

# THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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## SOUTH AFRICA The Cape & Karoo 11 – 24 January 2015

### TOUR REPORT

**Leaders: Geoff Crane & Bruce Terlien**

#### **Sunday 11 January 2015**

##### **Cape Peninsula**

On arrival at Cape Town International Airport we set off towards Cape Town in fine weather but with a brisk south easterly wind blowing. As we passed the city of Cape Town the group was given a brief overview of the “Mother City”. We chose to drive to Hout Bay via the coastal route stopping at Darwin Point. This is the geological contact zone between the three main rock types found in the Cape Peninsula that was identified and described by Charles Darwin during his short stop here towards the end of his voyage in the HMS Beagle. While we were there, we had sightings of Cape cormorants, white-breasted cormorants, common terns, swift terns, Hartlaub’s and kelp gulls.

We checked into Riverside Estates to freshen up. We then left for Kirstenbosch stopping along Rhodes Drive to describe the various projects over several centuries, most importantly the trees that CJ Rhodes introduced in this area. Entering Kirstenbosch NBG, we made our way up through the shady Camphor Tree avenue looking for owls. We spotted Cape batis, Cape white-eye, lesser double-collared sunbird, orange-breasted sunbird, sombre greenbul, Cape bulbul, olive thrush, Cape robin-chat and many more. We had a chance to visit the conservatory to discuss some of the desert plants on display in particular and then also to visit the shop to buy some guide books etc.

We returned to Hout Bay in the mid-afternoon for a bit of a rest before setting off for a delicious dinner down by the beach.

#### **Monday 12 January 2015**

##### **Cape Peninsula**

After a good night’s rest... It was decided to go up to the top of Table Mountain as the weather was perfect with very little wind and good visibility. We reached the Lower Cable Station and took the cable car to the top without having to queue for any length of time. After a short orientation talk we spotted many red-winged starlings and plenty of flowers. *Crassula coccinea* was in full bloom as was *Erica plunkenetii*. We enjoyed views from the top for more than an hour.

We descended and continued along the Atlantic coast, Chapman's Peak Drive, stopping at Noordhoek Foodbarn for a light lunch. We continued to the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve where we stepped out to enjoy the view and the fynbos at Smitswinkelsbaai, where we discussed the discovery of the Cape by early Portuguese explorers. We saw white-necked raven, jackal buzzard, rock kestrel, Cape spurfowl, helmeted guineafowl and black harrier. On the mammal front, we saw bontebok and eland. Nice stands of white *Phaenocoma prolifera*, *Leucospermum conocarpodendron*, *Watsonia tabularis*, *Mimetes cucullatus*, *Leucodendron coniferum*, *Leucodendron laureoleum* were all flowering nicely. Rock agamas, Cape sugarbird, ostrich and Cape gannets were also seen at the point. As it was late we decided that we would go to the penguin colony at Simon's Town the next day. We returned directly to Hout Bay to get ready for dinner.

## **Tuesday 13 January 2015**

### **Cape Peninsula**

We headed directly to Simons Town over the Silvermine Pass. The beautiful fynbos was putting on a good show with, *Protea repens & neriifolia*, stands of *Watsonias* and *Chasmanthe aetheopica* as well as *Polygala myrtifolia* and *Virgilia*. There were a good number of African penguins to be seen both on land and in the shallows off the beach. Some were molting, some were nesting... Some guests took to the warmish waters at Boulders Beach while others looked on. We then enjoyed a light lunch overlooking the waters of False Bay. We made our way along the False Bay Coast, we saw quite a few African black oystercatchers on the beach, turning inland to the Strandfontein Waterworks, we were greeted by a spectacle of hundreds of greater flamingos on the first pond, then turning to the second a large variety of teal, yellow-billed ducks, Cape shovellers, little grebes, red knobbed coots etc, a little further on, we saw purple swamphen, great white pelicans, white-breasted cormorants and blacksmith lapwings. Also three-banded plover, greenshank, Kitlitz's plover and more (too many to list here!).

Leaving Strandfontein, we drove around to the Rondevlei Reserve in the late afternoon. We had a fast glimpse of a malachite kingfisher whizzing by and we saw more of the same water birds we had seen at Strandfontein. We then returned to Hout Bay to prepare for dinner down in the village.

## **Wednesday 14 January 2015**

### **Cape Town to Karoo National Park via the Karoo Botanical Gardens**

We left Cape Town and headed for the Cape Winelands. We drove through the countryside, which was covered in vineyards and then through the town of Stellenbosch before arriving at the Karoo town of Worcester and the start of the Great Karoo. The Hottentot Holland Mountains and the Hex River Mountains were looking great with the vineyards and fynbos on the foothills. The Karoo National Botanical Gardens were very dry. We saw little & white-rumped swifts hawking insects above the central koppie area, a fiscal shrike, malachite sunbird, laughing dove, Karoo prinia, white-backed mousebirds and southern double-collard sunbirds feeding on the *Cotyledon obiculata* flowers. We had our picnic lunch under a wild plum tree in the gardens and then continued our drive north.

As we approached the town of Beaufort West we could see high cumulus clouds... We arrived at the Karoo National Park just after the rain storm had passed. This was a very unseasonal rain storm which was well received by the locals! A large Mountain Tortoise was lapping up the water that was on the road. After posing for the cameras it went off on its way. We stopped again to look at a distant Cape mountain zebra and then we checked in to our cottages. Strong winds kept gusting through the camp well into the evening.

## **Thursday 15 January 2015**

### **Full day at the Karoo National Park**

We had an early game drive before breakfast while the day was still cool (22°C) Cape mountain zebra, eland, red hartebeest, kudu, gemsbok, steenbok, springbok, Burchell's zebra and vervet monkey were all seen well. Apart from a pale chanting goshawk and a few lark-like buntings, 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.

After our alfresco breakfast we drove up the Klipspringer Pass to the viewpoint. Here we saw a large mountain tortoise and a few rock hyraxes on the cliffs. A little further down the road we saw a couple of klipspringers, which were new for the day. The temperature had shot up, so we retreated to the interpretive centre and then back to our cottages. African hoopoe, pale-winged starling, fiscal flycatcher and Cape sparrow were seen at the centre. After our picnic lunch we had some R&R time (rest and relaxation!) 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 on the circular route. Our first mammal out of the camp gate was a new one for the day, a grey rhebok. We saw some mammals, mostly the same species as we saw in the morning, as well as ostrich, speckled mousebird, trac-trac chat and Karoo scrub-robin.

Half an hour in the bird hide proved entertaining! A southern masked weaver was demolishing its nest (or a rival's nest?) Egyptian goose, three-banded plover and common moorhen were enjoying the water. Red bishop, southern masked weaver and lesser swamp warbler were in the reeds. Laughing doves and familiar chat were in the surrounding bush. Little & Horus swifts were skimming the water for a drink as were the lesser & greater striped swallows and rock martins. A couple of marsh terrapins were sunning themselves on some old reeds.

### **Friday 16 January 2015**

#### **Karoo National Park to Mountain Zebra National Park via Graaff-Reineét (302km)**

We had another early game drive before breakfast this morning. We drove up the Klipspringer Pass and continued around the circular route back to the camp. Cape mountain zebra, red hartebeest, kudu, gemsbok, chacma baboons, steenbok, springbok, Burchell's zebra and klipspringer were seen. The wind was still strong, but we did manage to see Karoo long-billed lark, Cape sparrow, pale-winged starling and Karoo chat.

After breakfast we packed our bags and departed the park. We stopped for Ludwig's bustard half way between Beaufort West and Aberdeen and at Aberdeen we had a coffee stop at the local farmstall. The wind was very strong with large sand storms tearing across the veld. We had a café style lunch at Graaff-Reinet and then headed for the Camdeboo National Park and the Valley of Desolation. Vervet monkey and ostrich were seen en route to the top view point.

We stopped a few times before the Mountain Zebra National Park, once for a pair of blue cranes in the grassland, with two young. And again for a view over a private game reserve that had giraffe, impala, reedbuck, blesbok, sable antelope, waterbuck, mountain reedbuck and springbok. We arrived at the Mountain Zebra National Park in the late afternoon. The approach road to the camp was very slow as we saw a family of Suricates enjoying the last of the sunshine, black wildebeest - which were new to our mammal list, a male kudu with an impressive set of horns, Cape mountain zebra and plenty of red hartebeest. The dark rain clouds in the distant north and the evening sun on the veld made for some fantastic photographic opportunities.

### **Saturday 17 January 2015**

#### **Full day in the Mountain Zebra National Park**

6AM start... Our pre breakfast drive showed us some great mammals. Before we left the camp we saw an obliging Smith's red-tailed rock rabbit (usually a very hard mammal to see!) and soon after exiting the camp we saw a black-backed jackal, and then..... Cape mountain zebra, a family of vervet monkeys, a herd of 80+ red hartebeest with young, kudu, chacma baboons, a shy common duiker, steenbok, springbok, ground squirrel and yellow mongoose. Some of the new birds were white-browed sparrow weaver, fork-tailed drongo, cardinal woodpecker, scaly-feathered finch, steppe buzzard, crowned lapwing, red-eyed bulbul and a juvenile pale-chanting goshawk serenading us with its chanting! This was all on the Ubejane Loop Drive.

After breakfast we set off on the Rooiplaat Loop. Plain-backed pipit, pied starling, hundreds of barn swallows with a few greater-striped, white-throated and South African cliff swallows in the mix. On top of the plateau we found large mixed herds of blesbok, Cape Mountain zebra, springbok and black wildebeest – and views that stretched for ever!

As there was no wind today, we had a late picnic lunch on my stoop and then some free time to enjoy the camp. Some of the group did the Eagle walk, which ascends the koppie behind the camp and others made use of the swimming pool. An early dinner and then off on a night drive. The night drive turned out to be very rewarding, with porcupine, aardvark, sprighare, spotted eagle owl and nightjars.

### **Sunday 18 January 2015**

#### **Mountain Zebra National Park to Addo Elephant National Park**

Our obliging Smith's red-tailed rock rabbit was outside the cottages again this morning as were the vervet monkeys. We left the Mountain Zebra National park after a leisurely breakfast. We took a slow game drive out of the Park seeing black wildebeest, kudu, Cape mountain zebra and red hartebeest.

Our drive through to Addo Elephant National Park via Cradock was uneventful.... A few stops for birds on the wire or in the air: amur falcon, jackal buzzard, steppe buzzard, white stork and white-necked raven.

We had lunch at the Addo main camp and then went out on the Domkrag Dam loop stopping at the view point (where you are allowed to get out of your vehicle) to see what was at the waterhole. Elephant, Cape buffalo, Burchell's zebra, Karoo rat, black-backed jackal, yellow mongoose, and warthog were seen on our first game drive in the Addo Elephant National Park. Also new birds to our ever growing list were: black-headed heron, dark-capped bulbul, lesser grey shrike, bokmakierie, Cape glossy starling and emerald spotted wood-dove.

### **Monday 19 January 2015**

#### **Addo Elephant National Park**

05:30hrs game drive departure in search of Lions that had been heard pre-dawn, near the camp..... We didn't see the lions but we did see a Karoo rat that was sitting out next to a bush, a giant African snail sailing across the road in no hurry, an Addo flightless dung beetle searching for some fresh elephant dung, Giant African millipeds crossing the road and plenty of birds. (That was still worth the early start!!)

After breakfast we noticed that lions had been seen this morning, exactly where we had been half an hour ago! So we decided to have a quick look and there they were – lying right out in the open! We waited and watched and our patience was paid off when they were aroused by three Warthogs that were playing 'chicken'. The two male lions got up and walked off giving us great views. We continued further in to the park to the Harpoor waterhole, where we found a small herd of elephants drinking and cooling off. This herd was gradually joined by other herds until there must have been over 100 elephants. We watched the drinking, splashing, cavorting, greeting, threatening, pushing and shoving..... for 45 minutes - Many photos were taken.

Back at the camp we had lunch and then some free time to enjoy the bird hide, the ground level waterhole, interpretive center and botanical walk. The waterhole in front of the bird hide had some masked weavers and red bishops busy at their nests and the main waterhole had a few male kudus and a pair of very aggressive Egyptian geese!

### **Tuesday 20 January 2015**

#### **Addo Elephant National Park to the Garden Route. Tsitsikamma National Park / Big Tree.**

We had an early breakfast and then loaded the vehicle and drove out through the south gate of the Park. We saw many groups of elephants with the one particular group having some large 'tuskers' in it. While we were photographing this small bachelor herd a secretary bird flew over.... We back tracked a few

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kilometres and found the secretary bird striding through the grasslands. Black-backed jackal, Cape buffalo, kudu, warthog, and plenty more plains game were also seen. The endemic Addo flightless dung beetle was also seen with a ball of dung.

Once we arrived at the forests of the Garden Route we went for a walk at the 'Big Tree' – (a 1000 year old Yellowwood tree) we took a forest walk and saw a beautiful purple orchid – *Eulophia meleagris* and a very strange fungus *Aseroe Rubra* - Red-star alike fungus. In the forests of the Tsitsikamma National Park we saw terrestrial brownbul, greater double-collared sunbird, Cape batis and chorister robin. The rock hyrax's (dassie's) were sunning themselves on the lawns at the Tsitsikamma restaurant and swift terns, cormorants and African black oystercatchers were on the shoreline rocks.

### **Wednesday 21 January 2015**

#### **Garden Route**

After breakfast we drove through to Knysna for some birdwatching in the wetlands. Some of the birds seen were pied avocet, black-winged stilt, Cape wagtail, yellow-billed duck, African fish eagle, little egret and plenty of marsh sandpipers. The view over the Knysna Lagoon from the Heads was spectacular. We then headed inland through the indigenous forests to the Diepwalle Forest station, where we had our picnic lunch. We left the forest and drove in to the mountain fynbos and to the top of Spitskop Peak. Here we had a wonderful 360° views over the forests, to the mountains beyond. We found some interesting plants up here too. The beautiful dark red George lily, *Cyrtanthus elatus*, blue *Agapanthus Erica discolour*, and a *Disa Cornuta* a Golden Orchid.

### **Thursday 22 January 2015**

We had half an hour in Plettenberg Bay to buy some essential holiday things i.e. postcards. And then we spent a relaxing few hours on the Keurbooms River at Plettenberg Bay. The boat trip took us up the river past beautiful old yellowwood trees and milkwood trees draped with Spanish moss. We went for a short walk in the forest where we saw a couple of African paradise flycatchers at their nest site, a couple of Knysna turacos high up in the tree canopy, Terrestrial brownbuls searching through the leaf litter and forest buzzard catching a thermal above the forest canopy. African black-backed puffback, Cape batis and yellow-throated woodland warbler were going about their business and several black sawwings were flying up and down the river corridor. kelp gull, white-breasted cormorant, reed cormorant, Egyptian goose, white-fronted plover, greenshank and speckled pigeon were also seen from the boat.

We had a light lunch at a local café 'Thyme & Again' and then drove through to Nature's Valley for a walk on the beach followed by a short forest walk. Common sandpiper, fork-tailed drongo, black-headed oriole, forest canary and terrestrial brownbul were seen. We had dinner on the quay at Knysna

### **Friday 23 January 2015**

#### **Garden Route to Hermanus**

After breakfast we headed further down the Garden Route past Knysna Lagoon, Swartvlei (lake) at Sedgefield, and the beach at Wilderness to Mossel Bay where we spent an hour at the Diaz Museum.

The drive through the dry agricultural lands were quite uneventful – Many many steppe buzzards on telegraph poles and white storks in the dry stubble of the fields. We stopped at a farm dam near Stanford that had spur-winged goose, Egyptian goose, red-knobbed coot, yellow-billed duck, blacksmiths lapwing, pied avocet, sacred ibis and little egret.

We spent an hour at Fernkloof Nature Reserve at Hermanus just to catch the late afternoon light and to stretch our legs! We had great views of orange-breasted sunbird and Cape sugarbird, but it was the fynbos that was looking fantastic. There were many different ericaceae and proteaceae species, with everything in between. *Protea longifolia* the bearded protea with large flower heads, *Protea compacta* flowering on their tall stems, *Protea repens* the common sugarbush, *Leucospermum cordifolium* with many sunbirds on the orange pincushions, *Drosera cistiflora* and *Drosera pauciflora* the flat red sundew, *Berzelia lanuginosa* with

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small white balls, *Erica cerinthoides* the red fire heath, *Erica sessiliflora* light yellow flowers, *Erica plukenetii* with their anthers sticking out and *Erica imbricate* the salt & pepper heath.

### **Saturday 24 January 2015**

#### **Hermanus / Fernkloof Reserve / Harold Porter Botanical Gardens**

We had an hour to look around Hermanus and then we set off for Betty's Bay and the Harold Porter gardens. Just out of Hermanus we came across a field with 210 blue cranes in – The largest flock of blue cranes that I have seen in the past ten years! At the gardens we saw *Phaenocoma prolifera* – the bright red everlasting and the yellow everlasting *Edmondia sesamoides*, *Berkheta barbata* – a large yellow daisy type flower, the blue flowered *Roella incurve*, *Mimetes cucullatus*, *Leucospermum cordifolium*, *Leucospermum prostratum*, *Aulax umbellate*, *Leucospermum truncatulum* and the strange *Lanaria lanata*. There were also plenty of *Ericas* particularly the yellow *Erica viscaria* subsp. *Macrosepala*.

At the Harold Porter Botanical Gardens we went for a walk in search of the elusive red disa orchid, *Disa uniflora*. At the second from last waterfall we found a few red disa's flowering beautifully next to the waterfall. In the gardens we watched an orange-breasted sunbird on some bright red erica's and a few Cape sugarbirds. We had a late lunch at the restaurant in the garden before heading off to the airport and the flight home.

We saw plenty of bird species on this tour, with some very special birds (a flock of 210 blue cranes) and plenty of plant species, 43 mammal species, plenty of reptiles - including three tortoise / terrapin species, butterflies, insects & frogs.