



TRIP REPORT FOR THE STRETTONS 'LIMPOPO UNCHARTED' BIRDING 4X4 TRIP

2 – 5 AUGUST 2012

On Thursday, the 2nd of August, 9 birders joined Joe Grosel, Lisa Martus and Trevor Van Niekerk for the start of a four-day birding 4x4 adventure into uncharted territory. Trevor, a 4x4 expert, had been tasked to map out an exciting new route from the Blouberg Massif, into the Makgabeng Plateau and through to the Waterberg. The far north-western region of the Limpopo Province can be regarded as one of the last truly wild areas of the country. It is remote, rugged, largely unspoilt and stunningly beautiful with habitats ranging from mistbelt forest to arid bushveld. As far as birding is concerned, the area is largely uncharted but the pristine and diverse habitats were expected to produce exceptional birds. The group were excited to begin the adventure, heading off around midday from Polokwane Bird Sanctuary towards the 'blue mountains'.



Blouberg Ivory Route Camp at the base of the Blouberg massif is surrounded by an interesting selection of habitats ranging from mountain cliffs and riparian forest to tall mixed woodland and deciduous scrub forest. The Ivory Route camp is set in a secluded spot on the banks of a mountain stream surrounded by the Blouberg foothills and dramatic towering cliffs. The mountain is the stronghold of the Ba-Hananwa people and the scene of a bloody battle between the ZAR and Chief Malebogo late in the 19th century.

After a warm welcome from David, Thabo and Khomotso at the Ivory Route camp, birders settled in to their traditional thatch huts before Joe took everyone for a stroll under the huge trees of the camp. The evening was a little breezy in front of the cold weather pushing its way up north but the birding adventurers enjoyed a festive braai under the stars in the camp's boma with the sponsor's gin and tonic and many mini bottles of Glendower Whiskey.



At night the resident Wood Owls could be heard calling in the adjacent riparian forest while the dawn chorus was dominated by Natal Francolin. The birds in the camp grounds were very confiding with Yellow-bellied Greenbuls, Jameson's Firefinch, Terrestrial Brownbuls, White-throated Robin-Chats and Bearded Scrub-Robins allowing close views and excellent photographic opportunities. Even an African Goshawk sat out in the open offering extended views. Flowering Coral Trees attracted an assortment of Sunbirds including Amethyst, White-bellied, Marico and Greater Double-Collared while the large Sycamore Figs were a hive of activity with fruit-eaters including a variety of Barbets, Thrushes, Starlings and Greenbuls of which the Sombre Greenbuls represent the most easterly population of in the Limpopo Province.



After a delicious breakfast under the looming mountains, Trevor led the group on a day of exploration, leaving the Blouberg mountain landscape and driving offroad on the newly established 4x4 route alongside the Makgabeng. **The Makgabeng Plateau** lies south of the Blouberg and west of the Soutpansberg. Rising 200 metres above the bushveld, the Makgabeng Plateau stretches over a distance of 250 square kilometres much of which is uninhabited. Towering ochre cliffs and strange Red

Sandstone rock formations rise dramatically out of the bushveld surrounds. En route to Makgabeng, a male Short-toed Rock-Thrush was hawking insects from a roadside telephone line while a very photogenic Rock Kestrel and Lizard Buzzard allowed several members of the group to get some high-quality photographs.



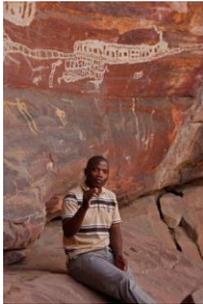
Adventurers were treated to spectacular landscapes culminating in a visit to an enormous sandstone cave, carved out of the rock and a natural sandstone amphitheatre along a riverline. Driving along cattle tracks and through river-beds allowed participants to get up close to the tall sand "rock" buttresses, deep Kalahari-like Sandveld and Acacia-lined streambeds. Birding highlights here included sipping Strettons gin while watching Cape Vultures returning to a prominent cliff-side

roosting site. Joe pointed out Booted Eagle, Lanner Falcon, Rock Kestrel and White-necked Raven as well as pesky Pied Crows who repeatedly mobbed soaring and roosting vultures. Other interesting bird observations in the Makgabeng included seeing both Dark-capped and Red-eyed Bulbuls drinking from the same leaking tap and large groups of Red-billed Oxpeckers sitting on cattle and donkeys.



After an exciting drive along a cattle track, we arrived at the lovely **Makgabeng Farm Lodge** to a warm welcome from owners Fortune and Lorraine Mabeba and the melodious rhythms of musician and artist, Thomas Kubayi and his band, Vutsila. Our delicious meal was accompanied by the poetry of local poet, Hazel, whose words serenaded us into the night. With its panoramic views of the Makgabeng, the lodge is situated in arid bushveld dominated by

Umbrella-Thorn and Marula trees. Some of the resident bird species seen around the lodge included Marico Flycatcher, Kalahari Scrub-Robin, Scaly-feathered Finch, Sabota Lark and Green-winged Pytilia.



After an early breakfast, we made our way back to Makgabeng to meet up with Jonas Tlouamma, an expert on Makgabeng's rock art sites who revealed to us the hidden secrets of the Makgabeng's past. This vast expanse of wilderness houses over 800 unique Khoekhoe, San and Sotho rock art sites, undisturbed for centuries. The original settlers were drawn here by the safe haven offered by massive cliffs and it has been inhabited ever since. Participants were enchanted by the San and Sotho rock art sites as well as the opportunity to experience the spectacular Makgabeng rock formations and a dramatic sandstone arch.



Participants had to be dragged away from the Makgabeng to head off to **Lindani Private Nature Reserve** in the Waterberg Biosphere. Lindani is dominated by Waterberg Sandy Bushveld but also features open sand plains, perennial streams and dense rocky ridges. Our group was welcomed by the resident pair of Mocking Cliff-chats and enjoyed a short afternoon walk before being serenaded by members of Solly Nkhumane's

Village Singers choir and a delicious Lindani dinner with chilled gin and tonics. The morning drive with Johannes Mosima produced over 80 species comprising an extremely varied selection of birds including Swee Waxbill, Pearl-breasted Swallow, African Black Duck, African Green-Pigeon, Cape Grassbird, Ant-eating Chat, Bearded Woodpecker and Grey-backed Cameroptera. Lindani is a 'pipit paradise' with no less than 5 species seen during our stay - Plain-backed, Buffy, Bushveld, African and Striped. After all the birding and the highlight of a Lindani rhino, the group were more than ready for a hearty brunch followed by a reluctant farewell to fellow adventurers, until the next time.



Joe Grosel and Lisa Martus

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