

in the zone

MOKALA NATIONAL PARK

TEXT BY LEON MARAIS

In summer, the best time to go birding in Mokala National Park is at sunrise. The camp gate hours are generous; you can leave before sunrise and return after sunset.

LEON MARAIS

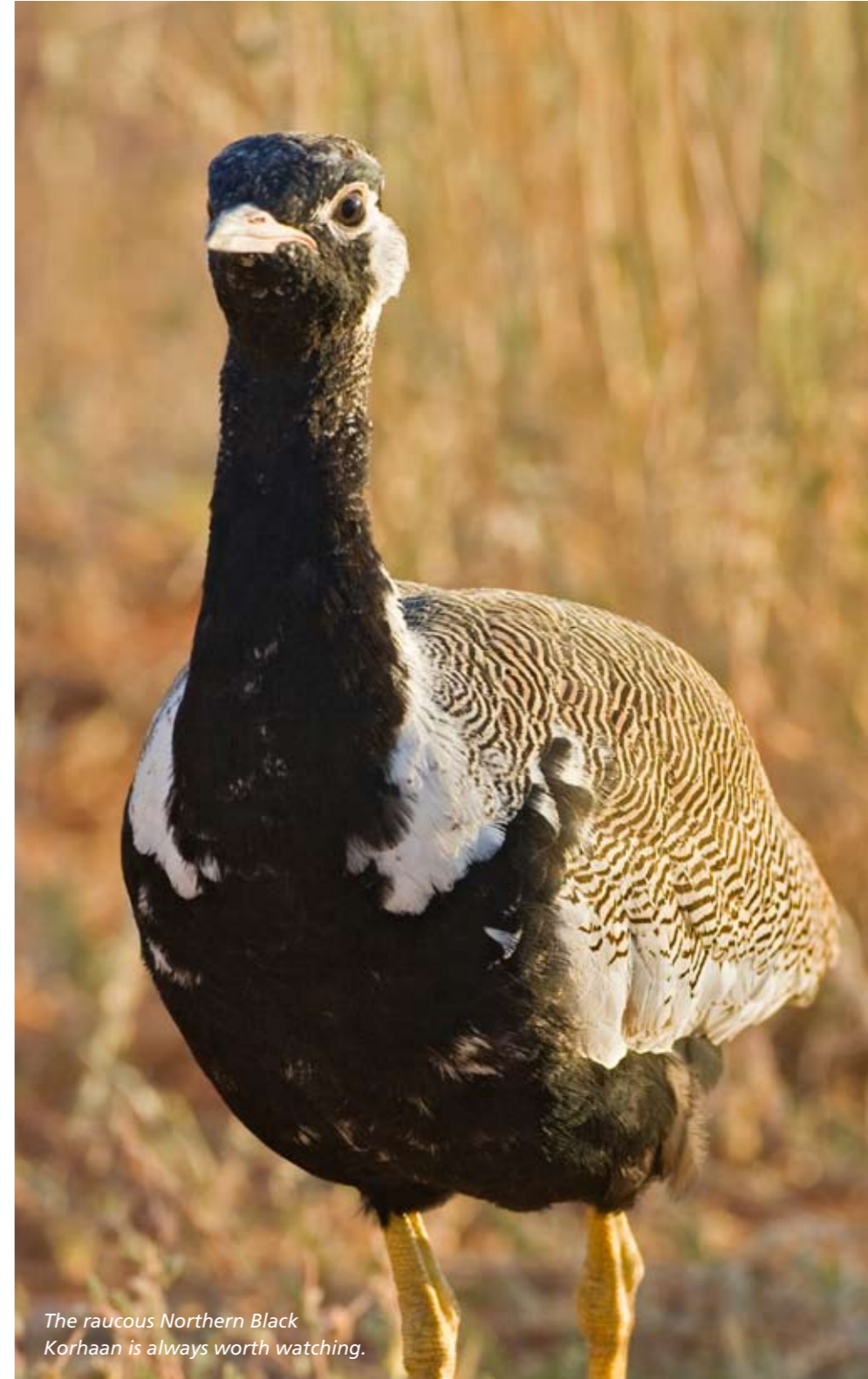
AS A BIRD GUIDE LIVING IN NELSPRUIT, I AM FORTUNATE TO BE ABLE TO VISIT THE KRUGER NATIONAL PARK FAIRLY REGULARLY. AND, WHILE THOSE TO WHOM I AM SHOWING THE PARK AND ITS WILDLIFE MAY RACK UP WELL OVER A HUNDRED LIFERS IN A FOUR-NIGHT VISIT, FOR ME LIFERS AT KRUGER ARE A RARITY.

It's not that I have a huge life-list, but rather that most of my birding is done in the savanna habitats of the north-east. While birding an area that you know well is rewarding in one way, visiting different areas always dangles the allure of new species, as well as the opportunity to experience something out of the ordinary. During Easter 2008 I got to explore something quite different when I embarked on a nine-day tour of the arid western habitats of the Kimberley region in the Northern Cape. A three-night stay at Mokala National Park formed the backbone of the trip.

Mokala National Park?

If you've never heard of it, you are forgiven. The latest addition to South African National Parks' (SANParks) collection of important reserves, Mokala has only been open to the public since mid-2007. In fact, the park's origins date back to 1998, when SANParks undertook a study of five areas to determine the best replacement location for the de-proclaimed Vaalbos National Park, to the north-west of Kimberley, which was the subject of a successful land claim. A 19 611-hectare tract of land in Wintershoek in the Plooyburg area south-west of Kimberley was subsequently selected. In 2005, the land was purchased and plans for the re-introduction of game were formed. The first five animals, a group of giraffes, were released into the reserve in June 2006 and a year later it was officially proclaimed, proudly bearing the name Mokala, the Tswana word for the camel thorn tree *Acacia erioloba*.

If you picture the terrain of Mokala, you'd naturally imagine flat, sandy regions dotted with iconic camel thorns, and possibly some haystack-like Sociable Weaver nests constructed in the larger trees. You would only be partly correct, however, for this region is in fact the transition zone of the savanna and Nama-Karoo biomes; the former being flat and sandy and the latter characterised by rocky larval outcrops, calcrete and shales. Indeed, part of the appeal of this area as a conservation unit is the preservation of the interface of these two biomes. This also makes for interesting birding prospects; for example, finding Kalahari Scrub-Robins in the sandy areas where their reddish hues ▶



The raucous Northern Black Korhaan is always worth watching.

CHRIS VAN ROOYEN



LEON MARAIS



MARK ANDERSON



blend in well, and Karoo Scrub-Robins on the rocky outcrops, where they are inconspicuous against the dark rocks.

In my experience, there are generally two types of birders: those who are happy with whatever species turns up, and the serious twitchers, who have a predetermined list of the birds they 'need'. With the casual birders you can just take it as it comes, but for the listers you need to be more systematic and know which species to prioritise. Many international birders, such as those I was with at Mokala, are compiling global birdlists. For them, the endemics and near-endemics become critical – if they miss them, they don't have the chance of seeing them elsewhere.

As in many arid regions, the level of endemism at Mokala is high and we recorded no fewer than 32 endemics and near-endemics. The Kalahari sandveld habitats, which are accessed by way of the longer loop roads, such as the Tsessebe and Kameeldoring, seem to hold more bird species than the rocky areas. The vegetative component is much greater here and thus food is more abundant, especially during times of higher rainfall.

Bird parties can include a dozen or more species and we encountered several that provided hours of exciting viewing, particularly between 07h30 and 09h00. These often centred around

large Sociable Weaver nests, with the feeding flocks of weavers attracting other species, such as Red-headed and Scaly-feathered finches, Lark-like Bunting and Yellow Canary. The activity drew insectivorous species such as Pririt Batis, Black-chested Prinia and Rufous-eared Warbler, as well as larger birds such as Marico Flycatcher and the spectacular Crimson-breasted Shrike. The southern region of the park, closest to the entrance gate, is more plains-like, with isolated camel thorns and tall grasses. Ant-eating Chats occur in the vicinity of their nest burrows, which are either self-excavated or the abandoned tunnels of animals such as aardvarks and porcupines.

Over the plains, Northern Black Korhaans can be seen and heard displaying, sounding ominously like a helicopter about to crash, while Fawn-coloured and Sabota larks call somewhat more melodiously from the tops of trees and bushes. The central regions of the park consist of the Karoo-like habitats, with long rows of rocky outcrops interspersed with flat areas of grass and scrub. The base and lower slopes of the outcrops receive extra run-off and are better vegetated, creating a transitional habitat frequented by Cape Penduline-Tit, Yellow-bellied Eremomela and Grey-backed Cisticola. Higher up, on the outcrops such as the one known as

Rondekop, Short-toed Rock-Thrushes can be seen, showing orange against the dark substrate, and even more conspicuous are the brilliant black-and-white male Mountain Wheatears. Cape Buntings can also be found among the rocks and we observed a fairly tame pair frequenting Mosu Lodge, using the buildings as an artificial nest structure. The open lawns of the lodge grounds and a small water feature in the gardens attract Ashy Tit, Fiscal Flycatcher, Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler and Orange River White-eye, which can easily be observed while you lunch at the restaurant's al fresco dining area. Greater Striped Swallows nest beneath the eaves of the restaurant's thatched roof, where they are harassed by the more aggressive White-rumped Swifts, which often usurp the swallows' nests.

The park's current accommodation infrastructure incorporates camping options, with the isolated Haak-en-Steek campsite ideally suited to do-it-yourself types, and Mosu and Mofele Lodges, for those who want to stay somewhere more substantial. Mosu Lodge is the fancier of the two, offering luxury and

semi-luxury units. The luxury option includes self-catering facilities, whereas the latter does not have any catering facilities. We stayed at Mosu Lodge and found it to be quiet and comfortable, with the staff going to great lengths to ensure that we enjoyed our visit.

As it transpired, I didn't add any new birds to my list while at Mokala. Not that it mattered, for it was pleasant enough to be able to spend time in a new environment and to explore our most recently proclaimed national park. We would probably have seen more species had we visited earlier in the summer, but then it would also have been far hotter. I left feeling that I had explored the park and thoroughly enjoyed it.

Being relatively small means that Mokala doesn't have the depth and scale found in reserves such as the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, where one can easily spend a couple of weeks. It does, however, make for a worthwhile stopover on any birding trip in the Kimberley region and, given its proximity to the N12, I think that it will come into its own as an interlude for birders on their way between Johannesburg and the Western Cape. □

Above The endemic Black-chested Prinia thrives in the arid conditions of the park.

Opposite, above Mosu Lodge is situated in typical Karoo-like habitat.

Opposite, below Chestnut-vented Tit-Babblers, also endemic to southern Africa, are attracted to the lawns surrounding the lodge.

Mosu Lodge has a restaurant, two luxury executive suites with self-catering facilities, and 13 semi-luxury units. Mofele Lodge, which is situated close to Mosu, has nine semi-luxury units.

There is also a campsite in the park. For reservations, contact Mokala National Park on tel. (+27-53) 204 0158/204 0164/204 0168; fax (+27-53) 204 0176, or visit www.sanparks.org for further information.



PETER RYAN