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BIRDS AND FLOWERS OF THE NORTHERN CAPE

We last travelled to the Cape in the flower season way back in 2009. On that trip we spent several days in Bushmanland chasing down and photographing all the Dry Karoo Larks. This time around our itinerary was slightly different.

We drove from Johannesburg down to Upington where we overnighted, before heading on to the Kgalagadi for a couple of days. Not really long enough when you are travelling that far but the majority of waterholes were dry and the birding was not up to its normally high standards. The weather was pleasant for the time of year- day time highs of 30 degrees and chilly but not unpleasant evenings and nights.

On our return to Upington we headed south down the N14 and on passing through Pofadder noted the temperature had dropped to 20 degrees. By the time we reached Springbok it had dropped to 17 degrees and for the next eleven days- 2 days in Springbok, 2 days in Port Nolloth, 2 days in Kamieskroon, 4 days in Langebaan, and all the way back up to Vryburg in the North West the temperature never rose above 18 degrees. Then in the space of 120 kilometres from Vryburg to Coligny the temperature rose 12 degrees back to 30 degrees. Thank goodness we don't live in the Cape!!!!



In Springbok we spent the day in the Goegap reserve- no flowers of any description due to serious overgrazing in the reserve. Then it was on to Port Nolloth. My photographic targets on this trip were- Black-eared Sparrow-Lark (and again we lucked out here with no sign of the bird). Barlow's Lark – the final Southern African Lark I needed to photograph and this time around Port Nolloth came up trumps, and my third target- better shots of Black-headed Canary was realised alongside some really great fields of flowers at Leliefontein north of Kamieskroon. In Langebaan we took one day out of our schedule to travel down to Seekoeivlei for the Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin but more of that later.

The flowers were better in 2016 than 2009 with Leliefontein and Skilpad being particularly good. Postberg at Langebaan was average but there were good patches in Langebaan itself- the corner down to the Seeburg hide is always good. And finally the flowers along the coast in the Columbine reserve near Tittiesbaai were "prachtig" as they say in that part of the world.

But back to the Kgalagadi. The 200 kilometre drive from Upington proved interesting. There were lots of seeding grasses and the numbers of Grey-backed Sparrow-larks was simply astounding. Through a belt of 50 kilometres there were flocks of 20-30 birds every hundred metres. I cannot estimate the number of birds we passed- probably in the tens of thousands. Many were sitting on the tar in front of us and you had to drive well below 100 kilometres per hour to give them time to fly and avoid hitting them. We stopped many times to check the feeding flocks- and not a Black-eared amongst them.



We stayed at Twee Riverien which gave us the afternoon, one full day, and a morning if required. The camp site was full of birds- White-backed Mousebirds, Crimson-breasted Shrikes, Red-headed Finch, Pied Barbets, Cape Sparrows, Yellow Canaries and Cape Starlings including one leucistic bird which looked really strange- totally white with black

primaries. At night the Southern White-faced Owl called from the tree directly above us and Barn Owls called for most of the night as well.

Now the last time we were in the Kgalagadi we had eight days in December and Stephanie complained bitterly about not seeing Cheetah. Oh you just missed them, we were told on numerous occasions- you should have been here 20 minutes ago!! Well we made up for it on this trip. How about NINE cheetah in a single day with our first ever cheetah kill thrown in for good measure.



Our first sighting was of mum and her two kids enjoying the early morning sunshine high on the dunes on the Mata Mata road. An hour later we came upon a road block caused by another mother with her 4 youngsters lying in the shade of a tree in the middle of the road. We had three cars in front of us, so not great views but we waited patiently for ten minutes before Mum got up, stretched her legs and looked casually at the Springbok sitting in the middle of the riverbed 50 metres away. Seconds later from the back of the vehicle she used as a blind she was streaking out into the riverbed. The Gazelle had 40 metres on her which was down to 5 metres within 50 metres and 5 seconds later it was all over. Tripped from behind the buck went down and she was on its throat in a flash. It was all over in less than a minute- her cubs bounded over, sniffed the body and the entire family retired to the shade of a nearby tree while she recovered her breath. We left 5 minutes later with the Springbok still lying in the middle of the riverbed watched over by the family casually lying in the shade. And there was still one more cheetah to go- a singleton lying in the shade just outside the camp at Twee Rivieren.

We had other good birds- Lappet-faced Vulture, Bateleurs, Black-chested Snake-eagles, Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters, Fawn-coloured larks and both Burchall's and Namaqua Sandgrouse, but with the waterholes dry there were no Lanners and Red-necked Falcons hunting the doves coming down to drink. We did however manage to find both the falcons in the park. The flowers in Goegap were a major disappointment but we visited a couple of fields of "orange" close by at Nababeep and Okiep.

Goegap gave us our first taste of Namaqualand birding with Grey-backed Cisticola coming quickly to its call. Karoo Prinia was common as was White throated Canary, Cape Bunting, and Karoo Scrub-Robin and we also had good views of Karoo and Trac-trac Chat. We had found Cinnamon-breasted Warbler on our last trip to Goegap but this time despite playing the call all morning at the base of every likely hill there was no sign. We also missed Karoo Eremomela which can be a tricky bird to find.



We had heard about the Leliefontein flowers in Springbok so after travelling down to Port Nolloth and back we headed for Kamieskroon where we stayed at the Kamieskroon Hotel ideally situated for both Leliefontein and Skilpad. The only bird we found at Skilpad was a Black Harrier quartering the fields of gold, but at Leliefontein there was water close to the road and lots of birds around. A large flock of Black-headed-Damara- canaries was present but no birds with an all black head. Both Black-



throated, White-throated and Yellow Canaries were present as well. The Red Bishops were back in full breeding plumage- the first I have seen this year and the Karoo Scrub-Robins seemed to be particularly tame.

We spent one morning doing the small flower reserves around Darling. We found Large-billed Lark amongst the flowers but did not manage to find a Cape Clapper Lark this time round. Tomorrow we will visit Port Nolloth and discover what a good birding place it is and how finding

Barlow's lark was quite a challenge

You have to choose whether to bird the long road down to Port Nolloth (120 kilometres) and only arrive mid morning or put foot and get there as early as possible. We sped on passing the Cape Crows, Pale Chanters and Lanners which adorn the telephone poles stopping only for one obliging Greater Kestrel along the way.

We have always used Claire and Callan's book "Essential Birding- Western South Africa" on our trips to the Cape. This was a groundbreaking book when it was published in 2000- the first book of its kind that could lead you to within metres of the bird you were looking for, and it is still very relevant today when you are looking for something special. However things change over 16 years- pans dry up, windmills fall into non use and disappear. So Callan how about an update? It would extremely well received by the Southern African and overseas birding Community.

The spot Callan describes for Barlow's Lark just outside Port Nolloth along the mining fence is obviously still there but Barlow's at least in September is no longer common. Fortunately the large fenced off area next to the spot which used to be run by Namaqua Mariculture (whatever that used to be) has closed. The front gates have been vandalised and the gate house completely stripped so we spent over 12 hours over two days driving on both sides of the fence over approximately 5 square kilometres looking for Larks. During that time we found one Barlow's, a good candidate for a Barlow's/Karoo hybrid and about 10 Karoo Larks (probably the same birds in the same places each day.) There were plenty of Cape Long-billed Larks around and we had good sightings of Southern Grey Tit and Cape Penduline Tit and Chat Flycatcher. White-fronted Plovers chased each other through the scrub and a very unusual looking Jackal Buzzard tested out ID strengths. We also bumped into another of the 4 Black Harriers we were to see on the trip. Leaving the dilapidated gatehouse late one evening we noticed two Rock Kestrels had taken up residence- at least for a few hours.

We checked the pan behind the town but that was dry the last time we visited 7 years ago and it is still dry today. It is basically used as a rubbish dump. It was too early for the Damara Terns but I very much doubt they breed there any longer.

We drove through to Alexander Bay one morning and spent 3 hours north of the mine checking along the dirt road for Barlow's. No sign there either I'm afraid- in fact for twenty kilometres north of Alexander bay the scrub on both sides of the road was virtually birdless.





Back in town our self-catering flat was twenty metres from a very pretty little beach on the Barlow's side of town. Every morning the Greater Flamingos appeared through the mist and there was even a small flotilla of Black-necked Grebes feeding 20 metres off shore. Crowned Cormorants were relatively close to the shoreline but the Banks Cormorant (I saw two with white backs in breeding plumage) as always stay way offshore- within bino range but too far to photograph.. Where is the best place to photograph Bank Cormorants within 500mm range??

Driving down the lonely N7 -the main road from Namibia to Capetown we decided to branch off and visit Lamberts Bay to see how the Gannet colony was doing. Well they seem to be doing just fine despite there being plenty of fur seals around- the colony was large with lots of young birds- probably close to a couple of thousand birds in all. The wind was in the wrong direction for photography with the birds landing with their backs to the hide and camera but I took a few shots. There were a few Cape Cormorants around and the usual Kelp and Hartlaub's Gulls but little else of note.

Then it was on to Langebaan passing a couple of Blue Cranes just north of Veldrif before hitting the town itself. We were staying at Club Mykonos but what a mission getting there. They are digging up the main road all the way from the highway to the middle of town. It must be hell for the inhabitants.

We arrived Monday afternoon and decided to head down to Capetown in the morning -the vagrant Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin had been hanging around for over 50 days and who knows how much longer it would stay. We had seen the bird in Kenya and Morocco and I already had good photographs but It is always nice to add a new bird to your Southern African list- I haven't had a lifer for more than a couple of years.

We got down to Zeekoevlei at around 10.am to find the picnic site deserted- so no easy tick here- we had to find the bird ourselves. As I got out of the car we saw a flash of an orange tail diving up into a tree- false alarm it was only a Cape Robin-chat but a quick scan immediately found the bird in a small tree twenty metres away. It took off immediately giving no time for anything but quick confirmation of the ID and disappeared into some thick scrub and that was the last we saw of it for over an hour. How can the thing just disappear we asked ourselves repeatedly. Another group of birders arrived and it was they that picked it up sitting quietly deep in the foliage of another tree 40 metres away. We followed the bird then for 10 minutes and I got some fairly average photographs but didn't want to chase it for too long.

We were back in Langebaan for a late lunch and checked out the flowers at Postberg in the afternoon – nothing too special but there were dozens of cars viewing them. Langebaan was a disappointment birdingwise. The waders hadn't returned yet- there were only Whimbrel and Greenshank in front of the





Geelbeck hide and at Seeburg the sand has built into a huge bank in front of the hide obscuring the view of most of the beach. That hide needs to be rebuilt on stilts 2 metres above the ground to give reasonable views. Why do Cape Nature and their donors spend thousands of rands on long walkways to hides and then not ensure a good viewing experience when you get there. It defeats me!

We found Cape Sparrow and Grey-winged Francolin on the way out so it at least made for an interesting end to the day. We drove through the park on the way down to Darling the

next morning and back through the park again in the afternoon with little reward for our efforts.

Our final day took us north to Veldrif where we checked the pans on the right of the road but didn't bother with the salt works on the right. Nothing of note but we found the White Pelicans further along the river. Then we headed out to Paternoster and on to Tittiesbaai and Columbine. I have always liked this reserve- the flowers never seem to disappoint- We more great views of Cape Penduline Tit and Grey backed Cisticola and there were a few Turnstone on the rocks by the picnic site . We found Sickle-winged chats exactly where Callan said they would be and after visiting St Helena and Stupneus bays wandered back to Langebaan, leaving us with our 1600 kilometre journey back home. We over-nighted in Upington once again and finally got back to Gauteng and stopped feeling cold for the first time in two weeks.

A good trip- the flowers were good and so were the birds although I still wish we had done the Bushmanland Larks!!

