

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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SOUTH AFRICA The Cape & Karoo 8 – 21 January 2017

TOUR REPORT

Leader: Geoff Crane

Day 1 Sunday 8 January 2017

Arrival & Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens

The flight arrived to a very busy terminal building as five international flights had landed within an hour of each other. As we drove towards Cape Town from the airport we drove past the Black River, seeing Hartlaub's gull, black-winged stilt, cattle egrets and a small group of greater flamingos. We then drove to our guesthouse in Hout Bay to freshen up and to have our lunch. Egyptian geese and red-eyed doves were there to welcome us and sacred ibis and hadeda ibis were flying over the lodge, a southern boubou was seen in the gardens later on.

The afternoon was very hot with no wind to speak of. We spent a relaxing afternoon at the beautiful Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens, where we saw Cape francolin, Karoo prinia, Cape white-eye, red-winged starling, speckled pigeon, fiscal flycatcher, black saw-wing, Cape robin-chat, olive thrush, little swift and orange-breasted sunbird. There were many plants flowering and a number of butterflies about. Garden acraea, African monarch, citrus swallowtail and a common geranium bronze were identified. We had a great dinner down by the Hout Bay beach seeing kelp gull while ordering a cold beer!

Day 2 Monday 9 January 2017

Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve & the Penguins at Boulders

After a delicious breakfast and a good night's sleep we headed for Simon's Town and the African penguin colony at Boulders Beach. We drove via the famous Chapman's Peak Drive with its stunning views and then down into Noordhoek and on to Simon's Town. At the colony there were plenty of penguins to photograph in various stages of moult as well as the majority that were supporting their new livery! The wind was quite strong but we could still enjoy the photographic opportunities that abound at the colony. Cape wagtail, African black oystercatcher, kelp gull, Cape robin-chat and Cape cormorant were also seen at Boulders Beach. We continued down the False Bay coastline to the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve.

Our first stop was at Olifantsbos on the Atlantic Ocean side of the Peninsula. We had some great views of hundreds of kelp, Hartlaub's and grey-headed gulls on the beach feeding on the sand hoppers. Swift and sandwich terns were roosting on the rocks as well as a rare vagrant of a gull-billed tern. Sacred and hadeda

ibis, blacksmiths lapwing, Egyptian goose, barn swallow, Cape gannet, African black oystercatcher, Cape and crowned cormorant, African ostrich and Cape wagtail were also seen here.

After a picnic lunch we went to Cape Point and walked up to the old lighthouse, with its 360° views. Cape sissen posed very nicely for us – at one stage we had five on a branch! We watched a family of rock hyrax's (dassie's) and Cape girdled lizards were also seen sunning themselves on the rocks. Back to the lodge for a cuppa and then out to a local restaurant for dinner. We saw plenty of birds today, just about all 'lifers' for those on the tour.

Day 3 Tuesday 10 January 2017

Rondevlei Bird Reserve / Strandfontein Water Purification Plant

Today was our 'Cape Town wetlands day' Our first port of call was Rondevlei Bird Reserve in the heart of Cape Town. This Reserve has always been a naturally occurring wetland and is still rich in bird diversity. On arrival we found a male Cape dwarf chameleon in all its splendour. We saw plenty of birds from the five bird hides. The plant highlights next to the path between hides were the Rondevlei spiderhead, the Cape flats conebush, *Leucadendron levisanus* and *Serruria foeniculacea*.

We had our picnic lunch at Rondevlei before moving on to Strandfontein Water Purification Plant (the sewage works!) Here we found a wealth of waterbirds; Cape, red-billed and Hottentot teal, southern pochard, little and great crested grebe, yellow-billed duck, thousands of greater and lesser flamingos and plenty of waders. Between the two wetlands we saw 98 species of bird! And one mammal - a Cape mongoose.

Great crested grebe	Little grebe	Great white pelican
White-breasted cormorant	Cape cormorant	Reed cormorant
African darter	Grey heron	Black-headed heron
Purple heron	Little egret	Cattle egret
Black-crowned night heron	Little bittern	African sacred ibis
Glossy ibis	Haded ibis	African spoonbill
Greater flamingo	Lesser flamingo	Egyptian goose
South African shelduck	Yellow-billed duck	Cape teal
Hottentot teal	Red-billed teal	Cape shoveler
Southern pochard	Spur-winged goose	Yellow-billed kite
African fish eagle	Steppe buzzard	Jackal buzzard
African marsh harrier	Cape spurfowl	Helmeted guineafowl
Purple swamphen	Common moorhen	Red-knobbed coot
African jacana	Three-banded plover	African black oystercatcher
Ringed plover	Black-smith lapwing	Wood sandpiper
Marsh sandpiper	Greenshank	Curlew sandpiper
Little stint	Sanderling	Ruff
Pied avocet	Black-winged stilt	Spotted thick-knee
Water thick-knee	Kelp gull	Grey-headed gull
Hartlaub's gull	Caspian tern	Swift tern
Common tern	Sandwich tern	Gull-billed tern
White-winged tern	Rock dove	Speckled pigeon
Red-eyed dove	Laughing dove	Spotted eagle owl
African black swift	Little swift	Alpine swift
Pied kingfisher	Red-capped lark	Barn swallow
White-throated swallow	Rock martin	Brown-throated martin
Black saw-wing	Pied crow	White-necked raven
Cape bulbul	Olive thrush	Cape robin-chat
Lesser swamp warbler	Little rush warbler	Levaillant's cisticola
Karoo prinia	Fiscal flycatcher	Cape wagtail

Plain-backed pipit
Red-winged starling
Cape sparrow

Common fiscal
S/double-collard sunbird
Cape weaver

Eurasian starling
Cape white-eye

Day 4 Wednesday 11 January 2017

Cape Town to Karoo National Park via the Karoo Botanical Gardens

We left Cape Town after a good breakfast and headed north on the main Cape Town to Johannesburg road. We could not really see much whilst travelling (common ostrich, African spoonbill and helmeted guinea fowl) but we did stop a few times and we had a nice hot walk around the Karoo National Botanical Gardens at Worcester. We saw a few large leopard tortoises making the most of a water sprinklers in the gardens and we now started seeing some of the birds that prefer the dryer areas of the country, like rock kestrel, acacia pied barbet, Cape robin-chat, Karoo prinia, Cape wagtail, common fiscal, European and red-winged starlings, malachite & southern double-collard sunbird, Cape white-eye, house and southern grey-headed sparrow and booted eagle.

As we arrived at the Karoo National Park we saw a beautiful steenbok by the road, followed by a small herd of red hartebeest and further up the hillside a few Cape mountain zebra. Burchell's zebra were seen at the waterhole by the camp. We just managed to unpack the vehicle before the big cumulus cloud that was hanging over the park burst. We had a short sharp down pour followed by an amazing rainbow. Just to put the rain shower into perspective - one of the girls on reception was just about in tears, as the locals have been waiting for rain for too long!

After the rain storm we had African black, white-rumped, horus and little swifts flying low over the camp as well as barn and greater striped swallows and rock martins. Some of the group relaxed on the stoop of their cottages with a cup of tea and others spent time in the bird hide. Little bittern, Egyptian goose, common moorhen and red-knobbed coot, red-eyed bulbul, white-necked raven, Cape and pied crows, speckled & white-backed mousebirds, red-eyed, Cape and laughing doves, familiar and Karoo chats, lesser swamp warbler, Karoo scrub-robin, rufus-eared warbler, southern masked weaver and white-throated canary were seen around the camp before dinner. We had dinner in the camp restaurant and on the way back to the cottages we saw a Karoo toad. For a day that was predominantly driving, we ended up seeing many bird species! (51 bird species and 6 mammal species.)

Day 5 Thursday 12 January 2017

Full day at the Karoo National Park

We had an early game drive before breakfast while the day was still cool. We set off around the Lammertjies Loop seeing Cape mountain zebra, eland, red hartebeest, kudu, springbok and Burchell's zebra. A Cape cobra was warming up on the tarmac road as we came around a corner and there were also a few leopard tortoises warming up in the morning sun.

Apart from a pair of spotted eagle owls settling in to roost for the day, the birds didn't feature much as the wind was still strong. At breakfast we did see fiscal flycatcher, southern masked weaver, Cape bunting, Cape wagtail, house and Cape sparrow, a three striped mouse and a mountain tortoise also joined us at breakfast.

After our alfresco breakfast we drove up the Klipspringer Pass to the viewpoint over the gorge. Here we saw a couple of klipspringers, which were new for the day and a little bit further we saw a small herd of grey rhebok. We saw quite a few birds this morning, the new ones for our trip were southern pale-chanting goshawk, a possible Ludwig's bustard (it was flying away from us at a distance!) Namaqua sand-grouse, Sabota, Karoo and spike-heeled larks, Karoo thrush, southern ant-eating chat, chestnut-vented titbabbler, long-billed crombec, fairy flycatcher, pririt batis, southern tchagra, pale-winged starling and red bishop back in camp by the bird hide. The temperature had shot up, so we retreated to the interpretive centre and then back to our cottages. After our picnic lunch we had some R&R time. Swimming, walking the Bossy trail, birdwatching from the hide or walking the fossil trail were options for the afternoon.

At 16:30hrs we headed out again. We decided to see if we could see the Verreaux's eagles at the gorge view point – but alas not today! We did however find a Cape crag lizard and a variegated skink sheltering in the cracks of the rocks. Half an hour in the bird hide proved entertaining! A southern masked weaver was building its nest, a rival weaver kept stealing material from the other's nest. Egyptian goose and common moorhen were enjoying the water. Red bishop, southern masked weaver and lesser swamp warbler were in the reeds, as was a little bittern. Laughing doves, Karoo scrub-robins and familiar chat were in the surrounding bush. After dinner a Bibron's gecko was identified by the outside lights on the cottages.

Day 6 Friday 13 January 2017

Karoo National Park to Mountain Zebra National Park via Graaff-Reinet

We had a nice early morning birdwatching walk. We walked to the hide, where we sat for 20 minutes, before walking through to the fossil trail and then back to the camp for breakfast. Bokmakierie, mountain wheatear, bar-throated apalis and neddicky were new to our list.

After breakfast we packed our bags and departed the park. As we left the park we had good views of Cape mountain zebra, red hartebeest, grey rhebok and leopard tortoise. We stopped for Ludwig's bustard and African pipit as well as a few other birds and we also stopped at a few likely looking birding spots between Beaufort West and Aberdeen. The wind was strong across the plains of Camdeboo so the birds were down! We had a picnic lunch at the Camdeboo National Park. We drove up Ribbokberg to the view point at the top, with fantastic views over the Valley of Desolation. Lanner falcons and white-necked ravens were seen at the top view point. At the Toposcope view point a *Haemanthus humilis* – a small pink flower was flowering after a recent bushfire.

We stopped a few times before the Mountain Zebra National Park, once for a pair of blue cranes in the grassland. And again for a view over a private game reserve that had reedbuck, blesbok, sable antelope and springbok. At this stop we had a verge of bright pink 'soar eye' flowers – *Ammocharis coranica*. We arrived at the Mountain Zebra National Park in the late afternoon. The approach road to the camp was very slow as we saw black wildebeest - which were new to our mammal list, a male kudu with an impressive set of horns, cheeky vervet monkeys in the trees by the road, yellow mongoose and ground squirrel. The Chacma baboons were retreating to their safe space for the night. On the bird scene we saw fork-tailed drongo, house martin, red-eyed bulbul and white-browed sparrow-weaver.

Day 7 Saturday 14 January 2017

Full day in the Mountain Zebra National Park

We set off before breakfast as soon as the camp gates opened up to the Park. There was a low wet mist hanging over the park, but fortunately this did not stop the birds from making a steady appearance. We drove up the Kranskop pass and then around the Rooiplaat Loop, along the Link road to the Ubejane Loop and then back to camp for breakfast. The mammal sightings were good but the mist did not make the photography that great! We saw 12 different mammal species, but no new species.

After breakfast the mist had cleared so we drove up onto the plateau again where we managed to get some good photos of the mammals and the fantastic views that seemed to stretch forever. We had a café lunch back at camp and then we set off clockwise around the Kranskop Loop. We had lots of stops for photography and bird / mammal watching. A large bull eland was an impressive sighting and some Cape mountain zebra at the end of the valley were nice to see.

African hoopoe, Cape longclaw, pied starling, red-headed finch, yellow-throated sparrow, red-billed quelea, cinamon-breasted bunting, scaly-feathered finch, sickle-winged chat, chin-spot batis, eastern clapper, lark, rufous-napped lark, Namaqua dove, double-banded courser, harrier hawk, hamerkop and secretary bird were all new birds for our ever growing bird list.

Day 8 Sunday 15 January 2017

Mountain Zebra National Park to Addo Elephant National Park

Before breakfast we went for a short drive around the Ubejane Loop. We had heard black-backed jackal the evening before and we found one just outside the camp. A little further on we came across a black rhino family browsing on the thorn trees. This was a great sighting as the black rhino favours dense cover. At the same spot as the rhino there was a family of suricates (meercats) waking up and warming up with the morning sun - we spent some time watching these charismatic creatures. We had good views of a couple of yellow mongoose as they ran across the road and the ground squirrels were also warming up in the morning sun. Gemsbok, red hartebeest, Cape mountain zebra, springbok, black wildebeest and kudu were also seen on the drive. New birds for our ever growing bird list were: swee waxbill, red-billed fire finch, red-billed wood-hoopoe and southern grey-headed sparrow. Marsh terrapin on a log in the waterhole were also new for us.

After breakfast we did a short game drive as a detour en route to the exit gate. We had great views of a pale chanting goshawk next to the road and we also stopped for a last few photographic moments. The drive to the Addo Elephant National Park was quick and easy with a few new birds. Just before the town of Cookhouse, we came across a ploughed field with plenty of white storks feeding in it and we stopped for a northern black korhaan near Somerset East.

We arrived at Addo Elephant National Park and had lunch at the camp restaurant. We settled in to our cottages and then set out for an afternoon game drive. Elephants were in small family herds all over the place. Each herd seemed to have a very young one with them. We saw a large herd of Cape buffalo and plenty of warthogs, which were all new for the trip. We took a slow circular drive up to Carols Rest Waterhole. We saw a large warthog with outsized tusks and quite a number of kudu. The kudu would take two steps off the road and would just disappear into the Spekboom. The dominant plant in the Park is the spekboom, *Portulacaria afra*. Even the elephants seemed to just disappear into the vegetation, the ripping and tearing of vegetation their only give away! One of the group members spotted a southern dwarf chameleon at the top of a bush – how? I do not know! But this was a great sighting and a first for me. Additional new birds for the day were: Cape glossy starling, greater double-collard sunbird, lesser-striped swallow and black-shouldered kite. After dinner, Cape dwarf gecko and marbled leaf-toed gecko were identified by the outside lights on the cottages.

Day 9 Monday 16 January 2017

Addo Elephant National Park

An early morning game drive was on the cards this morning. First stop was for the endemic Addo flightless dung beetle (without a ball of dung). We found a few later on in the day fastidiously making and rolling their dung balls. We had great views of a black-backed jackal scavenging off a Cape buffalo carcass and then just around the corner a spotted hyena was sauntering across the road in front of us. We saw a lot of birds on our drive. A couple of duetting bokmakierie's, a large flock of pied starlings, a secretive southern tchagra and the ever present Karoo prinia. Common waxbill, southern masked-weaver and red-eyed, Cape and laughing doves were also seen back at the camp before breakfast. A late breakfast back at camp and then we were out again on a route that would take us to the southern section of the park.

We drove past Gwarrie Pan, Rooidam and Hapoor Dam seeing more of what we had seen already. A new bird was the red-throated wryneck, which sat nicely for us all to get photos. The pink spekboom, *Portulacaria afra*, the blue plumbago *Plumbago auriculata*, and the red Cape honeysuckle *Tecoma capensis* were all flowering beautifully.... The Harvey's loop was quiet. We stopped many times to look at birds chalking up new species as we went. We came across a bachelor herd of elephants with impressive tusks at the Vulcani waterhole. A cacophony of noise coming from a few pied crows and hadeda ibis's drew our attention to a Martial Eagle in a small tree.

We had a café lunch at a local farmstall and then we drove back into the park looking for new sightings. Our afternoon mammal count was: Cape buffalo, elephant, red hartebeest, black-backed jackal, kudu, vervet

monkey, striped mouse, Karoo rat, warthog, Burchell's zebra and Egyptian tomb bats, which were flying around the camp at dusk (confirmed by a ranger!). We had dinner at the camp restaurant and after dinner a few of the group sat and watched the floodlit waterhole for a while.

Day 10 Tuesday 17 January 2017

Addo Elephant National Park to the Garden Route.

We awoke to a beautiful blue sky day! After breakfast we packed our bags and set off for the Garden Route. As we left the camp a large bushbuck crossed the road in front of us. We drove past Port Elizabeth and a few other small towns stopping for a coffee break at one. Once in the Tsitsikamma National Park, we walked along the boardwalk to the mouth of the Storms River through cherrywood, wild saffron and milkwood trees. We had our picnic lunch tucked out of the wind on the lawns by the crashing waves. The bright watsonia flowers by the edge of the road delayed us for a bit – photographically speaking!

We settled in to the Bitou River Lodge with a quick cup of tea and then we went for a walk around the gardens birdwatching. We saw greater doubled-collard sunbird, amethyst sunbird and southern masked weaver on the bird feeders. Brimstone canary, Cape batis, black-headed oriole, giant kingfisher, lemon dove, Knysna turaco, Cape gull (opposed to a kelp gull – some books have split these two!) and pin-tailed whydah.

Day 11 Wednesday 18 January 2017

Keurbooms River boat ride & Natures Valley walk

We had an early morning cup of coffee by the river and then after breakfast we drove through to the Groot River at Natures Valley. We had views of dusky flycatcher, yellow-throated woodland-warbler, Cape white-eye, Knysna turaco and terrestrial brownbul. Blue-mantled crested flycatcher, black-backed puffback, yellow-throated woodland-warbler, olive thrush, sombre greenbul, green-backed camaroptera, Cape white-eye, Cape batis and chorister robin-chat were seen from the walk. We then drove to the beach for a short walk. We had great views of a bushbuck family grazing on the green lawns of the holiday homes.

After lunch we enjoyed a leisurely boat trip up the Keurbooms River and into the forested Nature Reserve. We just sat back and enjoyed the view! Giant kingfisher, Knysna turaco, whimbrel, greenshank, white-breasted and reed cormorant, African paradise flycatcher, yellow-throated woodland-warbler and cardinal woodpecker were seen.

Day 12 Thursday 19 January 2017

Knysna

We woke up to an overcast sky with the promise of rain and it did end up raining off and on all day. So.... After another fantastic breakfast, with double-collard and amethyst sunbirds on the feeders, black crane with a chick on the river water lilies and a constant coming and going of other birds following the river margins. We set off for the town of Knysna and the Knysna Lagoon National Park. There were pied avocets, greenshank, Cape shoveler and black-winged stilt in the tidal wetlands en route to the Knysna Heads, where the lagoon (estuary) flows in to the Indian Ocean. The view was spectacular, as always (even being overcast).

We drove inland to the Diepwalle Forest, where we stopped to look at the 'Big Tree' - this gargantuan tree at 50 metres high, towers above the forest canopy. We continued along Prince Alfred's Pass to the Spitskop Peak, which is one of the higher peaks in the area. The rain held off long enough for us to have a picnic lunch and to admire the 360° views over the forests. We were able to photograph the beautiful dark red George lily, *Cyrtanthus elatus*, blue *Agapanthus*, *Erica discolour* and *Erica hispidula*.

Day 13 Friday 20 January 2017

Garden Route to Hermanus

After breakfast we set off for Mossel Bay and the Diaz Museum. This interesting museum depicts the Portugese influence on Southern Africa. We then continued through the 'bread basket of South Africa', and

stopped for lunch at Swellendam before moving on to Hermanus. We had seen white storks and blue cranes in the fields before on the trip but it's always good seeing them again. There were plenty of steppe Buzzards on the telegraph poles along the main road. Arriving in time for a walk around the Fernkloof Nature Reserve with its wealth of indigenous flora. The flora at the Fernkloof Nature Reserve was looking good, despite having no good rains for quite some time. A short walk produced *haenocoma prolifera* – The bright red everlasting and the yellow everlasting *Edmondia sesamoides*. *Berkheta barbata* – A large yellow daisy type flower. The blue flowered *Roella incurva*. *Mimetes cucullatus*, *Leucospermum cordifolium*, with the bright yellow new growth, *Leucospermum prostratum*, with the small yellow pincushions, *Aulax umbellata*, *Leucospermum truncatulum* and the strange *Lanaria lanata*. There were also plenty of Ericas flowering particularly the yellow *Erica viscaria*. We checked in to our accommodation and then went out to a local restaurant for dinner.

Day 14 Saturday 21 January 2017

Hermanus / Harold Porter Botanical Gardens

We spent an hour after breakfast 'at leisure' to buy last minute gifts to take home for the various housesitters. The cliff path walk overlooking the Indian Ocean was also utilized by some of the group – swift and sandwich terns, African black oystercatchers and cormorants were seen, as well as rock hyraxes on the rocks above the old harbour.

Our first stop was the Harold Porter National Botanical Gardens at Betty's Bay. On our tour last year we found some early flowering red disa orchids, *Disa uniflora*, at the waterfalls in Leopard's Kloof. A few of the group set off in search of the orchids and at the second from last waterfall we found five specimens flowering beautifully next to the waterfall. In the gardens we watched orange-breasted and southern double-collared sunbirds on some bright red Erica's and a few Cape sugarbirds, yellow-rumped widow, fork-tailed drongo, white-necked raven, somber greenbul and Cape robin-chat were also seen in the gardens.

We had a lunch at the restaurant in the gardens before heading off to the airport and the flight home to the UK. Stopping at Rooiels to see if the Cape rockjumpers were active in the strong winds – but alas they weren't! (It was worth a try!)

As a group we saw plenty of bird species on this tour, with some very special birds and plenty of plant species. Mammal species were well represented and we saw plenty of reptiles, butterflies, insects and frogs.... Many great photos were taken and I am sure plenty of great memories have been stored!