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info@birdingecotours.com

Cape and Kruger Custom Tour – Trip Report June 2015

By Jason Boyce

This tour was a private Western Cape and Kruger Park trip for two families, one with children, which focused on seeing the best of South Africa's fauna, flora, history, sights and scenes, landscapes, and people. For some of them this would be their first time in Africa – hopefully a trip of a lifetime.



Cape Sugarbird, Cape Peninsula

Day 1. Boulders Beach and Kommetjie

Our flights from Johannesburg arrived late morning on Sunday, the 7th of June, in Cape Town. From there our tour started.

Our first stop was at the Boulders Beach **African Penguin** colony – a real treat to anyone who has never been to the southern hemisphere and had the privilege of seeing penguins in the wild. Caroline, the youngest member on the tour, was in her element at the sight of these incredible creatures, as she watched them waddle around alongside the boardwalk.

We also popped in to Kommetjie before the daylight started to fade, and were rewarded with great sightings of **African Oystercatcher** and **Cape, White-breasted**, and the slightly more

uncommon **Crowned Cormorants**. Needless to say, the first day was enjoyed by all, and the prospect of another 10 days in South Africa was the most exciting part of it all.



African Penguin, Stony Point, Betty's Bay

Day 2. Table Mountain National Park

A beautiful sunrise breakfast in Simon's Town was had before we met up with John Tinkler, who would be our local expert for the day, as we explored Table Mountain National Park. The beauty of exploring the Cape Peninsula is that wherever you go you are treated to the most glorious views of both the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans! There is always a good variety of avian and mammalian wildlife to be seen as well; we encountered the likes of chacma baboon, bontebok, eland, and some Cape fur seals just offshore.

The birds were in full song and included, **Cape Sugarbird, Malachite and Orange-breasted Sunbirds, Cape Bunting, Jackal Buzzard, White-necked Raven, Cape Gannet, Cape Spurrow, Fiscal Flycatcher, and Bokmakierie**. We were also lucky enough to see an angulate tortoise.

One of the highlights of the day, though, was taking the Flying Dutchman funicular up to the lighthouse of Cape Point. The view from the top is absolutely breathtaking and was a truly special experience for our guests. The second day ended perfectly, as we were very lucky bumping into a Cape porcupine as we were on our way to dinner – a common and nocturnal mammal, but very secretive in South Africa – a fantastic surprise.



View of the peninsula from Cape Point Lighthouse

Day 3. Transfer to Hermanus, birding on the way

The past two days had offered us the most incredible weather, and Cape Town wasn't done with that just yet! We woke up in Simon's Town to another glorious day, looking over False Bay – with at least one eye on the calm sea, just in case there was an unsuspecting whale or pod of dolphins. After another fantastic breakfast we headed all the way around the bay towards the whale capital of South Africa – Hermanus, which is where we would spend the night.

En route we stopped briefly at Rooi Els, Betty's Bay, and Harold Porter National Botanical Garden. A stroll at Rooi Els was duly rewarded, not only with the sheer beauty of the scenery but also with a pair of **Verreaux's Eagles** flying back and forth overhead. At one point a **Peregrine Falcon** came out of hiding and started giving the eagles a hard time – what a sight! Another chance to see **African Penguins** at the Stony Point colony in Betty's Bay was not scoffed at, and we also managed to get some real nice looks at numerous rock hyraxes that love to lounge around on the rocks in the sun. Off to Harold Porter National Botanical Garden for a very enjoyable lunch and a walk into parts of the garden. Apart from being greeted by a troop of chacma baboons at the entrance, the fauna in the garden was once again a treat. Amazing views of **Cape Siskin** were had and were definitely one of the highlights of the brief stroll from the restaurant. Other attractions were **Cape Bulbul, Sweet Waxbill, Speckled Mousebird, Cape Canary, and Olive Thrush.**

We arrived in Hermanus with enough time to explore the town a bit, visit the local market, see the whale museum, and spend a few minutes at the lookout where the whale-crier stands; no whales were seen this time, unfortunately! Hermanus is an amazing, historic town and well worth a visit any time between July and November if you want to see the majestic southern right whales.



Cape Siskin (Male), Harold Porter Botanical Gardens

Day 4. Hermanus to De Hoop Nature Reserve

From Hermanus we made our way into the Overberg and all the way through to De Hoop Nature Reserve, where we would spend one night before heading back to Cape Town. En route we kept our eyes open for both Blue Crane and Denham's Bustard; we were richly rewarded with amazing visuals first of South Africa's national bird, the **Blue Crane**, and then with five **Denham's Bustards** in a field as we were nearing Cape Agulhas.

We stopped for lunch at Africa's southernmost tip, Cape Agulhas, took a quick tour of the lighthouse, and took some necessary photographs at the southernmost tip. Almost two hours later we had arrived at De Hoop Nature Reserve, where we had some really good views of **Common Ostrich, Southern Black Korhaan, eland, Cape mountain zebra, and grey rhebok,** all before we had arrived at the lodge.



Cape Mountain Zebra, De Hoop Nature Reserve

Day 5. De Hoop Nature Reserve to Cape Town

We unfortunately dipped on one of our main targets here, the Knysna Woodpecker, but during a walk around the lodge in the morning we did see **Southern Tchagra, Black Saw-wing, African Black Swift, Cape Weaver, Yellow Canary, Pied Starling, and Caspian Tern**. We took a drive down to one of the coastal lookout areas for our last look at the Indian Ocean before heading back through the Overberg region to Cape Town. We were treated to some more flocks of **Blue Crane** as well as other open country birds like **Capped Wheatear**, the comical **Helmeted Guineafowl**, and **Rock Kestrel**, before we stopped at Bredasdorp for lunch.



Blue Crane, Overberg Region

Over the last three or four days there had been an American bird, the **Snowy Egret**, hanging around the Black River near Cape Town, a bird that is considered a rare vagrant to South Africa; this was only the second record for the continent. I found myself a lucky man as the group very kindly spurred me on to go have a quick look at the bird, which eventually made front-page news the next morning. Over 1100 birders from all parts of South Africa eventually managed to see this bird – a species that roams about in the hundreds and thousands back in the United States.

The children were also super excited to get looks at some **Greater Flamingos** that were hanging about the canal.

A very South African dinner at Cape Town's V&A Waterfront was the perfect way to end the day before the flight the next morning.

Day 6. Flight to Mpumalanga, transfer to Sabie Sands Game Reserve

Today was a travel day, where we transferred from the beauty and majesty of the Western Cape to the warm 'bushveld' of Mpumalanga in the part of the country called the lowveld. Our flight was slightly delayed but we landed in Nelspruit at about 12:30 p.m., picked up our van, and headed to Cheetah Plains in Sabie Sands. After having been greeted by some impala at the airport and a couple of 'lowveld' bird species, such as **Lilac-breasted Roller**, **Magpie Shrike**, and **Southern White-crowned Shrike**, the bush safari leg of the trip had begun.



Lilac-breasted Roller, Kruger National Park

Day 7. Sabie Sands Game Reserve

An early start this morning meant that we could be out in the bush before sunrise in an open game vehicle, searching for the amazing fauna of the Kruger National Park and Sabie Sands Game Reserve areas. The Sabie Sands Game Reserve is open to the Kruger National Park and hence boasts the Big 5 and a host of amazing birdlife.

The highlight of the morning drive surely was watching a female leopard move through some of the dense vegetation in a gully, until we managed to get an 'up-close-and-personal' look at her as she strolled past our vehicle. Wow, what a treat! Some of the other animals that we encountered on the drive included giraffe, blue wildebeest, impala, waterbuck, greater kudu, white rhino, and a herd of African buffalo, and then, on the avian front **Hooded Vulture**, a pair of **Verreaux's Eagle-Owl**, **Bushveld Pipit**, **Grey Penduline Tit**, **Red-billed Oxpecker**, **Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill**, **Grey Go-away-bird**, **Natal Spurfowl**, and **Burchell's Starling**.

The afternoon was spent back at the lodge, where we found a few bird parties moving through, and some **Bateleurs** were spotted overhead. Harry, the resident hippopotamus, was also around at the local waterhole that can be seen from the breakfast table.

The evening drives were also very rewarding and yielded species such as black-backed jackal, spotted hyena, plains zebra, **African Barred** as well as **Pearl-spotted Owlets**, **Southern Ground Hornbill**, and our first sightings of African elephant.

Day 8. Into Kruger National Park

We started the morning as usual with a morning drive in search of the only species of Big 5 we had not yet encountered; African lion. While we knew that the chance of missing lion was a real one, we were quietly confident that we would find some. The morning produced some very nice sightings, and, after catching onto the alarm call of some nearby impala, we finally managed to see some lions in a typical hunting mood. First a couple of lionesses were spotted, and thereafter two older male lions came through the bush. The hunting was not successful on this occasion, but we were overjoyed at our success in seeing these amazing animals so close in a natural setting.

After the morning drive we left Cheetah Plains and headed into the magical Kruger National Park to Skukuza, the main camp, where we would stay for two nights. We had already managed to see the Big 5 in Sabie, and so we could relax and focus on some more quality sightings as well as some special avian species, perhaps.

En route to Skukuza we saw the likes of **Saddle-billed Stork, White-backed Vulture, Wire-tailed Swallow, Green Wood Hoopoe, Crested Francolin**, the gorgeous **Lilac-breasted Roller**, and **Fork-tailed Drongo**. Our guests absolutely loved the abundance of animals in the park and the fact that it was rare to drive a kilometer without seeing a mammal of sorts. One of the highlight mammals of the day for the children was seeing a warthog.



Lion, Sabie Sands Game Reserve

Day 9. Kruger National Park

We had booked an open safari vehicle for the whole day today and had a driver/guide, Shadrak, who told us all about Kruger, from the history of the park to the here and now sightings, as well as greatly detailed answers to all our questions. It was a pleasure having Shadrak along with us for the day.

Some of the better birds of this day spent in the Lower Sabie area included **Marabou, Yellow-billed, and Black Storks, Water Thick-knee, Grey-rumped Swallow, Brown-headed Parrot, Purple-crested Turaco, Senegal Lapwing, Temminck's Courser**, and **African Harrier-Hawk**. But it wasn't just the birds that kept us entertained today, we also saw African buffalo, African elephant, lion, leopard, giraffe, Nile crocodile, hippopotamus, plains zebra, bushbuck, steenbok, grey duiker, warthog, and greater kudu.



Purple-crested Turaco, Kruger National Park

Day 10. Kruger to Mount Sheba Nature Reserve

Today was our final morning in the Kruger, as tonight we would stay at Mount Sheba Nature Reserve. Our last morning in Kruger was very enjoyable, as the camp was alive with birds, and we had fantastic looks at **Crowned Hornbill, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Bearded Scrub Robin, African Green Pigeon, Collared Sunbird, and Retz's Helmetshrike**. A **Purple-crested Turaco** also came to visit, before we started our westerly journey up into the escarpment. Before we reached the Phabeni Gate, though, we stumbled upon a majestic male lion strolling down the road in front of us – an absolutely fantastic goodbye to Kruger for our guests.

Mount Sheba is situated in the escarpment and is home to many different species of birds as well as other fauna as compared to the Kruger National Park. A scenic spot with patches of indigenous forest attracts birders from across the country. On the way in we managed to get good visuals of a bird that one of our guests, an experienced South African birder, still needed to photograph, **Wailing Cisticola**. Some of the other birds of the afternoon included **Cape Canary, Drakensberg Prinia, Cape Crow, African Olive Pigeon, and Red-winged Starling**. Our light had dwindled, though, and we would have to wait until tomorrow to go after some of the specials here.

Day 11. Departure

An unfortunate bout of weather that morning halted our search for Bush Blackcap and for a number of other resident forest species, such as Olive Bushshrike, White-starred Robin, and Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher. We did, however, get to see some samango monkeys (the local subspecies of the blue monkey) hanging around the pool area, catching some sun – a nice second best to forest birds.

Unfortunately, with noon flights we had to make our way to Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport and bid farewell to Mt Sheba and, for our guests, to South Africa – hopefully not for good.

A huge thank you goes out to the whole group, who were fantastic company and made the trip one to remember. We do hope that this trip was a special and memorable one for all of you – until next time.