Full Detailed Itinerary - South Africa: The Fairest Cape to Kruger

Day 1: Cape Town

After arrival in Cape Town we will transfer to a peaceful B&B in the suburbs, where we will be based for the next 3 days.

Day 2 or 3: Pelagic (optional)

The waters off Cape Town are regarded as one of the best pelagic spots in the world. Sailing from Simonstown we will be awed by the spectacle of thousands of seabirds of 15 to 20 species squabbling over scraps behind fishing trawlers. Once we have soaked in the crippling views of Black-browed, White-capped and Indian Yellow-nosed Albatrosses, White-chinned Petrel, Cape Gannet and Sooty Shearwater, we will sift through the clouds of birds in search of less common species. This trip is optional because it is weather dependent and may be canceled if we are unlucky with the weather. Those who opt not to do the pelagic trip can visit the Cape Peninsula.

Day 2 or 3: West Coast

This dry coastline is incised by a series of wetlands holding fantastic densities of birds. In the spectacular Langebaan Lagoon, Palaearctic waders abound. Resident shorebirds include the scarce Chestnut-banded Plover. The adjacent terrestrial vegetation supports a variety of very local specialties. The most absorbing include Black Harrier, Black Bustard and Large-billed Lark.

Day 4: Cape Peninsula to Hottentot’s Holland Mountains

We spend the morning searching the exceptionally beautiful Cape Peninsula for fynbos endemics such as Orange-breasted Sunbird, Cape Sugarbird and Cape Siskin. We also visit Kommetjie, home of the Benguela Current-endemic African Oystercatcher, as well as Bank, Crowned and Cape cormorants. Continuing to the Cape of Good Hope we stop at Boulder’s Bay to mingle with the African Penguins. Our final stop, if time allows, is Strandfontein, a series of settling ponds supporting a remarkable variety of waterfowl. In the afternoon, we search for Cape Rockjumper, then drive to our lodge in the Hottentot’s Holland Mountains.

Day 5: Hottentot’s Holland to De Hoop Nature Reserve

Situated 125 miles (200 km) east of Cape Town, the Agulhas plain stretches from the Langeberg Mountains to the southern tip of Africa. Here we seek the highly range-restricted “Agulhas” Cape Long-billed Lark and “Agulhas” Cape Clapper Lark. Other spectacular specialties include parties of stately Blue Crane and Denham’s Bustard. We will overnight just outside De Hoop Nature Reserve.

Day 6: De Hoop to Wilderness

The morning will be spent around Potberg mountain, which holds the last Cape Vulture breeding colony in the region. Other targets here are the endemic Southern Tchagra, Pied Starling, Orange-throated Longclaw

and Pearl-breasted Swallow. In the afternoon we drive through to Knysna exploring the Wilderness Lakes en-route. We will spend two nights in the quiet town of Wilderness.

Day 7: Garden Route

The Garden Route winds over mountainsides dappled with fynbos flowers before it plunges into the thickly forested gorges where cola-hued rivers flow. Among the forest specialties we search for here are Forest Buzzard, Knysna Turaco, Narina Trogon, Knysna and Olive Woodpeckers, Chorister Robin-Chat, Olive Bush-Shrike, Swee Waxbill and Forest Canary.

Day 8: Garden Route to Karoo NP

We spend the morning in the Swartberg Mountains where we will search for the skulking Victorin's Warbler, charismatic Cape Rock-Jumper, rare Protea Canary, and local Cape Siskin. These mountains will provide some dramatic rocky backdrops to our birding. In the afternoon, we will descend into the hot and dry Karoo National Park for a two-night stay.

Day 9: Karoo NP

This park combines spectacular mountain scenery with the very best of Karoo birding; it is packed with Karoo endemics. The lowlands support Spike-heeled Lark, Gray-backed Sparrow-Lark, Karoo Chat, and Rufous-eared Warbler. The secretive Cinnamon-breasted Warbler, Pale-winged Starling, and Ground Woodpecker occur in rocky gorges, while the Sickle-winged Chat is found on the grassy plateau. The Karoo Long-billed Lark is common throughout.

Day 10: Karoo NP to Johannesburg

We return to Cape Town and fly to Johannesburg, where we'll overnight at a hotel away from this bustling city.

Days 11-13: Kruger National Park

We fly into Kruger first thing in the morning to make the most of our time at Kruger. Birding here is fantastic, with many species living right in the park's camps. The staccato calls of the Woodland Kingfisher and ridiculous moans of the Gray Go-away-bird reverberate throughout most lodgings. Elsewhere Trumpeter Hornbills, Saddle-billed Storks, and White-crowned Lapwings patrol the river edges, while menacing Nile Crocodiles watch from distant sandbanks. While looking for birds, we will undoubtedly bump into vast numbers of large mammals, including the possibility of Lion, Leopard, African Elephant, African Buffalo, and two species of rhinoceros. Nights will be spent at several birdy camps inside Kruger.

Day 14: Kruger NP to Johannesburg

Today we will soak up the remainder of Kruger's excellent birding and game viewing opportunities, before flying back to Johannesburg for another night.

Day 15: Departure

This morning we fly out or start the Eastern endemics and Drakensberg extension.

Tour Extension 1

Day 1: Drive from Johannesburg to Wakkersrtroom

Driving several hours through the Highveld grasslands of eastern South Africa brings us to the quaint village of Wakkerstroom, where we will spend the night.

Day 2: Wakkerstroom

The area surrounding Wakkerstroom supports some of Africa's most threatened species, many of which are endemic to South Africa. Here we will search for the critically endangered Rudd's Lark, Botha's Lark and Yellow-breasted Pipit. The rolling grasslands also support magnificent endemics such as the striking Southern Bald Ibis, elegant Blue Bustard, and dapper Buff-streaked Chat. The rank vegetation is also home to magical widowbirds, francolins, cisticolas, weavers, bishops and whydas. Two nights will be spent in the quiet country town of Wakkerstroom.

* Note: Both Botha's and Rudd's Larks are now so scarce that BirdLife South Africa have requested guides and bird tour companies make no attempt to locate these species until their populations recover. We will abide by these recommendations until further notice by the conservation NGO.

Day 3: Wakkerstroom to Mkuze

We will have most of the day at Wakkerstroom looking for any specialty birds that we still need. After a late lunch we hit the road and travel the 3 hours to Mkuze, dropping into a considerably different habitat, the coastal thornveld of KwaZulu-Natal. Night in Mkuze town.

Day 4: Mkuze Game Reserve

Today we will spend a full day at one of Africa's most famous reserves, where the White Rhino was saved from global extinction. Birding here is fantastic, and we can only hope to take in a fraction of the 400 bird species that have been recorded in this small 36,000 hectare gem. Highly diverse, this reserve comprises a wide range of habitats including pans, swamp forest, Acacia thornbush, woodland, riverine forest, and the unique sand forest. We will search for the main sandforest specials, the Rudd's Apalis, Pink-throated Twinspot and Neergaard's Sunbird. The surrounding bush offers a spectacular number of birds including a variety of kingfishers, barbets, bushshrikes, helmetshrikes, rollers, cuckoos, robins, bulbuls, starlings, sunbirds and seedeaters. Mkuze is also renowned as an excellent area for vultures and raptors, mostly because of the abundance of large predators in the park. While looking for birds we will undoubtedly bump into the some large mammals, including some of the park's 15 species of ungulates, and the possibility of predators such as Leopard and an excellent likelihood of the beastly White Rhinoceros. In the later afternoon we leave the reserve and head to St. Lucia, where we spend the night.

Day 5: St Lucia-Eshowe

Up for an early breakfast, we head straight to Lake St Lucia, a World Heritage Site teeming with water birds and bushveld birds. We shall explore the swathes of forests that skirt the lagoons edge, in search of Green Malkoha, Woodward's Batis, Southern Banded Snake-Eagle and Brown Scrub-Robin. Other target birds include Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Pink-backed Pelican, White-eared Barbet, Four-colored Bushshrike,

Narina Trogon, Woolly-necked Stork, Black-tailed Waxbill, Mouse-colored Sunbird, Southern Crested Guineafowl, Green-backed Twinspot and Trumpeter Hornbill. St Lucia also has a good selection of mammals, and likely species include impressive Hippopotamus, Common Reedbuck, Burchell's Zebra, Blue Wildebeest, Waterbuck, Vervet Monkey, Bushbuck and the tiny but exquisite Red Duiker. In the afternoon we heading to the coastal forests and mangroves surrounding Richard's Bay. On the face of it Richard's Bay is a fairly ordinary looking place, but the reality is that it is loaded with top quality birding opportunities. We will visit open pans at Thulazihleka where we might see the scarce Lesser Jacana as well as the localized Brown-throated Weaver and Pale-crowned Cisticola. We will surely see African Jacana as well as White-backed Duck, Whiskered Tern, Osprey and a variety of weavers, widows and water birds. We will also keep a keen eye on the countless waders, terns egrets, herons and other water birds that occur in this diverse lagoon. We will take a shot at locating the retiring African Finfoot before heading to our accommodation in Eshowe. Overnight in Eshowe.

Day 6: Dhlinza

Dhlinza forest is endowed with South Africa's largest and most impressive canopy walkway. One of the key specials at this forest and our main target for the day is the globally endangered and legendarily cryptic Spotted Ground-Thrush, a bird with an uncanny ability to blend with the leaf litter when it is not moving! But Dhlinza has another mega-special, Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon, as well as a host of other great forest birds such as Narina Trogon, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Dark-backed Weaver, African Black-headed Oriole, African Goshawk, Green-backed Twinspot, Terrestrial Brownbul and many other forest birds. Overnight Eshowe.

Day 7: Umlalazi to Underberg

In the morning we'll head straight to Umlalazi Nature Reserve where we'll look for a bunch of forest birds as well as the local specialty species, before heading off to Underberg for our assault on the Lesotho Drakensberg the following Day. Overnight Underberg.

Day 8: Sani Pass

This morning we head up the incredible Sani pass to 3482 m a.s.l (11,400 feet), the highest mountain pass in southern Africa. Here we enter the mountain kingdom of Lesotho (remember your passport as it is a different country!). Here we search for the many specials of the high Drakensberg. Near the base of the pass we will search the Leucosidea scrub for Bush Blackcap and Drakensberg Prinia, African Yellow-Warbler and perhaps the skulking Barratt's Warbler. Higher up, where the grassland is dominated by Proteas, we seek Buff-streaked Chat, Gurney's Sugarbird, Cape Rock-Thrush and Cape Grassbird. Higher still, we will search for the magnificent Bearded and Cape Vultures, Drakensberg Siskin, Drakensberg Rockjumper, Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Cape Bunting, Layard's Warbler, Gray Tit, Fairy Flycatcher, Sickle-winged Chat, Yellow-tufted and Mountain Pipits, before heading down the mountains before nightfall. We will see some interesting and bizarre mammals today including the specialized Ice Rat, Chacma Baboon and Rock Hyrax, colloquially known as the Dassie, and with luck some larger ungulates such as Common Eland, Mountain Reedbuck, Grey Rhebok and the agile Klipspringer. We overnight in Underberg.

Day 9: Xumeni Forest and Midland Grasslands to Durban

The morning will be spent at Xumeni, a marvelous block of Afro-montane forest, which offers our best chance to sample some exciting afro-montane specials. Amongst the residents here are Bar-throated

Apalis, African Crested Flycatcher, White-starred Robin and Chorister Robin-Chat, Yellow-throated Woodland-Warbler and the ever-so-secretive Buff-spotted Flufftail. We hope to have good luck with the retiring Orange Ground Thrush, and to see some of the few remaining pairs of the recently split Cape Parrots that breed and roost in this forest. In the afternoon we drive through the midland grasslands and look for Wattled Crane, Long-crested Eagle, and anything else we haven't already seen. Creighton is an excellent area for Oribi, and hopefully we can find this increasing scarce grassland antelope. On our January tours, we may also try for the rare Montane Blue Swallow. Its habitat is rapidly disappearing and it is nowhere else more apparent than here, where the only breeding pair in the district survives in a soccer pitch-sized grassland sandwiched by pine plantations. It is a magnificent bird, and if we are very lucky we should get superb views of these magical and scarce creatures. In the late afternoon we head to Durban where the tour finishes.

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