South Africa

Eastern Highlights

7th to 16th February 2028 (10 days)



Southern Crested Guineafowl by Daniel Danckwerts

South Africa's eastern provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga offer some of the finest birding and wildlife experiences in the country. This wonderfully varied region supports an extraordinary diversity of habitats, from high-altitude grasslands and mist-belt forests to subtropical wetlands, savanna and broad river valleys, and with them comes an equally impressive array of birds and mammals.

Over ten days, this tour showcases many of the eastern region's most celebrated birding destinations. We begin beneath the dramatic Drakensberg escarpment, where the legendary Sani Pass climbs into the highlands of Lesotho and offers access to a distinctive suite of montane specials. From there, we descend through the lush Natal Midlands, exploring endemic-rich forests and rolling countryside before continuing north to the wetlands and coastal habitats around St Lucia and iSimangaliso.

The journey then moves into the renowned game-rich reserves of Zululand, where superb bushveld birding is complemented by the chance to encounter some of Africa's most iconic mammals. Mkhuze Game Reserve in

particular is famed for its remarkable bird diversity, while the surrounding lowveld supports an exceptional selection of raptors, hornbills, bee-eaters, kingfishers and other characteristic species.

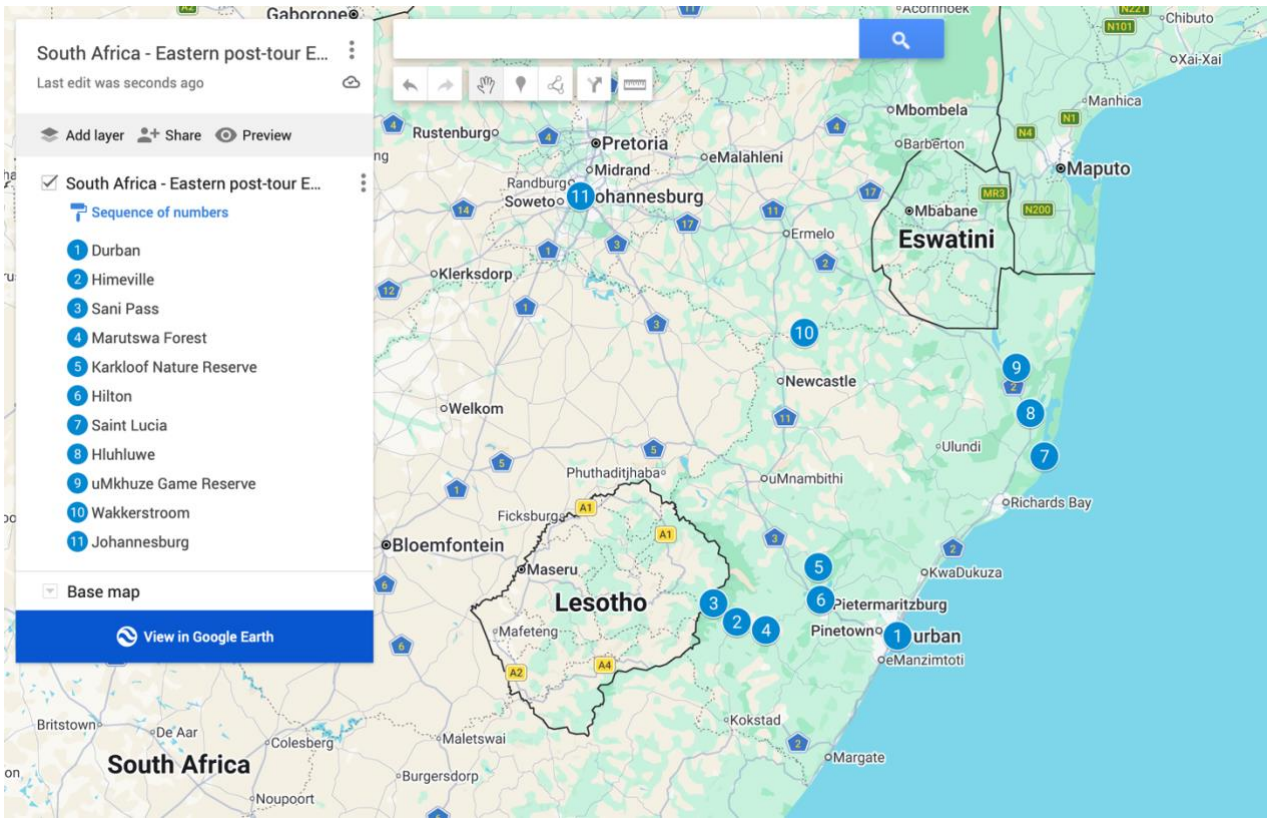
Our final major stop is Wakkerstroom, one of South Africa's premier highveld birding areas and a stronghold for several sought-after grassland endemics and near-endemics. Here, broad open plains and rolling uplands provide a fitting contrast to the forests, mountains and wetlands of the earlier part of the tour.

Combining outstanding birding, dramatic scenery and excellent mammal viewing, this compact eastern South African journey offers an exceptional cross-section of the region's natural riches and some of the most rewarding birding to be found anywhere in the country.

Itinerary & Map

Eastern Comprehensive

Day 1	**Arrival in Durban and transfer to Himeville**
Day 2	**Sani Pass day trip**
Day 3	**Himeville to Hilton via Marutswa Forest and the Karkloof**
Day 4	**Hilton to St Lucia**
Day 5	**St Lucia to Hluhluwe, via the iSimangaliso Wetland Park**
Day 6	**Explore uMkhuze Game Reserve**
Day 7	**Hluhluwe to Wakkerstroom**
Day 8	**Wakkerstroom**
Day 9	**Wakkerstroom to Johannesburg and overnight**
Day 10	**Final departures from Johannesburg**



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.**



Ground Woodpecker by Daniel Danckwerts

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. In order to do this, we will transfer to 4 x 4 vehicles and make our way up the rugged and spectacular Sani Pass, 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. A number of 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 Daniel Danckwerts

Karkloof. The Karkloof is a range of forested hills near Howick that is home to a number of 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



Malachite Sunbird by Daniel Danckwerts

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.

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.

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. Other species to keep a look-out for include Black Saw-wing and Southern Double-collared Sunbird, with further chances for Knysna Turaco, Grey Cuckooshrike, White-starred Robin, Swee Waxbill and Forest Canary.

Dlinza Forest. The beautiful forest reserve of Dlinza supports an avifauna combining both coastal and mistbelt bird species, and here we will search for African Goshawk, Crowned Eagle, the rare Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon, Narina Trogon, Purple-crested Turaco, Crowned and noisy Trumpeter Hornbills, Common Square-tailed Drongo, Chorister Robin-Chat, Grey Cuckooshrike and the highly endangered Spotted Ground Thrush. We are likely to also be entertained by the diminutive and at times surprisingly confiding Blue Duiker, a tiny antelope species that feeds almost exclusively on fallen leaves.



Spotted Ground Thrush by Daniel Danckwerts

Mtunzini. The small town of Mtunzini looks down on a wonderful patch of coastal forest and a large plantation of Raffia palms. These palms are an intricate part of the life of the Palm-nut



Gorgeous Bushshrike by Daniel Danckwerts

Vulture and this represents the southern breeding limit of this species. Other target specials include Black-throated Wattle-eye and a chance for African Finfoot.

St. Lucia area. We'll bird a small patch of forest that flanks the St Lucia estuary, an excellent site for the regional endemics such as Woodward's Batis, Rudd's Apalis, Brown Scrub Robin and Livingstone's Turaco. Other birds to look out for here include the iridescent African Emerald Cuckoo, the scarce Southern Banded Snake Eagle, Lemon and Tambourine Doves, Grey Waxbill, Red-backed Mannikin, Narina Trogon and Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird.

Isimangaliso Wetland Park. The dune forest on the edge of St Lucia town are the world's second highest vegetated dunes! This rich forest supports an exciting variety of endemics and specials, including the beautiful (but tricky) Livingstone's Turaco, Green Malkoha, Woodward's Batis, Brown Scrub Robin, Dark-backed Weaver, Green Twinspot, Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher, Red-backed Mannikin and shy Lemon Dove. Blue Monkey, Natal Red Duiker, Banded Mongoose and Red Bush Squirrel are possible mammal species that we may encounter. Other more widespread birds to keep our eyes peeled for are Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, White-eared Barbet, Lesser Honeyguide and Collared and Olive Sunbirds.

We will also take some time to drive the road through the Eastern Shores section of Isimangaliso Wetland Park to Cape Vidal. The habitats we traverse include moist coastal grassland, wetlands and coastal forest, and this translates to a large number of potential new species! Some of the top birds we will search for in the grassland and forest mosaic include the scarce Southern Banded Snake Eagle, Crowned Eagle, African Cuckoo-Hawk, Rufous-winged and Croaking Cisticolas and Yellow-throated Longclaw, while in the tall coastal forest at Cape Vidal itself we will look for Green Twinspot, Woodward's Batis, Brown Scrub Robin, Livingstone's Turaco and Grey Waxbill.

The grasslands en route support populations of African Buffalo, White and Black Rhinoceroses, Southern Reedbuck, Warthog, Greater Kudu and Plains Zebra, while forested areas hold Natal Red Duiker and Blue Monkey.

We'll take a night drive on rarely driven tracks deep into the Eastern Shores section of Isimangaliso Wetland Park. An array of birds, mammals and reptiles await us, with previous tours finding the elusive Leopard, Serval, African Buffalo, secretive Bushpig, Spotted Hyena, Cape Porcupine, Side-striped Jackal, Thick-tailed Greater Galago, endemic Setaro's Dwarf and Flap-necked Chameleon and Peter's Epaulleted Fruit Bat. Nocturnal birding can be



Neergaard's Sunbird by Daniel Danckwerts



Lemon Dove by Daniel Danckwerts

good, with decent chances of seeing the scarce Swamp Nightjar as well as Fiery-necked and Square-tailed Nightjar, while both Spotted Eagle-Owl and African Wood Owl are readily found.

Mkuze. The Mkuze area is one of the most productive birding hotspots in southern Africa and, with its wide variety of savanna, forest and wetland habitats, you can expect an excellent diversity of bird and mammal species in your days here. While we will take time to appreciate the overwhelming number of birds, we will concentrate particularly on finding the region's more localised specials. These include Eastern Nicator, Bearded Scrub Robin, Stierling's Wren-Warbler, Gorgeous Bushshrike and the stunning Pink-throated Twinspot. More widespread but none-the-less spectacular species that we will look for are Black-bellied Bustard with its strange, "cork-popping"* display, the nomadic Senegal Lapwing and beautiful Narina Trogon.

One of the more exciting habitats for us here is the park's 'sand forest', a rare and localised dry forest severely threatened by development. This habitat is home to Neergaard's Sunbird, Rudd's Apalis, the rather bizarre looking Crested Guineafowl, and the strange African Broadbill with its unique circular display. One of Africa's smallest antelope, the tiny, habitat specific Suni, also occurs in Mkuze's sand forest but we would be fortunate to encounter one of these shy mammals.

The ephemeral wetlands in the area can be very productive after good rains and depending on the local conditions we may opt for some time at one of these 'pans' where we will search for Black Heron, Lesser Jacana, African Pygmy Goose and White-backed Duck.

While in Mkuze we will be sure to enjoy some 'bushveld' birding – an excellent habitat for raptors and 'flock' birding especially. Here we will be ever vigilant for the huge Crowned and Martial Eagles, Little Sparrowhawk, Grey Penduline Tit, Bushveld Pipit, White-fronted and Little Bee-eaters, White-crested Helmetshrike, Southern Black Tit, Burchell's Coucal, Grey-headed and Orange-breasted Bushshrikes, White-throated Robin-Chat, Purple-banded and Marico Sunbirds, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow and if we are extremely lucky, the scarce and unpredictable Lemon-breasted Canary.



African Broadbill by Daniel Danckwerts

Mkuze is also an excellent reserve to see some of Africa's classic mammals and species like Plains Zebra, Giraffe, Bushbuck, Common Duiker, handsome Nyala, impressive Greater Kudu, Chacma Baboon, Vervet, Common Wildebeest, Impala and White Rhinoceros are all likely to be encountered during our time here. Rarer species that we may be lucky to see include Cheetah, Leopard, Black Rhinoceros and African Elephant.



Long-tailed Widowbird by Daniel Danckwerts

An evening walk and/or drive could produce African Wood Owl, Square-tailed and Fiery-necked Nightjars as well as small nocturnal mammals like Thick-tailed Greater Galago and White-tailed Mongoose.

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.

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, the rare and localised Botha's and Rudd's Larks (see note at end of itinerary), 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. 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.

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.



Blue Korhaan by Daniel Danckwerts

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

Overall Ease		Moderate. Suitable for all 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.
Photography		Good to very good. Some hides, mostly for mammal photography.
Annoyances		Potential for malaria (low risk), typical weather variability (seasonally dependent).

Financial Arrangements and Important Notes

The price for this 10-day Tailor-made tour of South Africa is **ZAR65,995.00** (roughly US$4,000.00) per person for a group size of 4 to 5 guests.

Tour inclusions:

- All meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 10 of the Eastern South Africa tour;
- 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 made 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.

Arrival and Departure Details

The Eastern Comprehensive tour starts with a transfer from Durban to Himeville of day 1 and concludes after breakfast in Johannesburg on day 10.

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), Cape Town International Airport, Cape Town (IATA: CPT) and King Shaka International Airport, Durban (DUR) 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.