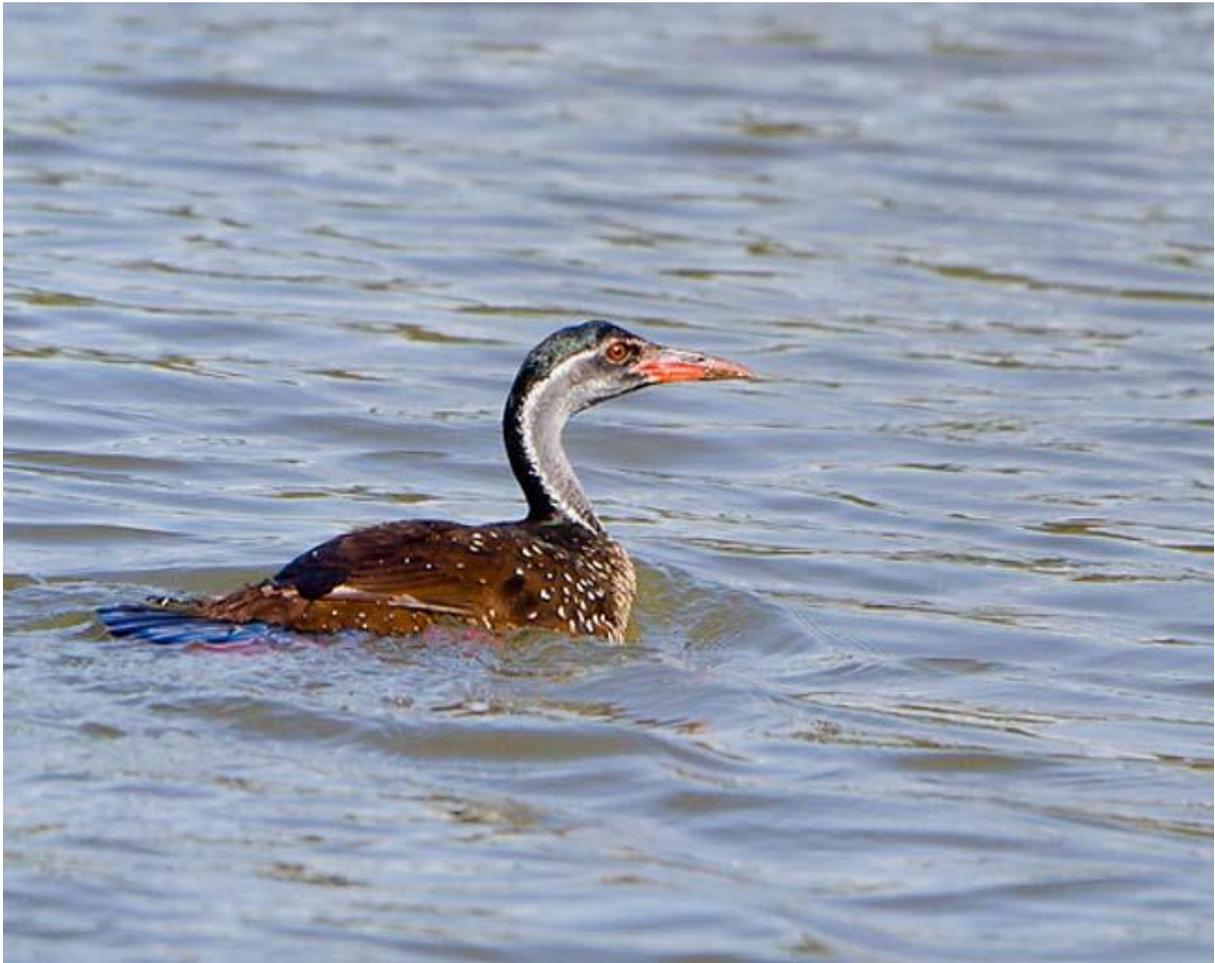


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WINTER BIRDING IN KZN JUNE 2014



It is always nice to escape the onset of the Highveld winter and this year was no exception with glorious weather in Natal except for the last weekend when temperatures dropped as a cold front came through. We couldn't find two consecutive weeks time share on the North coast so we did something different and had a week on the south coast at Port Edward and a week in St Lucia. The accommodation was infinitely superior in the South; the birding infinitely superior in the north.

Birding in the forest interiors was slow, much slower than last year so we kept to the forest fringes where the activity was much higher and we still managed most of the difficult forest species.

We overnighted with friends in Howick on the way down and managed to arrive at the Marutswa forest in Bulwer at 7.45am. The Cape Parrots arrived at 8.00am and stayed for half an hour, busy preening and warming up before departing at 8.30 for their feeding grounds.

In the South we birded Umtamvuna where our friends found the Knysna Woodpecker they had long been searching for. We tried Mount Currie for the Flufftail with no luck and the coastal reserves at Mpenjati, Uvongo and Umdoni Park all proved very quiet. Oribi Gorge was also quiet. In The North we visited Umlalazi, St Lucia environs , Bonamanzi, Isimangaliso Eastern and Western Shores and spent our last weekend at Mkhuze before hightailing it home.



My top 10 birds for the trip were

- Sooty Tern
- Cape Parrot
- African Finfoot
- Palm-nut Vulture
- Mangrove Kingfisher
- Small Buttonquail
- Saddle-billed Stork
- Rudd's Apalis
- Woodward's Batis
- Bearded Scrub Robin

A fair selection – I am sure you would agree. I would have included Southern-banded Snake-Eagle but the one we saw was way too far off to photograph well.



It took us five attempts to find the Sooty Tern (a Southern African lifer for Stephanie) at St Lucia estuary mouth but perseverance paid off and late one afternoon I found the bird funnily enough by hearing a different call- it was being harassed by a Swift Tern. The Finfoot we found at our spot for it at Umlalazi where it flushed from under my feet as I climbed the river bank. Umlalazi also provided the Palmnut Vulture and our friend Inger found the Kingfisher there. They are always difficult to spot

when they don't respond and sit motionless in the mangroves.

We had amazing views of Small Buttonquail on the way to the floodplain at Bonamanzi- it ran in front of the vehicle for at least 50 metres.

Saddle-billed Stork is always a difficult bird to find in Natal and we found two- one at the St Lucia estuary mouth and the other in Isimangaliso – Western Shores. They have now opened the Dukuduku gate and we explored here for the first time ever.

The Apalis, Batis and Scrub-Robin we all found in St Lucia which is just the best birding spot on the north coast. There are so many accessible birding locations in and around town with nearly all the coastal specials.



It has been a long time since we visited the South Coast and to be fair it is not much improved since our previous visit over a decade ago. Life seems to go on in its sleepy way and what the residents do with their time I would love to know. We did a little birding on the way down on the dirt road detour



just before Harrismith. This road was filled with Pink-billed Larks last time we visited but didn't produce more than a Zitting Cisticola and Spike-heeled and red-capped Larks this time round.

We stayed at the Caribbean Estates just outside Port Edward and once the novelty of the tame Woolly-necked Storks, a gang of marauding Peacocks, and the ever begging Mallards and white 'farmyard' ducks had waned, we did find lots of common birds in the grounds- Amethyst and Grey Sunbirds, Red winged and Black-bellied Starlings, Pied Wagtails, Green Pigeons and a few herons and weavers in the marshy patches. The

Blue Duiker there were particularly tame.

I would like to pose the question- why are the Robbin Island Peacocks still considered the only 'feral' population in the country. The birds on Benoni Golf course have been around for 30 years and are free flying and can go where they wish. The birds here although used to being fed scraps by the visitors and were not truly feral were free flying birds none the less.

The Mallard female was interestingly a cross with an African Black Duck and not a Yellow-billed as is usually the case.

Umtamvuna was very quiet. The Lovells found their Woodpecker at the second attempt when we didn't join them and on our second visit later in the week we did eventually manage Spotted Ground Thrush, Brown Scrub Robin and even a very silent White-starred Robin. None obliged with a photograph. We found African Fire-finch on our way out.





The coastal forests at Mpenjati, Uvongo and Umdoni were all so quiet we didn't linger long. Umtamvuna had taught us you could go an hour without seeing a bird. Mount Currie looked and was cold and forbidding. I tried to call up Broad-tailed Warbler and Stephanie said one popped up for a quick look but I missed it. We heard Red-chested Flufftail calling but there was sight nor sound of Striped Flufftail. We made do with a covey of red-winged Francolin and a pair of South African Shelduck on the dam.

We tried Oribi Gorge for the Knysna Woodpecker and heard it call once but never got a glimpse- another quiet day

We could only hope the birding would be better on the North Coast

St Lucia has to be one of the premier if not the premier birding spot on the North coast. It has so many, easily accessible birding spots from the roundabout at the end of town, through the Parks board camp sites, trails (Gwalaqwala) through the thicker forest areas, along the river side and down to the estuary mouth and shoreline. At the top end of town you have the Iphiva trail through grasslands and can bird the now disused Iphiva campsite.



You can find all the North coast specials within a couple of kilometres of the town centre. Including the mangrove and Raphia Palm specialists- the Kingfisher and Vulture. We had a Palm-nut Vulture juvenile fly above us along the beach.

There are always lots of flocks of Crowned Hornbills and Livingstone's Turaco's.

A drive through Isimangaliso Eastern shores Reserve up to Cape Vidal is mandatory. It is the best spot for Southern-banded Snake-Eagle on the north coast. This park is run by Ezemvelo Wildlife which has done great work in recent years improving the camp site and improving loop roads to new hides overlooking some of the pans. With the praise comes a major brickbat for not reopening their major game-viewing and birding loop running South of Lake Banghazi. Some concrete runners were washed away on the embankment alongside the lake over 18 months ago, and despite offers of help (free labour and cement) from local tour companies nothing has yet been done. Sounds like bureaucracy run mad.



The light for photography here in early winter is great. All you need is the light behind you and the birds close enough to shoot.

Bonamanzi is another lovely spot on the North coast to bird. The accommodation is quite upmarket these days but the Reserve is kept beautifully, the roads are good and the campsites are fine, and the sand forest and floodplain habitats

make for some great birding. They also welcome people like us as day visitors. We didn't arrive until 9.00am and decided on a game drive which took an hour to organise. At that late stage of the day the flood plain offered the best bet and whilst hoping for a Lemon-breasted Canary, which I need a shot of, we were compensated with a Small Buttonquail and Black-bellied Bustard on our way down to the floodplain.

The floodplain holds all three Longclaws and whilst I got a brief glimpse of a Rosy-throated when it flushed on my side of the vehicle we were unable to find it or another again. Driving around the pan edges through wet sloshy grass, ever fearful of getting stuck was an experience but our driver knew the terrain well and we had no problem. I got lots of photos of Rufous-winged Cisticola and the usual Pelicans, terns, gulls, lapwings and plovers. An enjoyable 4 hours at R300 per head.



Mkhuze is run by KZN Parks and I visit every year with some trepidation as standards in their parks are declining rapidly. I thought the roads in Hluhluwe/Umfolozi last year were an absolute disgrace and while the tar roads in Mkhuze are fine the dirt roads are appalling- filled with sharp, puncture inducing stones combined with larger rocks that make a 4 wheel drive necessary and even then great care is required making game viewing an unpleasant exercise. The hides are a disgrace at Mkhuze- totally unmaintained- thatched roofs collapsing, wooden palisades smashed and the entry road to the Kwamalibali hide has potholes a warthog could hide in.



We stayed in their self catering "squaredavels" which by Parks Board pricing are still good value. Birding here was quiet particularly the first day which was

windy and cold but interesting none the less as we encountered one of the biggest bird parties I have ever seen with dozens and dozens of birds moving rapidly- (too fast to photograph) through. I counted over thirteen species and probably missed many more - Black bellied Starlings, Sombre and Yellow breasted Greenbuls, Chinspot Batis, Ashy and Dusky and Southern Black Flycatchers, Grey-Tit Flycatcher, Green Wood-Hoopoe, Scimitarbill, Black Cuckoo-shrike, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Bearded Woodpecker, Green-backed Cameroptera, Grey and Amethyst Sunbird. A truly great spectacle. And all good bushveld birds- no sand forest specials at all. We never heard or saw Gorgeous Bushshrike, Eastern Nicator, Pink-throated Twinspot or Neergard's Sunbird.

We birded the same area the next morning and other than the nearly tame Crested Guinea fowl, never saw a bird - they were obviously still all in that great party somewhere.

We picked up a nice Flappet Lark, a bird difficult to photograph as it is usually a mile in the air or buried in the grass, a pair of obliging Striped Kingfishers, and a young Openbill close to Nsumu pan



We never tried the Fig forest- It had been a massive disappointment last year and Nsumo Pan had little to offer, so with the cold front still lingering it was nice to know we would be heading for home in the morning.

