



SOUTH AFRICA: 2-DAY SOUTHERN GAUTENG TO DULLSTROOM BIRDING TRIP

TRIP REPORT DECEMBER 2015

By Chris Lotz



Cuckoo Finch (photo by John Caddick) on a previous trip – this one was at Suikerbosrand, whereas this time we saw it near Dullstroom.

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Date	Location	Overnight
16 Dec 2015	Gauteng to Dullstroom via Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve	Dullstroom
17 Dec 2015	Back to Gauteng via Marievale Bird Sanctuary	

OVERVIEW

The high altitude (about 2100 meters or 6900 feet), picturesque town of Dullstroom, midway between Johannesburg and the Kruger National Park, is a premier site for a good number of very exciting bird specials. It's one of the easiest places for several greater Drakensberg endemics such as **Yellow-breasted Pipit** (which lurks here in surprisingly high densities within its restricted habitat year-round, but which becomes elusive and cryptic in winter), **Gurney's Sugarbird**, **Buff-streaked Chat**, and **Sentinel Rock Thrush**. And, Dullstroom is also a famous site for **Cape Eagle-Owl**, all three southern African crane species, and many other star birds. As if all of this is not enough, the critically endangered White-winged Flufftail lurks nearby but can only realistically be seen during strictly-controlled 1-day conservation events that are arranged once every few years – unfortunately we did not look for this species on our current trip. Rudd's Lark, another critically endangered species most birders visit Wakkerstroom for, also surely still occurs in the area, waiting to be rediscovered. All in all, it's an exciting highland region to bird, within easy striking distance of Gauteng.

Given about 24 hours ex Johannesburg, it is possible to see the bulk of Dullstroom's special birds (besides the flufftail, which we did not target). Since we had two full days for the trip, we decided to add habitat variety and to also bird two of southern Johannesburg's premier birding sites, Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve (where we focused on dry savanna and bushveld habitats we would not encounter around Dullstroom) and Marievale Bird Sanctuary for its plethora of waterbirds.

Day 1, 16 December 2015

We met in Johannesburg at 5:30 a.m., and a **Red-chested Cuckoo** started calling just as we were packing our stuff into the vehicle. This is a bird that Paul and Dawn had heard a lot before but which they still needed to get visuals of. Luckily the cuckoo was sitting in a fairly open tree, and after a few minutes we found ourselves looking at this nice bird. We then headed straight for Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve just south of Johannesburg near Heidelberg. At our first stop, Dawn managed to spot a **Marsh Owl** sitting on the ground staring at us (we seemed even more interested to it than it was to us, which says a lot!). Our list grew quite fast with spectacularly-plumaged widows, bishops and whydahs, **South African Cliff Swallow**, **Cloud Cisticola**, and other goodies. We then headed into the park proper, where we located **Red-throated Wryneck**, **Mountain Wheatear**, and **White-backed Duck** very quickly. We then found **Cape Canary**, **Streaky-headed Seedeater**, and many other good birds lurking around the offices. We did the tourist drive quite quickly due to limited time, seeing **Wailing Cisticola**, **Wing-snapping Cisticola**, rather close-up **Red-winged Francolins** (which, however, stayed behind a few blades of grass, making focusing/photography challenging – luckily we saw these again very well in Dullstroom), and a range of other rather good birds. Mammals such as plains zebra, blesbok, and localized black wildebeest also put in an appearance.

We then stopped in Heidelberg for lunch supplies, which we devoured en route to Dullstroom (by 1 p.m. we were famished after many hours of birding!). We arrived in Dullstroom in the mid afternoon, checked into our pleasant accommodation, and then went to our **Black-winged Lapwing** site. We were lucky and managed to find about seven of them. We then

proceeded to our **Cape Eagle-Owl** site and managed to see this massively bulky, rabbit-eating owl along with the handsome, localized **Buff-streaked Chat** and other goodies, while enjoying the sunset.

We celebrated with a good dinner at one of Dullstroom's many restaurants, around 8 p.m.

Day 2, 17 December 2015

We started at 5 a.m., immediately heading up the legendary de Berg road, which ascends towards Mpumalanga Province's highest point and gives remarkably easy access to some otherwise slightly tricky greater Drakensberg endemic birds. Good numbers of **Common Quail** were calling like mad along the lower reaches of this road, but we failed to get visuals. **Drakensberg Prinia** and many hirundines such as **Banded Martin** were very much in evidence just before the steep ascent. At this time of the year one gets a sense just of how many **Yellow-breasted Pipits** this amazing area holds, as they were displaying like crazy and thus conspicuous. **Long-billed Pipit** also showed well, but **African Pipit** was (as always) the most abundant (by far, in fact). **Sentinel Rock Thrush** showed well, but we really struggled to get good views of **Eastern Long-billed Lark** (although many of them were calling). **Red-winged Francolin** and, a bit higher up in shorter grass, **Grey-winged Francolin** were seen well. As we approached the top of this legendary birding road we were ecstatic to see a male **Cuckoo Finch** in excellent, bright plumage sitting on a fence right next to the road. The next bird on our target list was **Gurney's Sugarbird**, which we found with ease (as usual: this is indeed a solid site for the species). The final stop before a late brunch was a new site way down in a valley for White-bellied Korhaan, which we only had time to briefly look for and which we sadly missed – I was hoping the small family group of them would be in the same place as earlier this year, but alas. On the way back, however, we did see a lone **Cape Vulture** flying over us, followed shortly by a huge kettle of **White Storks**!

After a nice brunch we opted to head for Marievale Bird Sanctuary, as we had hardly any targets left in Dullstroom, yet Dawn and Paul "needed" quite a number of water-associated birds. And we certainly ended the trip with an amazing bunch of new trip birds during the hour and a half we had available here. We encountered quite a number of shorebirds, as well as **Fulvous Whistling Duck**, **Hottentot Teal** and other ducks, **Greater Flamingo**, **African Marsh Harrier**, **African Swamphen**, **Black Heron** using its intriguing umbrella fishing technique, **Squacco Heron**, **Black-crowned Night Heron**, stacks of **Whiskered Terns** in their beautiful breeding plumage, and an absolute ton of other birds. This is a paradise for reed-associated warblers, and we found **African Reed Warbler**, **Great Reed Warbler**, **Lesser Swamp Warbler**, and **Little Rush Warbler** despite our limited time. A yellow mongoose gave brief but fun views.

All in all, this was a spectacular little trip, and the three of us had marvellous fun. In two days we packed in so many different birding habitats south and east of Johannesburg that we ended with a respectable bird list (128 species), but the main thing about this highland route is the quality of so many of the birds (being rare, localized, elusive, or spectacular species). Dawn's top five birds were Marsh Owl, Purple Swamphen, Red-winged Francolin, Black Heron (with its umbrella fishing!) and Yellow-breasted Pipit. Paul's were Cape Vulture, Cuckoo Finch, Cape Eagle-Owl, Marsh Owl, and Red-winged Francolin.

My top five birds were Cuckoo Finch (since it's an unpredictable, nomadic bird and downright uncommon), Cape Eagle-Owl (although we almost always see it at this stakeout, it's a very difficult species elsewhere), Yellow-breasted Pipit (especially because they were

displaying like crazy and were in very fresh, bright, breeding plumage), Black-winged Lapwing (just because it can be a tricky bird), and then I can't choose between Gurney's Sugarbird/Buff-streaked Chat/Sentinel Rock Thrush (all three of them rather good-looking Drakensberg endemics).