

South Africa

The Western Cape and Kwazulu-Natal

November 5th – 19th 2003

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In the desert you have time to look everywhere, to theorise on the choreography of all things around you
Michael Ondaatje *The English Patient*

Itinerary

Nov. 5th Even without the burden of jet lag, the 11-hour overnight flight from London to Cape Town on a cramped South African Airlines 747 was quite enough to be going on with as we staggered into a bright Western Cape morning. However, the heady mix of our first Red-winged Starlings, Anhingas and Sacred Ibises as we chatted to our obviously very personable guide, Brian Vanderwalt, put tiredness firmly into the background as we boarded our bus and headed off towards our first base at Simonstown. Initial impressions were as mixed as the view through the windows; a sprawl of shanties built from wood scraps, terracotta coloured breeze-block cubes of dwellings little bigger than a garage, a few souls standing around huts made from little more than plastic sheeting and then more affluent housing, surrounded by security fencing and warnings of armed response from the security firms protecting them. Then into a mix of rolling dunes and agriculture, mainly cabbages and potatoes, before skirting the coast road around the azure blue and rolling surf of False Bay, passing unmistakably South African names like Muizenberg and Fish Hoek and our first Cape Gulls, African Black Oystercatchers and skeins of Bank Cormorants.

Simonstown created a good impression. Our colonial hotel stood close to the small harbour with dark cliffs towering imposingly over the north side of the bay. The grey hull of a large fighting ship in the adjacent naval base tried its best to look serious against a foreground of brightly painted small craft and a cheerful mix of shops and restaurants recalled Canada to some, New England to others. Fish and chips and a welcome beer by the quayside set us up well for an afternoon drive to a wrack-strewn bay at Kommetjie, where continuous lines of Cape Gannets moved past the sandy point and Blacksmith Lapwing and White-fronted Plover busied themselves amongst sand and seaweed, while Bank, White-breasted, Crowned and Cape Cormorants stood sentinel and a big flock of Great Crested, Common and Sandwich Terns loafed on low rocks. We even managed excitement at our first Fiscal Shrike and Karoo Prinia, species that would soon be making up the numbers each day.

On towards the Cape Peninsula, we passed below lofty cliffs and the dry heather, rush and proteas that are the main constituents of the coastal fynbos, a botanically fabulous mix that comprises an enormous variety of flowering plants such as irises, pellargoneums and lilies. While this might be relatively unproductive for birds, we were not complaining as a stop for a handsome Jackal Buzzard drifting along the cliffs also allowed us to find Bokmakierie (and any one of several other species that pronunciation of its name suggested), Southern Double-collared and Malachite Sunbirds, Speckled Mousebird, Cape Robin, Cape Bunting and Cape Siskin.

Our next stop, at Boulders Beach, was more like PenguinDisney than what we had seen thus far (though perhaps I forget about the Ostriches). About a thousand African (Jackass) Penguins stood about on rocks, caged in to prevent them from terrorising the local populace, though the fate of one luckless bird, its carcass being thrashed about on the sea by a Fur Seal, was a reminder that we, not the penguins, are the ones who are the interlopers. A Cape Clawless Otter on nearby rocks was a real bonus, but by now we were thinking of a meal and some sleep and we headed back to Simonstown, to a menu that included Kudu, Wildebeest, Ostrich, Mako Shark and Swordfish, washed down with some very pleasant Chardonnay, all at markedly non-European prices.

African Penguin; White-breasted, Bank, Cape and Crowned Cormorants, Black-headed Heron, Jackal Buzzard, African Black Oystercatcher, White-fronted Plover, Blacksmith Lapwing, Hartlaub's Gull, Greater Crested (Swift) Tern, Speckled Mousebird; White-throated and Greater Striped Swallows, Cape Bulbul, Cape Robin-chat, Grey-backed Cisticola, Karoo Prinia, Common Fiscal, Southern Boubou, Bokmakierie, Red-winged Starling; Malachite and Southern Double-collared Sunbirds, Cape Siskin, Cape Bunting.

Nov.6th Rufous-chested Sparrowhawk was a real bonus for those who had wandered down to the quayside in the morning, prior to heading off eastward around False Bay to the small settlement of Rooi Els. Scattered low, brightly painted buildings with sparse gardens perched close to a deep blue, white-flecked sea on wave-washed rocks with washing fluttering in the breeze recalled the Falklands, though the dark coastal cliffs, the occasional Rock Hyrax and Chacma baboons, the latter engaged in attempts at breaking and entering by any means at their disposal, suggested otherwise. Orange-breasted Sunbird, Familiar Chat and Cape Bulbul and Cape Weaver on a twirly-dry (triangular washing line, dear reader) came in quick succession and those who had endured tormented nights wondering if indeed we would find the fabulous-looking Cape Sugarbird need not have worried, as a group was discovered just below us, the males decorated with sumptuous tails that waved sinuously as they moved about the proteas on which they were feeding. Tails are big out here, as we were to discover. Although we were to prove unlucky with Cape Rockjumper, two Ground Woodpeckers, much sought-after, were seen high on the crags above and as mid day drew on, two magnificent Verreaux's Eagles appeared, gliding effortlessly to a huge nest in a long gash in the cliff. Cape Rock Thrush and Brimstone Canary were gleefully added and then it was time for lunch. We lunched at the Harold Porter Botanical Gardens, where carefully manicured shrub and flowerbeds merged seamlessly into natural fynbos beneath the steep cliffs of another breathtaking landscape. A Lesser Grey Mongoose interrupted lunch as it sneaked along a path and it was not long before we were tucking into some sumptuous avian fare that included the sweet and sour combination of Cape Batis and Sombre Bulbul, with Speckled Mousebird and a party of Sweet Waxbills close by. Glimpses of Black Saw-wing tantalised us until we found four zipping about a bridge across a gully where they nest and a Neddicky proved elusive in the fynbos below the crags, but all of this secrecy paled into insignificance as we encountered the first in a memorable trio of skulkers on the trip; Victorin's Warbler. Any doubts that it should be included in the genus *Bradypterus* because it possesses some colour were dispelled by its characteristically inhibited approach to daylight, singing from a patch of heather that would not have concealed a bar of soap particularly effectively. Still, its guard eventually slipped sufficiently for everyone to be treated to as good a view as one has the right to expect from any of this enigmatic bunch. Brown-backed Honeybird proved to be no less elusive for some, but we all had excellent views of African Dusky Flycatcher, Olive Thrush, Cape Grassbird and Cape Siskin before driving back to Rooi Els for another stab at the rockjumper. In a strengthening breeze that made birding very difficult we were not displeased that our pelagic trip had been postponed until tomorrow, relief expressed in the darkening realisation for Brian that we might prove to be the sort of group that would add the epithet 'Cape' to everything that moved. Fortunately for him, this joke only lasted for the remainder of his time with us.

Verreaux's Eagle, Jackal Buzzard, Red-breasted Sparrowhawk, Cape Francolin, Brown-backed Honeybird; Ground and Olive Woodpeckers, Sombre Greenbul, Olive Thrush, Cape Rock Thrush, Familiar Chat, Victorin's Warbler, Cape Grassbird, Neddicky; African Dusky and African Paradise Flycatchers, Cape Batis, Cape Sugarbird, Orange-breasted Sunbird, Cape Weaver, Yellow Bishop, Sweet Waxbill; Cape and Brimstone Canaries, Cape Bunting.

Nov.7th Despite the strong wind yesterday afternoon, the morning dawned bright, sunny and, to general relief, calm. Accompanying us on our mission was Ian Sinclair, ex-pat Irishman who settled in South Africa in 1970 and has since become an integral part of their birdwatching scene, his name appearing in a shoal of books, including the SASOL guide each of us was using for this trip. His companion was Alvin Cope, replete in white wellies, and whose countenance gradually disappeared during the course of the day, as his face submerged in layers of sun block, sunglasses and handkerchief. They made a good team, as we enthused like the amateurs we were over our first White-chinned Petrels which, along with a few Sooty Shearwaters, Pomarine and Arctic Skuas and a solitary Great Shearwater, were all we saw for the first two hours as we headed steadily out to sea from the cliffs of the Cape.

The secret of pelagics in the area seems to be to find a trawler, and then to trust that its crew will be doing all the right things to attract seabirds. Our first boat was located after 2 ¼ hours, a long-liner that trailed a skein of seabirds in its wake. At this point, the unruffled nature of the morning changed to something close to pandemonium as new species appeared one after the other. First to get binoculars lifting and cameras clicking as the bucking and pitching of our boat was forgotten (well, almost) were Northern and Southern Giant Petrels, each giving close enough views for bill colour to be inspected, then Pintado Petrel, Subantarctic Skua and Shy Albatross. The sense of elation at the first albatross many of us had ever seen was almost immediately washed over by two more, as Black-browed and then Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatrosses preceded a brief Wilson's Petrel, the only small petrel of the trip, as we headed for the wake of a second vessel, trailing a maelstrom of at least 400 Great Shearwaters, several albatrosses, Pintado Petrels and a lone Cory's Shearwater. Eventually, we left the swarm receding in the distance and began our journey steadily back towards the coast, the glow of the experience kept alive by a family of Humpback Whales, the distinctive long, sickle-shaped dorsal fin of Bryde's Whale, then a party of Common Dolphins, riding effortlessly alongside us, with more heading across the waves in our direction. Roger, lower than us in more ways than one, could hear them calling as they cavorted alongside at staggeringly close range and for

several minutes we were surrounded by a mêlée of dolphins, plunge-diving gannets and fur seals as we circled the shoal of fish that they had found.

Back on land, we headed for the charming-sounding Cape Flats Water Treatment Works near Strandfontein, where a decent selection of waterfowl, several of which were not seen again on the trip, kept us amused for an hour or so, along with some small birds in the wind-blown reeds surrounding the ponds that included Lesser Swamp and Little Rush Warblers and Levallant's Cisticola. Tired but happy, we decamped to a new base near Cape Town's waterfront, with its neon mix of shopping malls, restaurants and street entertainers, approaching a crazy mix of London's Docklands, Leicester Square and Covent Garden.

Shy, Black-browed and Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatrosses, Southern and Northern Giant Petrels, White-chinned, Pintado and Wilson's Storm Petrels, Cory's, Great, Sooty and Manx Shearwaters; Yellow-billed Duck; Cape and Red-billed Teal, Cape Shoveler, Southern Pochard, Maccoa Duck, Red-knobbed Coot; Arctic, Pomarine and Subantarctic Skuas, Sabine's Gull, White-throated Swallow; Lesser Swamp and Little Rush Warblers, Levallant's Cisticola, Common Waxbill.

Nov.8th Despite the fact that our lodgings were in a tastefully converted prison, we were allowed out after breakfast to explore the intriguingly named Constantia Greenbelt, then the nearby botanical gardens at Kirstenbosch. The greenbelt proved to be a peaceful, secluded valley half way between Cape Town and False Bay, surrounded by affluent residential development. The sound of singing Chaffinch, introduced by settlers years ago, accompanied our descent into the wooded, shrubby valley where birding was initially quite slow until someone spotted a splendid Black Sparrowhawk, perched high above our heads in full view, its uncompromising yellow-eyed glare unmoved by our excitement. However, such boldness is not for the Knysna Warbler, the second in our triumvirate of ultra-skulkers, which Brian heard singing close by. We knew where it was, it knew where we were, but could we see it? A calling Red-chested Cuckoo diverted our attention for a while, allowing the warbler to sneak off to another patch of shrubs where it began singing again. Undeterred, some of us eventually managed to see a small brown bird, moving cautiously through the tangle below like a mouse. Given the rest of the trip, we might just have got good views, but nobody was betting.

Kirstenbosch was pleasant, manicured like Connaught Park in Dover, in a similarly hilly situation on the eastern slope of Table Mountain. A pleasant interlude on another sunny day, the main highlight was a pair of quite lovely Lemon Doves, apparently not easy to see, that gave us very close views in low shrubs at the edge of one of the paths. Returning to the HQ for lunch, we discovered that the Springboks had been beaten by the All Blacks in the Rugby World Cup quarter-finals; the expressions on the faces of the locals suggested that they had all been looking for Knysna Warblers.

Our afternoon involved a trip to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was incarcerated. To say we didn't see many birds is to miss the point. To spend at least 17 hours a day locked in a cell for 18 years and to emerge without apparent resentment is almost beyond comprehension and the fact that this all happened little more than ten years ago is a salutary reminder of the power of denial.

Hadeda Ibis, Black Sparrowhawk, Crowned Lapwing, African Wattled Plover, Lemon Dove, Red-chested Cuckoo, Knysna Warbler, Cape Sparrow, Common Chaffinch, Forest Canary.

Nov.9th Our first stop, as we headed north from Cape Town, was at a series of pools where Great White Pelican, Water Thick-knee and White-backed Duck were new for the trip and as we drooled at Southern Red Bishops in full breeding plumage our guide waxed lyrical about a couple of Whiskered Terns; apparently unusual so close to his home.

We continued northward, through open bush country into coastal fynbos with ridges of sand denoting our proximity to the West Coast National Park, into which we enthusiastically tumbled as we saw our first African Marsh Harrier drifting over the dunes. At a long pool en route to the Geelbek visitor centre we were treated to a languid flypast by a male Black Harrier, worth every bit of its status as the cover bird of the SASOL guide, then an African Goshawk, Karoo Scrub-robin and an African Rail, walking around the pool's edge with its chick. The advance guard of the 50,000 waders that summer in the area kept us amused for a while, with Kittlitz's Plover briefly assuming the mantle of 'bird of the trip' for a few of us, a couple pattering about close to us in channels among the samphire either side of the boardwalk that led to the viewing hide. A post-lunch walk in dry, open shrubby country produced African Pipit, Long-billed Lark and the incongruous sight of our first Cardinal Woodpecker on a post in a landscape even more treeless than Dungeness. We moved on again as the afternoon drew on, to a rocky viewpoint from which diligent scanning soon located a male Southern Black Korhaan. Hard work with 'scopes eventually produced views of several more and a Bat-eared Fox, though after encountering a party of Grey-winged Francolins and our first Pin-tailed Whydah we were later to see the korhaan much closer, including one that appeared to have found its way into a roadside garden.

Brian took us to a quarry where we found Acacia Pied Barbet, another Black Sparrowhawk and a male Verreaux's Eagle that gave fabulous views perched in a tree on the lip of the excavation. We scrutinised the nesting Rock Kestrels, recently split by Sinclair into a new species, different to our birds in several respects,

and then headed for the road northward, stopping briefly for a party of Cape Penduline Tits and our first White-throated Canaries.

Northward to our next stop at Velddrif on the Berg River, we passed through flat mixed arable farmland and grazing, including our first sheep, interspersed with scattered plantations and remnants of the original vegetation. The occasional Black-shouldered Kite and Springbok enlivened the journey and we arrived at our riverside lodgings late in the afternoon, to be greeted by the touchy-feely Keevit, presumably Afrikaans for 'complete pervert'. England, by the way, had just scraped past the Welsh in the Rugby, to set up a semi-final confrontation with Les Bleus of France.

Great White Pelican, White-backed Duck, African Goshawk; African Marsh and Black Harriers, Grey-winged Francolin, African Rail, Southern Black Korhaan, Kittlitz's Plover, Water Thick-knee, Namaqua Dove, White-rumped Swift, White-backed Mousebird, Acacia Pied Barbet, Cardinal Woodpecker, Large-billed Lark; Brown-throated and Banded Martins, Cape Penduline Tit, Karoo Scrub-robin, African Pipit, Southern Masked Weaver, Southern Red Bishop; Yellow and White-throated Canaries.

Nov.10th Those of us who were awake early enough were treated to a beautiful sunrise as a flock of Lesser Flamingos busied themselves beyond the road bridge, skeins of Great Crested Terns passed silently over us, probably 3,000 or more, and a Caspian Tern drifted over the mirror that was the river, lapping gently against its low, grassy shore.

An early start saw us at the Cerebos salt works to the west of Velddrif, with its delightfully politically-incorrect logo, that produced phenomenal views of Three-banded and Kittlitz's Plovers and a couple of Spotted Thick-knees, as well as our first Grey-headed Gulls, vastly outnumbered by the very similar Hartlaub's so far on the trip. We were unable to venture further into the plant until the manager arrived to give permission, so we moved on into rolling grassland west of Vredenberg, stopping at a roadside pool amid grass and scattered low vegetation, dotted with patches of low yellow-flowered shrubs and occasional rocky outcrops. Scrub Hare and Yellow Mongoose acted as brief distractions from a host of new birds that included Red-capped Lark, Capped Wheatear, Sickle-winged Chat and Southern Ant-eating Chat in quick succession. We swiftly added Cape Longclaw and the very local endemic Cape Long-billed Lark on a nearby ridge, Karoo Lark amid a patch of yellow-flowered shrubby vegetation and a party of Grey Tits on a fence line, before progressing once again into rolling grassland north of Paternoster that would complete a pre-breakfast loop back to Velddrif and breakfast at about 10. However, a suspicious-looking large bird on a fence line amid rolling yellow cereal fields had us all hurrying out of the bus once again and close inspection revealed it to be a Spotted Eagle Owl. A small flock of Namaqua Sandgrouse dropped in to the low, sparse vegetation on the opposite side of the road, where more Southern Black Korhaans strutted about on the low ridge above us, then a distant trumpeting in the still morning air alerted us to our first Blue Crane of the trip; a male displaying and calling over a low hill that overlooked the plain. So engrossed had we become that it took some frantic jumping, slapping and nervous inspection to confirm that we had found a new location for the forthcoming site guide *Where to Watch Birds in Ants*. Still not finished, we returned to the salt works, gained permission to enter, and walked past what appeared to be ponds of melted strawberry and vanilla ice cream to a pair of Chestnut-banded Plovers, giving a larger White-fronted Plover a piece of their mind as it wandered too close to their tiny chick. 14 ticks before breakfast. Pass the milk, please.

Departing Velddrif with a last look at the Berg River we drove east into partly cultivated open bush country, then alongside a range of rocky, rugged hills into grain lands; mile after mile of golden fields backed by dark, rocky mountains, punctuated by sporadic trees. We stopped briefly for five Blue Cranes near Piketberg then at a lily-covered lagoon near Porterville, where a party of Red-faced Mousebirds proved uncooperative for most of us and the lagoon rather unproductive, apart from a brief Little Bittern, though a riverbed along the road did produce Malachite Kingfisher and Fiscal Flycatcher.

On past Gouda and Wolseley and the country began to take on a Pyrenean quality as we veered away from the flat lands and climbed into the Skurweberg range, passing below grey crags that came ever closer to the road as we neared Michell's Pass, the portal to the Tanqua Karoo, the great desert wilderness to the north. Through the rocks and once again in the afternoon sunlight we were suddenly in the oasis that is Ceres, a verdant, prosperous fruit-growing community with low white-washed houses, tennis courts and cricket and rugby pitches, amid a profusion of green. After a quick coffee by the hotel pool, and one of those remarkable chance meetings, on this occasion the guy who runs the café at Manston airport, we piled back into the bus and headed for a range of hills where Brian showed us the much sought-after Protea Seed-eater, though the location was quite chilly in the late afternoon breeze; a reminder that while this was not exactly Nepal we were now at altitude.

Lesser Flamingo, African Fish Eagle, Blue Crane; Chestnut-banded and Three-banded Plovers, Spotted Thick-knee, Namaqua Sandgrouse, Spotted Eagle Owl, Red-faced Mousebird; Giant and Malachite Kingfishers; Cape Long-billed, Karoo and Red-capped Larks, Grey Tit, Capped Wheatear; Sickle-winged and Southern Ant-eating Chats, Fiscal Flycatcher, Cape Longclaw, Protea Seed-eater.

Nov.11th The peace of the Ceres early morning was rippled by early risers returning to announce that there were African Black Ducks on the tree-enclosed river nearby, so the rest of us straggled along to watch the birds from the footbridge, mingling with smartly dressed local schoolchildren walking and cycling into another bright day.

Leaving Ceres and its pear and apple plantations behind us, we headed steadily into contrasting arid, rocky country, stopping for Mountain Chat on an uphill climb that recalled the ascent from the Dead Sea into the Judean Desert, staring in some disbelief at great tar-like smears on the rock face that were hyrax droppings; ideal fodder for one of those ghastly TV shows in which everyone swaps partners, gardens, wallpaper and overall lifestyle, presumably to bolster the psychotherapist industry, probably an irrelevance to the average rock hyrax, who does seem to be a pretty well adjusted sort.

Our first taste of the Karoo was an arid plateau where rocky outcrops jutted from shrub and sandy earth, against a background of low, dark ridges. A pale morph Booted Eagle drifted across the bare landscape and a Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk slid from one roadside telegraph pole to another, keeping tantalisingly ahead of us, before we stopped where the road wound beneath a crumbling rock face. Among a surprisingly large number of birds in such barren habitat were Long-billed Crombec and Layard's Tit-babbler, busying themselves among the boulders and low scrub, a brief Larklike Bunting and several sunbirds and canaries. The grassy shrublands ended abruptly at an escarpment, dotted with aloe scrub and skirted by a narrow oasis at the base of the cliff where we lunched beneath acacias, distracted by Fairy Flycatcher, Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler, Pirit Batis and African Reed Warbler.

Our transition from the lush, verdant idyll that is Ceres was complete as we emerged on to the arid plain beyond the escarpment, encountering our first Karoo Chats. A party of Karoo Korhaans, spotted from the bus, very nearly evaded us as they tried to melt into some sparse shrubland, with Yellow-bellied Eremomela and Rufous-eared Warbler nearby, but even this vegetation began to thin out as we progressed deeper into the flat, stony terrain, where dwarf shrubland on bare ground with flat, crumbling stones testified to the low rainfall and intense summer heat. A walk into this astonishing landscape produced Tractrac Chat, a real gravel-plains specialist, wing-flicking among silvery-white desert plants on dark, crumbly soil, mixed with fat yellow succulents that glistened with moisture when broken, while White-throated and Yellow Canaries seemed utterly out of place as they flurried between bushes, searching for seeds.

Looping around a great flat plain backed by low, bare mountains with the afternoon sun allowing patches of shadow to return, we had our first distant view of Tanqua Guesthouse, a long, low building with a square turret part way along that heightened the resemblance to a desert fortress. Even at this distance we were deceptively far away and by the time we had checked in to our sleeping quarters, it was late afternoon, the evening chill was well on its way and Capped Wheatears perched on low stones outside, their shadows lengthening by the minute.

Our evening meal came and went in animated chatter, all of us sensing the uniqueness of this special place, and the night as we headed back was still and magical, as abundant stars glistened in unbroken jet black and a strange, intensifying light away in the distance became the moon, rising silently over the low, dark escarpment into the unfamiliar southern sky.

African Black Duck, Booted Eagle, Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk, Karoo Korhaan, Mountain Wheatear; Tractrac and Karoo Chats; Chestnut-vented and Layard's Tit-babblers, African Reed Warbler, Long-billed Crombec, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Rufous-eared Warbler, Pirit Batis, Fairy Flycatcher, Larklike Bunting.

Nov.12th Up early, conscious of our limited time in this unique place, we ate breakfast accompanied by Large-billed, Spike-heeled and Red-capped Larks, running between low bushes on the plain just outside the main guesthouse building (the larks, that is, not us). We headed for the acacia thickets and alfalfa fields that followed the course of the Tanqua River, just below the farm, and soon encountered a small party of Namaqua Sandgrouse, with a couple of Namaqua Doves near by, then Wattled Starling and a Pearl-breasted Swallow, flitting about the farmyard, before embarking on a series of attempts to obtain views of the obviously numerous but reticent Namaqua Warbler. Cloud and Zitting Cisticolas see-see-seed and zitted over the bright green alfalfa, while Common Quails whetted their lips inside it, a Karoo Thrush performed for some, and two Blue Cranes appeared and nearly three hundred Namaqua Sandgrouse flew over, but still the warbler showed itself only briefly, probably not even relenting when a superb Ludwig's Bustard flew over our heads and distracted all thoughts of the horrid little thing. The rest of the day was occupied by the drive back to Cape Town and, despite two magnificent Martial Eagles over the dry plains, the realisation that we really should have had another day in the Karoo. Views at last of Namaqua Warbler at Karoo Poort, A Giant Kingfisher flying across the road at exactly the same spot outside Gouda as on the way north, two more Blue Cranes and two Lesser Kestrels on pylons near Wellington were the highlights of the journey, at the end of which we emerged at our overnight accommodation in a casino complex near the airport that had all the subtlety of Sodom and Gomorrah, a bewildering contrast to the beauty of the previous evening.

Martial Eagle, Lesser Kestrel, Ludwig's Bustard, Spike-heeled Lark, Pearl-breasted Swallow, Cloud Cisticola, Namaqua Warbler, Wattled Starling.

Nov.13th Well, it turned out to be a very pleasant evening in very enjoyable company that included Brian and his wife and nobody got turned into a pillar of salt. We bade farewell to Brian and Josh, our driver, and left Cape Town on a one-hour flight to Durban, markedly lusher, cloudier and cooler than the South Western Cape. Our new guide, John McAllister, met us at the airport with Logan, our driver, and we were soon on our way, heading south along the coast before turning inland at Umzinto and climbing steadily through a hilly landscape, dominated by sugarcane and, as we gained altitude, vast plantations of eucalyptus and conifer, passing settlements with their distinctive conically-thatched rondavels, more like the Africa we expected.

Our first stop, at a reed-fringed lake near Ixopo, which presumably means 'Kentucky Fried Chicken' in Zulu (a tasteless reference to our lunch stop), produced Amethyst Sunbird, Fan-tailed Widowbird, three lovely Grey Crowned Cranes and Yellow-fronted Canary, as well as the realisation that English names of birds were going to cause some confusion, recent tinkering having resulted in an average of three alternatives for each of the widows, or whatever they are this week.

Beyond Ixopo, in truth an onomatopoeic word signifying the pulling of a hoof from sticky mud (try saying it with a clicking sound with the back of your tongue at the back of your palate, or go looking for some cattle in mud, it's the right time of year), we stopped amid grassy fields and forest to eat. That done, we wandered off and discovered Red-throated Wryneck, a lovely bird that for most of us meant cleaning up on the world's *Jynkinae*, all two of them. Greater Double-collared Sunbird and Black-headed Oriole followed before we moved on, to a ridge of grassy thistle-filled fields about 10 km from our destination, where we managed not only Black-bellied Korhaan close by, but also a male Denham's Bustard, puffed up like a woolly football in display on the ridge opposite. White-winged Widowbird and wonderful languid-tailed Long-tailed Widowbirds flopped about over the shallow grassy valley below us and we arrived at Creighton well satisfied with the start to the KZN leg of our tour.

Smithfield Guest House, run by Malcolm and Gail Gemmell, is a modified old farmhouse in agricultural land with timber and dairy farming, surrounded by higher ground, capped with timber and patches of indigenous forest. In contrast to our amiable but rather distracted guide, Malcolm had us organised almost immediately, allowing a delay only for the discovery of Horus Swifts and Southern Grey-headed Sparrows around the farmhouse, before whisking us off into some wooded hills north of Creighton for some late afternoon and early evening birding. Despite his initially overbearing manner, we soon began to warm to him and he found a party of highly attractive African Olive-pigeons at the edge of a forest trail, on our way to look for the rare and localised Blue Swallow in a patch of grassland amid the plantations that cloak so much of the original landscape. Our quest among ant-bear holes (they aren't really bears, just aardvarks, which spend the entire day hiding after a night of sitting smugly at the head of the dictionary) proved fruitless, although a couple of saw-wings had us going for a while. Undaunted, Malcolm then took us to a line of crags where he had seen both Spotted Eagle Owl and Cape Eagle Owl in the last year or so, and although this hardly seemed a great recommendation for our chances, we were treated to both species within 400 m of each other, both spotlighted, Cape Eagle Owl with orange eyes, Spotted with yellow ones.

We returned to a super meal then tumbled into bed, with Fiery-necked Nightjar calling in the night, looking forward to an early start and our expedition into Lesotho.

Grey Crowned Crane, Denham's Bustard, Black-bellied Korhaan, African Olive-pigeon, Cape Eagle Owl, Horus Swift, Red-throated Wryneck, Black-headed Oriole, Dark-capped Bulbul; Greater Double-collared and Amethyst Sunbirds, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow; Fan-tailed, White-winged, Red-collared and Long-tailed Widowbirds, Yellow-fronted Canary.

Nov.14th It is a long day out here, with the first glimmer of light around 4am and darkness not totally enveloping the day until 7pm. Malcolm clearly had plans for us to make the most of this and we were on our way soon after first light, after a quick peek at the nesting African Paradise Flycatcher in the garden, first picking up Stuart, a local bird guide, who would take one half of our group in his jeep. Breakfast was stowed securely in boxes in the 4WD vehicles in which we travelled, in readiness for the difficult road up to the Sani Pass that separates Lesotho geographically from the rest of South Africa.

The Creighton to Underberg section was notable only for a Long-crested Eagle amid almost incessant conifer plantations, though a stop at a mud-fringed lake produced Black Crane, African Snipe and Dark-capped Yellow Warbler. We began to climb steadily through mixed grassland and plantations, passing a party of Red-billed Queleas by the roadside, and several Jackal Buzzards and African Harrier-hawks as cliffs began to draw closer to us on either side of the road. We stopped like hobbits for breakfast in a grassy clearing by a rushing river at about 1,500 m, where our target species, Bush Blackcap and Barratt's Warbler, sang but failed to show in thick riverine stands of Ouhout, a gnarled evergreen shrub, leaving us with views of Klaas's Cuckoo and Giant Kingfisher to go with our coffee, rusks and broken teeth for those among us who didn't realise they should be dunked prior to consumption.

Stuart stopped to point out yet another Cape Eagle Owl where he had seen it roosting previously on a roadside rock face, and we need not have worried about the birds missed at breakfast, as both showed well as we climbed through increasingly rugged terrain, in which we found a Red-winged Francolin calling near

one of several hairpin bends. A Malachite Sunbird, shining in full sunlight, preceded a Gurney's Sugarbird that showed well for everyone at a stand of tall proteas, our only Streaky-headed Seed-eater of the trip appeared as we crossed a dry stream bed and we joined Malcolm and Stuart in agonizing over the difference between Drakensberg and Karoo Prinias, which seem to exhibit mixed characteristics in the area, suggesting a zone of overlap or, dare it be suggested, that they are the same species? A Black Stork appeared next, sliding across the sky towards jagged crags over which both Cape Vulture and Lammergeier were soaring, and upwards we continued, the scenery becoming ever more stunning, the grassy cliffs of the Drakensberg plummeting downwards, then sloping and softening in great green fingers that splayed out into the valley below.

The road narrowed and twisted and, suddenly, we were on the plateau that is Lesotho, the kingdom in the sky. Mountain Pipits and Drakensberg Siskins, hopping about on the dark, barren soil distracted us from the border formalities, but the lure of the highest pub in Africa overcame all and we stumbled in for glühwein and Whistling Weasel, a more than passable pale ale, which we drank on the veranda at an altitude of 2,873 m, overlooking the pass just below and a Sloggett's Ice Rat, luxuriating in its excellent name on a dry wall in bright sunshine. We were treated to fantastic views of Drakensberg Rock-jumper, initially a lone female, then a male, sidling up to her with head cocked to one side and tail fanned, before they both ran across the boulders with at least two others close by at the top of the cliff, and as we walked back into the thin air a party of Southern Bald Ibis dropped down just beyond the wall surrounding the yard.

We moved on, over a flat, grassy landscape cut by earth channels, small huddles of thatched rondavels with herders gathered outside in the intense sunlight and occasional patches of stony ground, with low hills on either side completing a more than passing resemblance to the vast Mongolian steppes. Basutu herders vacate this snow-bound plateau in the winter in favour of lower altitudes 200 km or more to the north and in all probability we were witnessing their return to summer grazing, to plots demarcated by cairns of stones on top of the hills above us. Flocks of sheep clattered along the road and drifted steadily across the shallow valley floor below, a couple of young lambs draped around the necks of the herders accompanying them, neither man nor animal in much of a hurry to go anywhere. As we watched a Sentinel Rock Thrush living up to its name on low boulders one young man approached and entertained us musically for a while in return for a decent crop of coins and in doing so gave the impression, confirmed by Malcolm, that they are gentle, humorous people. They have a sharp edge, though, having been fierce warriors in the past, even a thorn in the side of the great Shaka and his legions, stealing his cattle and making off with them into their own lands. Clever people, too, smearing cattle dung on to rocks ahead of the herds to persuade them through terrain they would otherwise have been reluctant to negotiate.

After Wailing Cisticola and Ground Woodpecker as we lunched in a roadside quarry, we began to retrace our steps, needing to beat the deadline of 4pm at the border post. Back in South Africa, we spent some time below the crags watching a couple of pairs of Buff-streaked Chats and a Cape Rock Thrush, replacing Sentinel at lower altitude. Our group became detached from the leading jeep until a call on Malcolm's phone alerted us to the fact that they had found a Secretarybird by the roadside, some way along the road ahead. Foot down, we looked eagerly about as we saw their vehicle ahead, then the bird itself, a long-legged, grey apparition stepping deliberately across a lush grassy field, its long black nape plumes shaking as it carefully picked its way up the hillside, most unlike a crane, as I thought it would be, until it was well up at the foot of the grey crags above us.

Back at Creighton, it was raining, for the first time on the trip, and John, Clive and I found that Stuart, our host, had left a bottle of wine for us in our bungalow. It proved to be a thoroughly excellent Cabernet Sauvignon, and we slept like logs as the rain poured on to the tin roof

Southern Bald Ibis, Secretarybird, Lammergeier, Cape Vulture, Long-crested Eagle, African Harrier-hawk, Red-winged Francolin, Black Crane, African Snipe, Klaas's Cuckoo, Bush Blackcap, Sentinel Rock Thrush, Buff-streaked Chat, Drakensberg Rock-jumper, Dark-capped Yellow and Barratt's Warblers, Wailing Cisticola, Drakensberg Prinia, Mountain Pipit, Gurney's Sugarbird, Red-billed Quelea, Drakensberg Siskin, Streaky-headed Seed-eater.

Nov. 15th Our efforts to see the Cape Parrots of Hlabeni Forest were thwarted by lingering low cloud and rain, though the real pity was that although an Olive Bush-shrike did show itself the forest was clearly alive with birds that were largely invisible in the murk. Still, Red-necked Spurfowl, Black-backed Puffback and Forest Buzzard were seen on the fringes and driving the 4WD on slippery forest tracks was great fun.

Cutting our losses, we drove on to a grassland site near Creighton where Broad-tailed Warbler, Croaking Cisticola and Rufous-naped Lark were new, then swept through a nearby grassy field for Black-rumped Buttonquail. The culmination of our efforts came with a successful attempt to see Blue Swallow, a very local breeder, each pair of which needs around 1,000 ha of grassland, which has clearly been badly affected by the elimination of so much natural habitat by commercial forestation. Wing-snapping Cisticola at the same site was a bonus, and we reluctantly left Creighton, returning to the coast road via Richmond and Pietermaritzburg then heading north through pouring rain, arriving near Eshowe late in the afternoon, where a brief stop produced Mountain Wagtail, our first Lesser Striped Swallows and a Village Weaver.

Our lodgings for the night were at a place called Shakaland, originally created as a film set, but now where it is possible to undergo The Shaka Experience, as the leaflet would have it. This involves an explanation of the layout of the Zulu village, some spear-throwing, a visit to the Sangoma (diviner) and beer tasting (a maize-based fermentation that tastes like fizzy porridge with a hint of crushed-up Redshanks, not quite up to the standard of Whistling Weasel). I've often wondered what I was drinking in the Lord Clyde for all those years. Apparently, the post-meal dancing was jolly good.

White-faced Duck, Forest Buzzard, Red-necked Spurrow, Black-rumped Buttonquail, Diderik Cuckoo, Brown-hooded Kingfisher, Rufous-naped Lark; Blue and Lesser Striped Swallows, Broad-tailed Warbler; Wing-snapping and Croaking Cisticolas, Ashy Flycatcher, Mountain Wagtail, Black-backed Puffback, Olive Bush-shrike, Village Weaver.

Nov. 16th Yesterday's rain had evaporated and we awoke to a still, sunny morning. With any lingering cynicism back in its bag, we ventured into the dry bushveld beyond the compound, seeing only Black Cuckoo-shrike, White-bellied Sunbird and White-browed Scrub-robin before we came out on to the brown dirt access road that cuts along one slope of the valley, allowing us to look down on the tops of the acacias on one side and up to a scrubby hillside on the other. Someone spotted a Pygmy Kingfisher, perched in a roadside bush, and suddenly birds came thick and fast; Kurrichane Thrush and Common Scimitarbill on treetops in the distance, Black-collared Barbet, Red-fronted Tinkerbird, Dusky Indigobird and Yellow-throated Petronia on the low hillside above us and Orange-breasted Bush-shrike, Tambourine Dove, White-throated Robin-chat, Violet-backed and Black-bellied Starlings and Golden-breasted Bunting close to the road. If all this sounds frantic, it was, but this wonderful Pandora's Box of birds still had much to offer, with nothing more arresting than a fabulous male Long-tailed Paradise Whydah by the edge of the road, two females sitting close by, possibly admiring his wonderful, sinuous tail and the combination of black, deep yellow and rich chestnut that makes this one of the most beautiful birds I have ever seen. A couple of Blue Waxbills were found in the scrub close to us, a Dark-backed Weaver put in a brief appearance and a long-tailed warbler-like bird turned out not to be one of the constantly calling Green-backed Camaropteras but a sleek Yellow-breasted Apalis. Two Ashy Flycatchers later and we headed back to the compound, giving some passing locals a peek through our telescopes before tumbling in to breakfast, replete with an average of 20 new species for most of us.

The sun was well up as we left Shakaland, but we lingered over a Wahlberg's Eagle, three Lanners and a party of Woolly-necked Storks before clambering back into the bus and moving on to Dlinza Forest, where we arrived just after nine. Binoculars, telescopes and voices were soon in action as Trumpeter and Crowned Hornbills and Collared Sunbird appeared before we had entered the forest, accompanied by a local guide, to find our first Purple-crested Turaco, sitting unobtrusively high in the canopy. Square-tailed Drongo, Grey Cuckoo-shrike and numerous Yellow-bellied Greenbuls preceded fantastic views of a Blue Duiker, a small antelope that scuttled to within two or three yards of us before realising its error, then two or three Spotted Ground-thrushes close to an obliging Chorister Robin-chat where a narrow stream cuts across the forest floor. Dlinza boasts the first aerial boardwalk in Africa, but also every garden freak cum amateur botanist in South Africa, most of whom seem to believe that since plants can't hear it doesn't matter how much noise they make (except, of course, the Tigger Lily, which can hear 'stromry well, it just doesn't want to). So, we saw virtually nothing avian from the platform that overlooks the forest, though a Black-chested Snake-eagle drifted over and a Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird busied itself in a nearby tree, presumably searching for its earplugs.

Back at the bridge over the river near Shakaland, we tried but failed in a quest for White-backed Night Heron, but did see Burchell's Coucal instead. By way of celebration we stopped for lunch at the local Poultry Pantry in Empanzeni, before continuing to Richard's Bay, where we stopped for a while at a wetland site in a charming industrial landscape, redolent of the outskirts of Calais, where Lesser Masked-weaver and Yellow and Southern Brown-throated Weavers were new, as were a few Hottentot Teal, just about identifiable in the strengthening wind, a small gang of African Pygmy-geese and African Pied Wagtail.

This had been a long day, and we were largely happy to be moving on to our next base, at Bonamanzi Game Park, set in savannah, only a ten-minute shudder from Hluhluwe and where we almost immediately saw our first Nyala and Crested Guineafowl of the trip. Scattered around the camp in tree houses and cabins on stilts, while John B and Chris basked like Nimrod in a chalet that looked as if it was built for the President and his entourage, the logistics of the accommodation meant that we eventually met rather late for a very welcome dinner. Clive and I were out in the sticks in a tree house at the edge of the forest, where we were visited each evening by a host of fabulous insects, attracted to the lights on our porch; moths of myriad patterns and sizes, a cicada and beetles with antennae so long that it was surprising we couldn't get the BBC World Service on them. The local geckos had a field day. Best of all, though, on our return from the meal, was a Thick-tailed Bush baby, its pink eyes shining brightly in the beam of my torch as it clambered about in the tree just outside our door.

In my case, at least, no fewer than 37 new species had been seen during a long but thoroughly excellent day, during which England had subdued France to reach the Rugby World Cup final, against Australia.

Woolly-necked Stork, African Pygmy-goose, Hottentot Teal, Wahlberg's Eagle, Black-chested Snake-eagle, Crested Guineafowl, African Jacana, Tambourine Dove, Purple-crested Turaco, Burchell's Coucal, African Pygmy Kingfisher, Common Scimitarbill; Trumpeter and Crowned Hornbills, Black-collared Barbet; Red-fronted and Yellow-rumped Tinkerbirds; Black and Grey Cuckoo-shrikes, Square-tailed Drongo, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Kurrichane Thrush, Spotted Ground-thrush; Chorister and White-throated Robin-chats, White-browed Scrub-robin, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Green-backed Camaroptera, African Pied Wagtail, Orange-breasted Bush-shrike; Violet-backed and Black-bellied Starlings; White-bellied, Eastern Olive and Collared Sunbirds, Yellow-throated Petronia, Dark-backed Weaver, Lesser Masked-weaver; Yellow and Southern Brown-throated Weavers, Blue Waxbill, Long-tailed Paradise Whydah, Dusky Indigobird, Golden-breasted Bunting.

Nov. 17th The drive to Mkuzi Game Park of about two hours, allowing for stops for Little Bee-eater and Broad-billed Roller, saw us at the park entrance at 6.45, three quarters of an hour after the 6 o'clock Gnus, in addition to which we passed Burchell's Zebra, Giraffe, Vervet Monkeys, Nyala, Impala, our first Emerald-spotted Wood-dove, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill and an African Goshawk, perched by the café as we arrived. So far, so good, but in a piece of indifferent planning by our guide we wasted the remainder of the best part of the day while we took breakfast here, where a lone member of staff did her best, helped by us in the fetching and carrying. Nevertheless, we did not get on our way until well after 9, though we did find Bearded Scrub-robin, Blue-mantled Crested-flycatcher, Grey Tit-flycatcher, Southern Black Flycatcher and both Rudd's and Bar-throated Apalis as we waited, and the colours of the Violet-backed Starlings that visited the trees by the café, shining in the bright sunlight, had to be seen to be believed.

On our way in the bus at last, we stopped for a magnificent stag Kudu, with a Red-billed Oxpecker clinging to its foreleg, then Southern Black Tit on our way to hides by two rather quiet waterholes, where we had very close views of a stag Nyala and, outside of the second, the spectacularly dull Terrestrial Brownbul, busying itself on the ground like a Blackbird; you certainly get what it says on the tin with your Terrestrial Brownbul. After finding a Rattling Cisticola in a pile of dead brush, we stopped for lunch at a large waterhole, conspicuously absent throughout South Africa after more than a year with little rain, and saw a selection of waterbirds that are surely more numerous in periods of greater rainfall; Hamerkop, African Openbill, Marabou, Yellow-billed Stork, Water Thick-knee and a few Collared Pratincoles and Wood Sandpipers. Wart Hog, which we saw just nearby, is also normally much more numerous in the wet, though for us it meant very few mosquitoes – we hardly saw any.

The afternoon drive produced Lilac-breasted Roller, Green Wood-hoopoe, Neergaard's Sunbird and African Hoopoe, but most of us found it very frustrating to be in the bus instead of walking around; something it is not possible to do because of the danger of being reduced to pulp by rhinos. Apparently, white ones are OK while black ones are bad news, though never having been good at chess, being in the bus seemed like a good idea to me. A Pale Flycatcher close to the track, its behaviour much more like a redstart than a flycatcher, was just about the last memory of the day as we left Mkuze for the drive back to Bonamanzi.

Although this was in several respects a frustrating day, it has to be said that we did see some very good birds and mammals. Nevertheless, we should have had an earlier start, packed breakfast and jeeps that would have made for better viewing for the occupants. Still, one partially negative day in fifteen hardly rates as a disaster.

Hamerkop, African Openbill; Marabou and Yellow-billed Storks; African White-baked and Lappet-faced Vultures, Emerald-spotted Wood-dove, Little Bee-eater; Lilac-breasted and Broad-billed Rollers, African Hoopoe, Green Wood-hoopoe, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Southern Black Tit, Terrestrial Brownbul, Bearded Scrub-robin; Bar-throated and Rudd's Apalis, Rattling Cisticola, Grey Tit-flycatcher; Southern Black and Pale Flycatchers, Blue-mantled Crested-flycatcher, Cape Glossy Starling, Red-billed Oxpecker, Neergaard's Sunbird.

Nov. 18th A dawn start outside the temporary abode of Clive and I (no *Dunroamin* or *Tigh-na-Batis* for the likes of us, but the ISO 9002-approved *Tree House number 5*) for African Broadbill was unfruitful (though not for it, perhaps, given the state of some of us), so we sloped off towards the camp restaurant and breakfast, finding plenty to chew over in an African Cuckoo-hawk nearby.

Refreshed, we jumped into separate land cruisers and set out for the floodplain at Bonamanzi. This created a differing set of birds for each group, since the drivers took different routes. Ours chose to drive through the forest near the camp, where we were treated to great views of Gorgeous Bush-shrike, brief views of an African Yellow White-eye and Purple-banded Sunbird, though a singing Grey-headed Bush-shrike proved uncooperative. Out into the open bush above the floodplain, we passed a few rather unexpected Red-backed Shrikes, some Yellow-throated Longclaws, a pair of Chinspot Batis and then fabulous views of an adult Bateleur, followed shortly after by a juvenile, the adult pursued by an enraged Fork-tailed Drongo that at one point actually landed on the raptor and pulled at its nape feathers.

A Brown Snake-eagle drifted overhead as we dropped on to the floodplain itself, a flat expanse of grass and patches of rush over which we drove in search of Rosy-throated Longclaw, a very sparsely-distributed bird in this part of Africa. Although we hardly expected to have good views, those we had were superb, of a male that picked about in the grass ahead of us, far brighter than its depiction in the field guide and, for me, one of

the birds of the trip. A few Black-winged and African Wattled Lapwings later, suffering almost terminal confusion over their English names in the process, we all assembled for lunch, garnished with a couple of Lemon-breasted Canaries. We also learned that the crew in the other jeep had scored earlier with Red-breasted Swallow. After a Spectacled Weaver at a reedy pool and the first of several Rufous-winged Cisticolas on the grassy fringes, we dropped down to another section of the floodplain, with lush rush and grass growth than the first, and found a party of Senegal Lapwings. Much camera clicking later, time was up, so we said our farewells to the lapwings and Bonamanzi and moved on once again.

Driving south to the coast where the St. Lucia river meets the sea, we passed little en route, stopping only when someone spotted a bunch of hippos in the river below the bridge. This spot also turned up Goliath Heron and Wire-tailed Swallow, a large colony of Yellow Weavers on the riverbank and a fearsome-looking Nile Crocodile, which may indeed clean its teeth night and morning, though one suspects that a nice bit of bone-crunching is more to their liking. Amazing beasts.

Our overnight at Kingfisher Lodge, overlooking the St. Lucia river, was one of the best places we stayed; so far as we could tell, Jim's pad was so extensive that he was going to have to get up three hours early to allow himself time to find breakfast. The lodge grounds were also good for birds, so some of us stayed behind while others decamped to the river. We were treated to several White-eared Barbets, an immature Palm-nut Vulture, very unusual here, and three Red-capped Robin-chats, while those bringing Tales from the Riverbank had found a Lesser Crested Tern and White and Pink-backed Pelicans.

Bouncing off down the road in animated chatter towards our evening meal, we flushed an African Wood-owl from a tree by the road, which obligingly perched briefly on a low branch in torchlight before disappearing into the night. The less said about the evening meal, our last of the trip, the better.

Goliath Heron, African Cuckoo-hawk, Brown Snake-eagle, Bateleur, Palm-nut Vulture; Senegal, Black-winged and African Wattled Lapwings, Lesser Crested Tern, African Wood-Owl, White-eared Barbet; Red-breasted and Wire-tailed Swallows, Red-capped Robin-chat, Winding Cisticola, Chinspot Batis; Yellow-throated and Rosy-throated Longclaws, Gorgeous Bush-shrike; Purple-banded and Scarlet-chested Sunbirds, African Yellow White-eye, Spectacled Weaver, Yellow-breasted Canary.

Nov. 19th Up early, we walked from the lodge into the forest bordering the river, conscious that this was the last opportunity we would have to pick up any birds missed thus far and, in some cases, to reach the pretty special 400 species mark for the trip.

Yellow-rumped Tinkerbirds were numerous, Brown Scrub-robin elusive, Dark-backed Weaver obliging and Grey Sunbird even more so as it perched close to us above the track through the forest, while a couple of Square-tailed Drongos were noisily mobbing a Vervet Monkey, apparently unmoved by it all. Thick-billed Weaver brought back memories of the States and the Scillies for those who have seen Rose-breasted Grosbeak, two Golden-tailed Woodpeckers were new for the trip and, after much frustration, we finally got passable views of two or three Livingston's Turacos, their crests reaching for the sunlight above before they flopped off through the trees and disappeared once again. Superb views of Scaly-throated Honeyguide, tempted close to us by a tape of its song, and we were back at the ranch again, in time for breakfast, with Terek Sandpiper at the edge of the river below us.

We had time to visit a couple of sites near St. Lucia, the first of which produced only Black-chested Snake-eagle, while the second, a camp site by the river estuary, proved to be a really good finish to an excellent trip. A party of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and some White and Pink-backed Pelicans lounged about in their different ways at the river mouth, and a Grey-headed Gull drifted by, while an unpromising mix of mown grass and *Casuarina* trees, another Australian import, in the camp ground proved to be much better than it looked. A small party of eight Green Twinspots, initially quite elusive, eventually gave fabulous views as they fed at the base of one of the clumps of trees, and we also had good views of a definite Knysna Turaco, its short crest conspicuously pale-tipped in the sunlight that beamed through the trees. The ranges of this and the similar Livingston's are not supposed to overlap in South Africa, but they clearly do.

So, that was it. A tedious drive back to the airport at Durban, a one-hour flight to Johannesburg and then back to London. Ten different places in sixteen nights, excellent birding, brilliant food and accommodation, and a different view of South Africans, who we found to be most hospitable and approachable. Best place? The Karoo. Best bird? Green Twinspot (yes, really), maybe Secretarybird. Best memory, of all the memories we have? The moon rising over the Tanqua Karoo. I'm sure we all have our own recollections, but this was a great trip, with much that was unexpected and many, mostly positive surprises.

Terek Sandpiper; Knysna and Livingston's Turacos, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Brown Scrub-robin, Woodward's Batis, Grey Sunbird, Thick-billed Weaver, Green Twinspot.

Ian Hodgson. December 2003