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# THIRSTLAND BIRDS OF THE KALAHARI, KAROO AND KGALAGADI

Although we had birded the Kgalagadi several times before I had never done so as a photographer and as wanted to spend Christmas out of Johannesburg so we set about planning the trip. Unfortunately camp sites were only available after Christmas and so the idea of touring the dry desert areas of South Africa was born.

We had never been to the relatively new Sanparks reserve at Mokala which opened after the closure of Vaalbos which had been subject to a successful land claim. So our first stop was approximately 50 kilometres west of Kimberly. We liked Mokala- the red sands of the Kalahari made a scenic backdrop to the rocky outcrops and camel thorn trees.

The campsite is small consisting of 6 sites each with its own fridge, cooking area and toilet/shower, all with a view of the waterhole where Cape Buffalo, Kudu, and Warthog came down to drink in the evening.



The birds are typical dry country birds and in the campsite we had Ashy Tit, Pririt Batis, Kalahari Scrub-Robin, and Yellow Canaries. We took a night drive one evening which while not finding any of the nocturnal beasties we were after, gave us Red-crested Korhaan and Rufous-cheeked Nightjar.

Pearl-breasted Swallows were collecting mud to build their nests outside the reception area while a Pygmy

Falcon kept a watchful eye on the nest building activities of the Sociable Weavers.

From Mokala we moved on to the Karoo National Park, always a firm favourite of mine. They have expanded the trail network on top of the mountain considerably since our last visit and you can now spend the entire day driving around the park.

Karoo Chats and Bokmakiere are usually the first birds you see on entry closely followed by Rufous-eared Warbler if you recognise his high-pitched seep-seep call. The camp site is pleasant with lots of bird activity- mainly weavers and sparrows but the Rock Martins were busy building their nests in the eaves of the ablution block. On the drives we encountered Karoo Korhaan, Ground Woodpecker and I got my first ever shots of Layard's Titbabbler. I have searched for Cinnamon-breasted Warbler many times here and have never even heard the bird. Another non-existent bird for me here is the African Rock Pipit which again I have never as much as heard. Best mammal in the Karoo NP was an African Wildcat which crossed the road in front of us and scurried away without so much as a glimpse in our direction. You can usually find Klipspringer up the mountain and we had an extremely confident little Steenbok on the mountain road.

From Karoo NP we made our way south to Pofadder. This was not to be our first Christmas in Pofadder but Stephanie informed me it was definitely going to be our last. Christmas here is actually great. On Christmas morning the roads are totally deserted



and you feel as though you have the entire world to yourself. In addition the birding is usually splendid. On arrival I shot 3 kilometres down the road to the windmill where I have always found Sclaters' Lark, and sure enough after a twenty minute wait I had my first pictures of a Sclaters' Lark who visited along with Red-capped Lark and White-throated and Yellow canaries.

From Pofadder it is a good birding drive down to Namies for the Red Lark- en route we stopped at our spot for Cinnamon-breasted Warbler who quickly showed himself. Unfortunately they have erected a serious fence along the base of the koppie which meant a close photograph was no longer possible. Red Lark is a tricky bird to see well- you can chase him from bush to bush for hours. A different tactic is to drive slowly, repeatedly up and down the road, and wait for him to perch close by. After two hours this eventually worked for me. In the mean time I was busy photographing Spike-heeled Lark and lots of Grey-backed Sparrow Larks while Namaqua Sandgrouse circled overhead.



While in Pofadder we always take a drive down to the Orange River. This is reputedly one of the best roads in the Karoo for Burchall's Courser. We missed them again by half an hour another birder told us; nice views of Double-banded Courser were small recompense. I was pleased however to get some shots of Yellow-belled Eromomela. A common enough bird but always tricky to find and see well. When last did any one see Rosy-faced Lovebirds at the Orange River? I am not sure how regular they are there

now.

From Pofadder we made our way to Augrabies Falls. We looked hard for Cinnamon-breasted Warbler- I once had a very confiding pair here (pre photography days) but they are not an easy bird to track down here. Namaqua Warbler is a virtual certainty as they are common in the reedbeds along the stream at the back of the campsite. We had great early morning views of a pair of Verraux's Eagle flying closely together and an interesting ariel interaction between an Rock Kestrel and a Lanner Falcon. The Yellow Mongooses are tame around the campsite and will allow a close approach.

From Augrabies we then took the now tarred road all the way from Upington to Twee Rivieren. It really isn't a good idea to visit the Kgalagadi over the Christmas holidays. The camps are full - shade is practically non-existent and the temperature hits the mid-forties every afternoon. Despite the heat the birding was excellent birds staying active far longer than I thought they would. Pride of place always goes to the Raptors in the Kgalagadi. Lots of Bateleur. Booted eagle,





Tawny Eagle, great views of a Black Harrier, Gabar Goshawk, Black-chested Snake-Eagle, Southern Pale Chanters and many juvenile Lanner Falcon along with a few Red-necked Falcon harried the Cape turtle Doves at most of the waterholes. Never saw a spectacular dove kill, the juveniles seemed more intent on just practising their dive-bombing raids.

Great birding spectacles are not uncommon in the Kgalagadi. Two that stand out for me were views of

26 –yes 26 Secretarybirds at one waterhole, who were drinking, socializing, and resting in the shade. Why such a conglomeration I do not know. There were also large numbers of Northern Black Korhaan who competed to see who could display longest and call loudest.

Kori and Ludwigs' Bustards were also there in good numbers- the Ludwigs' being particularly confiding. Owls were plentiful too. The Southern White-faced Scops was in his usual place in the tree outside the petrol pumps at Mata Mata, Barn Owl we found in the campsite at Mata Mata, and Great Spotted and Verraux's Eagle-Owls were common in the big acacias along the water courses.



Game was plentiful too- Lots of really good looking lion – not like their scruffy counterparts in Kruger. Giraffe we only found close to Mata Mata. Brown and Spotted Hyena along with Cape and Bat-eared Fox were found on more than one occasion while the ground squirrels in camp were a constant source of amusement.

We stayed at all three campsites and good birding was to be had in all three. Crimson-breasted shrikes, Brubru, Fawn-coloured Lark, Great spotted Cuckoo, Scimitarbill, Lilac-breasted Roller, Green-winged Pytilia and Swallow-tailed Bee-eater amongst others.



One of our targets was Cheetah and despite hearing tales back in camp of how many Cheetah had been seen that day, one never crossed our path in the five days we were there.

The Kgalagadi is to my mind the finest park in South Africa outdoing even the Kruger. The light there is a photographer's dream. Photo opportunities simply abound and the game and birds are out of this world. A thirstland bird trip is something everyone should try.

