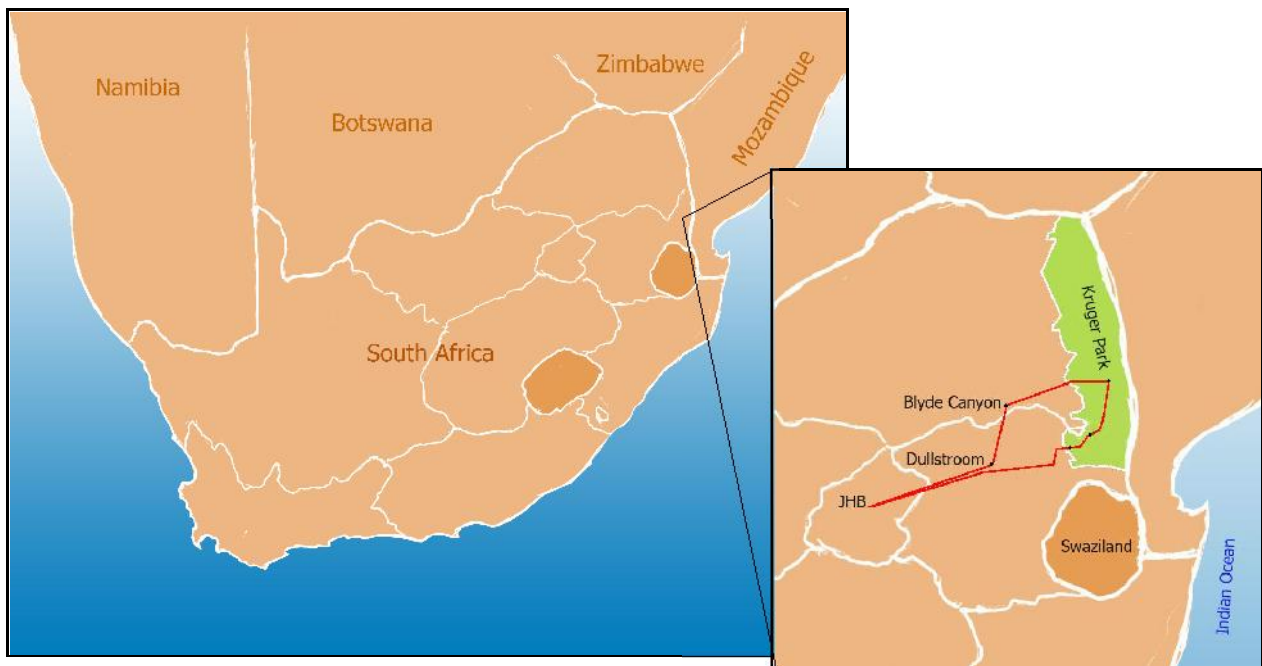


ESCARPMENT AND KRUGER NATIONAL PARK VOYAGER BIRDING AND WILDLIFE TOUR

*From the Highlands to the savannah;
an experience in South Africa's incredible diversity*

General description

South Africa is world-renowned for its incredible biological diversity, and nowhere is this more poignant than in the north-east of the country. Within a day's drive one can go from cool 2000 metre-plus grasslands to hot, sub-tropical savannah at no more than 250 metres above sea level, with much in the way of transitional habitats in between. This wonderful, compact itinerary is designed to make the most of this diversity while at the same time avoiding long journeys between stops and allowing enough time to enjoy the various accommodation venues. For the birder and wildlife enthusiast this translates into a superb range of species to be seen and is the ideal introduction to the region's avifauna and wildlife in general. The highlands are an endemics hot-spot, and notable species to be seen include Bokmakierie, Gurney's Sugarbird, Yellow-breasted Pipit, Drakensberg Prinia, Cape Grassbird, Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Buff-Streaked and Ant-eating Chats, among others. Descending in altitude, the tour explores some montane forest habitat, the cliffs and gorges of the Blyde River Canyon, third largest canyon in the world, and transitional habitats before levelling out in the Kruger National Park, where birds and beasts abound. Here daily lists of well over 100 species are to be expected, and sightings of big mammals such as Lion, Elephant and White Rhinoceros add substantially to the appeal. All in all this is a fantastic way to be introduced to some of South Africa's scenery, birds and animals. See the basic map below for a depiction of the route. For those struggling to choose between the savannah country of the north-east and the Western Cape, why not combine the two itineraries to make a comprehensive South African birding tour?



Brief itinerary

Day 1: Monday, 1st November 2010 ~ Dullstroom

Meet at O.R Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg and drive eastwards to Dullstroom, a small town in the Mpumalanga highlands, with one or two birding stops en-route, and an afternoon activity if time allows. Overnight in Dullstroom. Note that, depending on flight times, it may be necessary to stay over in Johannesburg on the night of arrival, and begin the tour the next morning.

Day 2: Tuesday, 2nd November 2010 ~ Dullstroom

The highlight of the highlands: a morning excursion up into the 2000 meter-plus Veloren Valei (Lost Valley) Nature Reserve in the Steenkampsberg Range to look for endemics such as Yellow-breasted Pipit, Buff-streaked Chat, Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Grey-winged Francolin and large birds such as Denham's Bustard, Cape Vulture and Secretarybird. Later in the morning we'll head back to town for a breakfast and in the afternoon we'll have another vehicular excursion into the surrounding countryside to look for species such as Blue Crane, Grey-crowned Crane and Southern Bald Ibis. Overnight in Dullstroom.

Day 3: Wednesday, 3rd November 2010 ~ Blyde River Canyon

We leave Dullstroom early in the morning and drive through to a lovely old hotel on the edge of the escarpment, where we explore a patch of rare montane mist-belt forest, looking for species such as Cape Batis, Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher, Narina Trogon, Orange Ground-Thrush, Knysna Turaco and others, followed by a lovely breakfast at the hotel. We then drive via scenic back roads to the Blyde River Canyon, third largest canyon in the world, birding on the way. Overnight Aventura Blyde Canyon.

Days 4 - 5: Thursday – Friday, 4th - 5th November 2010 ~ Satara, Kruger Park

After a morning activity we drive to the Kruger National Park, stopping en-route to view the Taita Falcon, one of South Africa's rarest breeding birds. We enter the park via Orpen Gate and spend the rest of the day birding our way to camp. The following morning we may explore the arid Mavumbye plains before breakfast, and in the afternoon, after some time in camp, we head out into other areas of the park. There's also a chance for a night drive as an optional extra. Species we'll be looking out for include Southern Ground Hornbill, Kori Bustard, Southern White-crowned Shrike, Double-banded Sandgrouse, Purple Roller, Red-crested Korhaan and many others. Overnight Satara Rest Camp.

Days 6 - 7: Saturday – Sunday, 6th - 7th November 2010 ~ Skukuza, Kruger Park

After a morning excursion we depart and head south into bushier country on our way to our next rest-camp, birding as we go. After checking in we'll have time to unwind before an optional afternoon activity, such as walk in the camp or a short afternoon drive along the Sabie River. Birds we'll look out for here include Purple-crested Turaco, Trumpeter Hornbill, African Fish Eagle, African Green Pigeon, Goliath Heron, White-crowned Lapwing and others. The next full day will give us more opportunity to explore this rich region of the park. Overnight Skukuza.

Day 8: Monday, 8th November 2010 ~ Pretoriuskop, Kruger Park

For our final night we head further south to our last stop on the tour. The south of the park, dominated by large granite outcrops, is renowned for White Rhino sightings, and birds such as Dark Chanting Goshawk, Purple-crested Turaco, Bennett's Woodpecker, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Buffy Pipit and others. Overnight Pretoriuskop.

Day 9: Tuesday, 9th November 2010 ~ Departure

There will be a final optional activity on the last morning, offering a last chance to see species missed so far. After breakfast we'll meander slowly out of the park and then head back to Johannesburg, a five hour drive away.

Tour in brief

Tour dates: begins in Johannesburg on the 1st November 2010 and ends in Johannesburg on the 9th November 2010.

Expected weather conditions: warm to very hot, possible afternoon thunderstorms.

Tour tempo: medium to medium-plus, optional mid-day breaks on non-travelling days (advisable in the hotter areas).

Accommodation standards: medium: lodges, guest houses and National Park's rest-camps.

Birding in brief: excellent variety, three major habitats included, tops for endemics.

Top 5 birds: Southern Bald Ibis, Yellow-breasted Pipit, Gurney's Sugarbird, African Scops Owl, Southern Ground Hornbill. Bird lists of 270 species and upwards can be expected, with 300+ being possible.

Mammal viewing: excellent, especially in the Kruger National Park, where Lion, Leopard, Elephant, Cape Buffalo, White Rhino, Giraffe, Zebra etc can be seen. Thirty plus mammal species to be expected.

Other wildlife and attractions: the Drakensberg Escarpment and the vast scenic beauty of the Kruger National Park.

Things to bring:

Binoculars, spotting scope if you have one, camera, hat, sunglasses and sunscreen, comfortable closed walking shoes, sandals for time spent in camp, windbreaker and fleece in case of cool weather, long trousers, insect repellent and malarial prophylactics (consult your doctor or GP), medications and other personal items. The recommended bird book is the Sasol Birds of Southern Africa 3rd Edition, Hockey, Sinclair and Tarboton, Struik Publishers.

