon.

Kruger National Park. The Greater Kruger conservation area incorporates vast areas of adjacent Mozambique and Zimbabwe and forms one of the largest reserves on earth. It is also one of Africa's most diverse parks, protecting a huge variety of wildlife. We'll visit several sites and camps in the central and southern part of the park.

The central part of the park is dominated by open grassy plains and sparsely vegetated woodlands. The birding and game viewing in this region is excellent with many bird species attending mixed flocks, particularly in acacia dominated woodland. In fact, the acacia savanna that

dominates most of the Kruger National Park contains one of the highest densities of birds of any habitat type in the world! This, coupled with the immense variety of game that we will endeavour to see, ensures a truly unforgettable African experience.



Verreaux's Eagle-Owls by Glen Valentine

We will bird the rich bushveld and grasslands of the park, which are particularly productive for a few special species. These include Kori Bustard – the world's heaviest flying bird, the magnificent Martial Eagle, Bateleur, Marabou Stork and the impressive Secretarybird, one of the world's great avian gems. Further specialties that we will search for in the woodland areas include the lovely Orange-breasted and Grey-headed Bushshrikes, African Grey Hornbill, Southern White-crowned and Magpie Shrikes, Red-billed Oxpecker riding on the backs of big game, Bennett's Woodpecker, African Hoopoe, Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, Burchell's Starling, Mourning Collared Dove, Brown-headed Parrot, Red-crested Korhaan, Southern Black Tit, miniscule Grey Penduline Tit, noisy Green Wood Hoopoe, Common Scimitarbill, Greater and Lesser Honeyguides, Acacia Pied Barbet, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Sabota Lark, Mosque Swallow, Black Cuckooshrike, Kurrichane and Groundscraper Thrushes, eye-catching White-throated Robin-Chat, melodic White-browed Scrub Robin, Burnt-necked and Yellow-bellied Eremomelas, Stierling's Wren-Warbler, Black-crowned and Brown-crowned Tchagras, Brubru, dazzling Violet-backed Starling* and Golden-breasted Bunting.

The sweet grasses in the Satara area are also excellent for large herds of grazing mammals such as Common Wildebeest, Plains Zebra, and Impala. These huge herds in turn support a healthy population of predators and Satara is particularly well known for this. In fact, we have an excellent chance of finding Lion, Leopard, Cheetah, Spotted Hyena and the very scarce and highly threatened African Wild (Painted) Dog in this area. High densities of other game include Southern Giraffe, Greater Kudu, Klipspringer, Bushbuck, Warthog, Chacma Baboon, Vervet and Dwarf Mongoose, to name just a few.



Southern Ground Hornbill by Glen Valentine

Aside from the many mammals, we'll be seeking Black-bellied Bustard, Crested and the rare Shelley's and Coqui Francolins, Swainson's and Natal Spurfowls, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark, European* and Purple Rollers, Yellow-throated Longclaw and with luck, the erratic and nomadic Temminck's Courser, and Senegal Lapwing. Summer visitors to these grasslands also include the scarce Pallid* and Montagu's* Harriers, while rocky outcrops might yield Mocking Cliff Chat, Red-winged Starling, and Cinnamon-breasted Bunting. In the late afternoon pairs of boldly patterned and crepuscular Double-banded Sandgrouse come to the edges of the road to

feed, before making their way down to watering holes at dusk to drink.



African Wild Dog Pups by Greg de Klerk

The denser bushveld, woodlands, and gallery forest of the southern section of the park are host to one of the most mouth-watering species that we hope to find, the majestic Southern Ground Hornbill that is often seen striding around in small groups. We will certainly be treated to many encounters with the gaudy Lilac-breasted Roller. Raptors are numerous throughout the reserve and we will no doubt enjoy sightings of the striking Bateleur as well as Tawny* and Wahlberg's* Eagles, Hooded, White-headed, White-backed and huge Lappet-faced Vultures, and the handsome African Fish Eagle, while other possibilities include Shikra, Lizard Buzzard, Gabar and Dark Chanting Goshawks, the scarce but extremely attractive African Cuckoo-Hawk, Black-chested and Brown Snake Eagles, Lesser Spotted*, Steppe*, Crowned and Booted Eagles, African Hawk-Eagle, African Harrier Hawk and Amur Falcon*.

This area is also famous for regular sightings of the rare African Wild Dog, while we stand an excellent chance of finding the endangered White Rhinoceros and with exceptional luck, its rarer cousin, the Black Rhinoceros. It is also arguably the best area in the park to see the crepuscular Leopard, certainly one of the world's best-looking cats! In addition, we should encounter Lion, Spotted Hyena, Black-backed Jackal, large herds of African Elephant lounging in the Sabi River, herds of African Buffalo, Waterbuck, the beautiful Bushbuck, and pods of Hippopotami. The persistent troops of playful Chacma Baboon and Vervet will keep us entertained during the heat of the day.



African Elephant by Keith Valentine

Scouring the riverine woodland and thickets along the Sabi River, we hope to encounter Bennett's, Golden-tailed, Bearded and Cardinal Woodpeckers, Ashy Flycatcher, gorgeous White-browed and Red-capped Robin-Chats, Terrestrial Brownbul, Yellow-bellied and Sombre Greenbuls, African, Jameson's and Red-billed Firefinches, superb Green-winged Pytilia, Red-faced Cisticola and Southern Boubou. The large riparian trees lining the rivers provide perfect nesting sites for weavers, which are extremely well represented in the park and include Southern^ and Lesser Masked^, Village^, Spectacled and Thick-billed.

We should also find African Green Pigeon with its lovely, mournful, liquid call, the tiny Little Sparrowhawk, African Goshawk, gaudy, Purple-crested Turaco, Red-headed

Weaver^, Black-headed Oriole, the showy African Paradise Flycatcher*, Arrow-marked Babbler, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Green-backed Camaroptera, iridescent Collared, Marico, White-bellied, Amethyst and Scarlet-chested Sunbirds, and the vocal Black-collared and Crested Barbets.

Noisy flocks of White-crested Helmetshrike are regularly encountered and we will also be on the lookout for the much rarer Retz's Helmetshrike along with its seldom-seen host, the rare and much sought-after Thick-billed Cuckoo*.



Leopard by Greg de Klerk

The park's numerous large rivers and wetlands harbour a number of exciting water-associated birds and we will be on the lookout for the massive Goliath Heron, stately and severely threatened Saddle-billed Stork as well as the more common Woolly-necked and Yellow-billed Storks, African Spoonbill, the unique and monotypic Hamerkop, Wire-tailed and Grey-rumped Swallows, White-crowed Lapwing and if we are lucky, the rare African Finfoot or unpredictable Greater Painted-snipe.

**There will be opportunities for optional sunset drives. Success on these sunset drives here varies greatly, but the list of possibilities is rather impressive and includes a good number of owls and nightjars, as well as Bronze-winged Courser, both Common and Central African Large-spotted Genets, Southern Lesser and Thick-tailed Greater Galagos, White-tailed Mongoose, African Savannah Hare, the incomparable Cape Porcupine, African Wild Cat, African Civet, Serval and Spotted Hyena – besides the Big 5!

Tour Grading & Key

Overall Ease		Undemanding, perfectly suited for all birding / wildlife interest levels and most mobility capabilities.
Birding Ease		Undemanding, most species provide good visuals. A small number of scare / tricky species.
Accommodation		Good to comfortable.
Walking / Trails		Walking and hiking quite limited. Mostly over flattish ground, some areas are uneven with rock/stone. Lodge gardens.
Vehicles / Roads		Comfortable vehicle. Closed minibus style vehicle, changing to typical Africa open safari vehicle in Kruger NP.
Photography		Very good to excellent.
Annoyances		Potential for malaria (low risk).

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 dinner on day 1 to lunch on day 12;
- 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.**

- Our Relaxed series of tours are designed to focus on having an enjoyable holiday with a bird and wildlife focus. Where possible; we have reduced or removed long drives, single night stays and poor/rustic accommodation. We have also sought to reduce or remove difficult hikes, narrow/muddy trails, and otherwise oppressive environmental conditions. Early starts and night birding are mostly optional, and we will not spend much time searching for difficult and/or skulking species.
- This tour is not suitable for hardcore birders and listers, or dedicated photographers.
- 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.
- Winter and Autumn in southern Africa provide variable weather conditions. In the east, clear sunny skies are the norm, with mornings and evenings getting cold – especially on open game drive vehicles.
- 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.

Arrival and Departure Details

The tour begins in Johannesburg with an introductory dinner in the evening of day 1. The tour concludes mid-morning of day 12 in 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.

O.R. Tambo International Airport, Johannesburg (IATA: JNB.) and Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport, Mbombela (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. The following website provides detailed information about visa eligibility and assistance with online applications options where viable: Visa HQ for Travel

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