



BirdLife South Africa Avitourism Division
Self Drive Itinerary

Birding Route Name: Kruger to Canyons Birding Route

Self-drive Itinerary Name: 8 day 'Best of Kruger to Canyons'

Habitats: Montane grasslands, afro-montane forest and savanna

Duration: 8 nights

Distance covered: ±1150 km

Costs: Fuel	- R800
Reserve Costs (per person)	- R100
Guide Costs	- Negotiable
Accommodation	- Variable

Itinerary updated: August 2010

Day 1: Johannesburg to Dullstroom

Overnight Linger Longer

This country retreat, 12 km outside Dullstroom, with its many quaint, superb cuisine restaurants, hotels and pubs, infinite tourist attractions and of course fly-fishing facilities has become a sought after breakaway destination for the weary traveler or the ideal stopover on the way to the Kruger National Park.

This is an area of highland grassveld, vleis and ridges and therefore a prime spot for grassland endemics.

Specials Include: Ground Woodpecker, Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Rufous-chested Sparrowhawk, Southern Bald Ibis, Gurneys Sugarbird, Malachite Sunbird, Wattled and Blue Crane, Denham's Bustard, Pale-crowned Cisticola, Black-winged Lapwing, Cape Eagle-Owl, Yellow-breasted and Long-billed Pipit and Buff-streaked Chat.

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GPS Coordinates: S 25 19-344 E 030 08-839

Day 2: Dullstroom to Hoedspruit, via Mount Sheba and the Blyde River Canyon

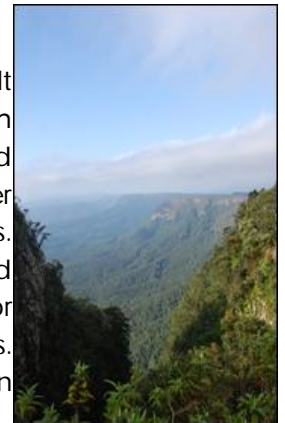
- **Mount Sheba**

Mount Sheba is situated in the Mountains above Pilgrim's Rest amongst tall, dense afro montane forest with the upper slopes and plateau predominantly open grassland. Specials include: Crowned Eagle, White-starred Robin, Olive Woodpecker, Orange Ground-Thrush, Yellow-throated Woodland-Warbler, Buff-streaked Chat, Yellow-streaked Greenbul and Buff-spotted Flufftail.



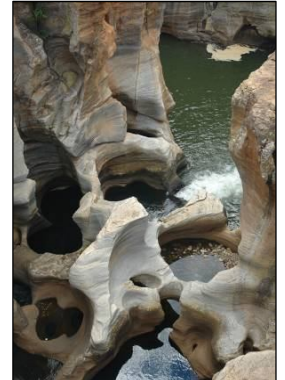
- **God's Window**

Besides the spectacular views there is a small patch of Afro-montane mist belt forest which receives a high level of precipitation. The forest has a high diversity of flowering plants that in turn attract a variety of different bird species, such as nectar-feeders including Gurney's Sugarbird, Greater double-collared, Southern double-collared, Collared and Malachite sunbirds. You can also find Spectacled Weaver, Cape Canary, Sombre Greenbul and several robin species. The lookout point is an excellent spot to watch for raptors, especially in the mid morning as they start to make use of thermals. This spot is worthwhile visiting for an hour or two in the early morning, but it can get quite busy during the weekends



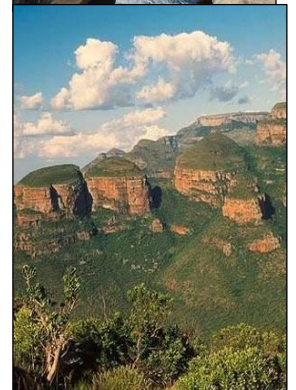
- **Burke's Luck Potholes**

The site is situated on afro-montane grasslands similar to the area at the Three Rondavels lookout point. Typical birds encounters include Wing-snapping Cisticola, Wailing Cisticola, Zitting Cisticola, Yellow-throated Longclaw, Cape and African Wagtail, Buff-streaked and Familiar Chat, Stonechat, Drakensberg Prinia, Southern Red and Yellow bishops. The area is best visited during summer when bird activity is at its highest especially in the grasslands surrounding the site.



- **Three Rondavels**

Three Rondavels lookout site is dominated by montane grassland which hosts a number of high altitude species not found elsewhere on the route. Species include Wing-Snapping Cisticola, Wailing Cisticola, Levillant's Cisticola, Broad-Tailed Warbler, Croaking and Lazy Cisticola, Drakensberg Prinia, Cape Rock Thrush, Buff-Streaked Chat, Familiar Chat, Mocking-Cliff Chats. In addition, the lookout is a fantastic area to look for raptors. Species which can be located here including Cape Vulture, Verreaux's Eagle, Rock Kestrel, Lanner and Peregrine Falcon.



- **J.G. Strydom Tunnel**

The road which meanders through the Abel Erasmus Pass and the Strydom Tunnel offers some of the best raptor birding on the route. Sheer cliffs hem the road in and provide roosting sites for a number of different species whilst thickly wooded valleys offer a different habitat type supporting a wide range of species. A number of lay byes near the pass offer an opportunity to scan the cliffs and forests. Species to look out for include the extremely rare Taita Falcon, Verreuxs Eagle, Verreuxs Eagle Owl, Cape Vulture, European Honey Buzzard, Lanner and Peregrine Falcon, Rock Martin, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, Cape Rock Thrush, Mocking Cliff-chat and Striped Pipit and Mountain Wagtail.



Overnight at Otters Den River Lodge (two nights)

Otters Den River Lodge is an exclusive hideaway on a forested island in the Blyde River near Hoedspruit. One reaches the camp by crossing the Blyde River by suspension bridge, symbolising your escape to wilderness. The camp is designed to accommodate a group of up to ten guests in five chalets. The chalets are a combination of stone, thatch and canvas structures with a timber deck on stilts, overlooking the river. The Island constitutes 50 ha of forest, veld, wetland and has 2km of river front on the main channel of the river. The bird list tops 220 species and small game such as otter, serval, genet, civit, bush pigs, bush babies and small antelope are spotted if you are patient and observant. Hippo and crocodile are often seen under the bridge.

Specials include: White-backed Night-Heron, Little and Dwarf Bittern, African Black Duck, Cape Vulture, Bat Hawk, European Honey-Buzzard, Verreaux's Eagle, African Finfoot, Tambourine Dove, Purple Crested Turaco, Wood Owl, Narina Trogon, Half-collared Kingfisher, Green Twinspot and Gorgeous Bush Shrike.

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Day 3: Mariepskop State Forest and Swadini Dam.

Mariepskop State Forest

On the eastern side of the Drakensberg Escarpment, facing away from the Blyde River Canyon, is the Mariepskop complex, a mountain enclave and centre of endemism of unsurpassed beauty. The relatively small area on top of the escarpment (1945 m above sea level) is unique due to patches of fynbos, a biome normally only found in the Cape regions. This small and isolated pocket of fynbos harbours an extraordinary diversity of plant species that attract birds that are hard to see elsewhere on the Birding Route such as Gurney's Sugarbird, Greater Double-collared Sunbird and Cape Canary. Going up to Mariepskop will take you through three different biomes: savanna, afro-montane forest and fynbos.

Due to the great variety of habitats present over a relatively short distance, this area can be highly rewarding for birding. Along the dirt road towards Mariepskop raptors such as African Hawk-Eagle and Forest Buzzard are often perched on the power lines along the road. On the way up to Mariepskop the disturbed areas are good for Red-collared Widowbird, Pin-tailed Whydah, Southern Red Bishop, Cape White-eye and Steppe Buzzard.

Around the Forestry Office and adjoining forest you can find African Olive-Pigeon, Knysna Turaco, Grey-headed Bush-Shrike, Olive Woodpecker, Sombre Greenbul, Bar-throated Apalis, Southern Boubou and if you are patient enough even Buff-spotted Flufftail.

You can ascend to the top where you can see the Indian Ocean and Maputo on a clear day. Mariepskop is the highest peak in the northern Drakensberg Escarpment. The view is spectacular. Recommended by SA Birding as "*an essential part of a [birding] visit to this area*", a full day's exploration of the Mariepskop forest is advised. Other specials include: Black-fronted Bush-Shrike, Southern Tchagra, Bush Blackcap, Square-tailed Drongo, Brown Scrub-Robin, Lemon Dove, Terrestrial Brownbul, Orange Ground-Thrush, Chorister Robin-Chat, Cape Robin-Chat, White-starred Robin, Cape Batis, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Yellow-throated Woodland-Warbler, Olive Bush-Shrike, Knysna Turaco, Amethyst Sunbird, Southern Double collared sunbird, Grey Cuckooshrike and Narina Trogon

Dense Curry-bush thickets close to the summit are excellent habitat for Barratt's Warbler, and Bush Blackcap. African Crowned Eagle breeds here and can regularly be seen over the forest. Check forest verges and clearings for Red-necked Spurfowl, Sweet Waxbill, Green Twinspot and Forest Canary.

Swadini Dam

The Swadini Dam is situated at the mouth of the Blyde River Canyon. The dam is fairly steep sided but yields specials such as African Finfoot, White-backed Night Heron, Half-collared Kingfisher, Malachite Kingfisher, Giant Kingfisher, African Black Duck and the occasional Bat Hawk. There are a number of trails and birding opportunities in the vicinity of the dam and surroundings.

Day 4: Hoedspruit to Balule Private Nature Reserve

Overnight at Toro Yaka Bush Lodge (two nights),

Toro Yaka, which means "My Dream" in Northern Sotho, is a one-of-a-kind lodge situated in the unforgettable pristine bushveld of Balule, a 30 000 ha nature conservancy in the Greater Kruger National Park. Toro Yaka is owner managed by husband and wife team, Steve and Nicole Bailey, who will personally ensure your stay to be something to remember.

The lodge has been designed for true bush elegance, and combines personal service and closeness to nature. Six en suite double or twin rooms, equipped with overhead fans, air conditioners and mosquito nets. Beautiful English décor, all under thatch, ensures luxury but fitting accommodation. The pool deck, dining room and entertainment area all overlook a waterhole to watch animals at your leisure.

The cuisine is a fusion of European and traditional African, prepared mostly outdoors over an open fire. A sparkling freshwater pool is a welcome sight in the summer.

Contact:

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Email: info@toroyaka.co.za

Website: www.toroyaka.co.za

GPS Coordinates: S 24' 12' 03.5" E 30' 53'18.6"

Day 5: Toro Yaka Bush Lodge

Guided Activities (excluded)

All bush activities are conducted by Steve, who is a professional (Special Knowledge and Skills) trails guide, qualified through the Field Guide Association of South Africa (FGASA). His 12 years of experience and specialised knowledge of all aspects of nature make all bush experiences truly unforgettable. In excess of 350 bird species have been recorded in the Balule Nature Reserve. Specials include: African Barred Owlet, Pel's Fishing Owl, Southern White-faced Scops-Owl, Bronze-winged Courser, Stierlings Wren-Warbler, Martial Eagle, White-crowned Lapwing, Southern Ground Hornbill and Retz's Helmet-Shrike.

Day 6: Balule Private Nature Reserve to Phalaborwa

Grietjie Private Nature Reserve Vulture Restaurant

The Kruger to Canyons Birding Route partnership, a division of BirdLife South Africa, has recently been involved in key Infrastructure Development Projects. The most exciting initiative has undeniably been the establishment of a Vulture Restaurant on the Grietjie Nature Reserve 20 km south of Phalaborwa. The reserve forms part of the Greater Kruger National Park. The Vulture Restaurant is one of just a few located within a Big 5 reserve and hyena and other carnivores are



free to come and go. Spotted Hyena will be useful in fragmenting the remaining bones from old carcasses; elsewhere school children often perform this necessary act. Vulture Restaurants have been proven to increase the breeding success of vultures by providing them with more calcium, in the form of bone fragments, in their diet.

The purpose of this viewing hide is to primarily act as a tourism attraction in the Lowveld, but also serves an educational purpose regarding the plight of vulture populations in southern Africa, which are in a drastic state of decline, and to assist researchers involved in a number of different vulture monitoring projects in the Lowveld. Carcasses are normally only put down at the weekends, ensuring that the birds do not become reliant on the additional food source.

Specials include: Cape Vulture, White-headed Vulture, White-backed Vulture, Hooded Vulture, Lappet-faced Vulture, Dark Chanting Goshawk, Tawny Eagle and Bateleur.

Overnight at Sefapane Lodge and Safaris (one night)

Sefapane Lodge offers a great deal to the visiting birder. The grounds are host to a number of bushveld species that head for the green oasis of the centrally positioned dam. Kruger National Park and accompanying birdlife is only 1 km away from the lodge whilst the adjacent Selati and Olifants Rivers offer good waterbird viewing opportunities.

Accommodation consists of 31 African style thatched rondavels. Each rondavel has en-suite bathroom, air-conditioning, mini fridge and coffee/tea making facilities. 3 family units can sleep up to 6. All rondavels are privately situated amidst bird filled gardens. The lodge also features 18 luxury self-catering houses, comprising of a lounge with satellite TV, fully equipped open plan kitchen, 3 bedrooms with en-suite bathroom and a wooden deck overlooking the dam.

The large swimming pool with charming sunken bar is a unique feature of the lodge. The a-la-carte restaurant offers indoor and outdoor dining with many terraces to choose from.

Specials include: Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Grey-headed and Orange-breasted Bush-Shrike, Red-faced Cisticola, Purple Heron, Bronze Mannikin, Cut-throat Finch and African Mourning Dove.

Activity: Enjoy a traditional South African bush braai dinner in the Kruger National Park. At night everything changes into a magical African wonderland with lanterns and torches that light the path to your table, set up under the African moonlit sky.

Specials include: Spotted Eagle-Owl, Bronze-winged Courser, Spotted and Water Thick-Knee, Fiery-necked, Square-tailed and European Nightjar.

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Website: www.sefapane.co.za

GPS Coordinates: 23°56'58.36 "S 31°09'05.06 "E

Day 7: Phalaborwa to Kruger National Park

- Mopani Rest Camp

The camp overlooks Pioneer Dam, which often hosts Collared Pratincole. Other specials include Kittlitz's Plover and Rufous-winged Cisticola. The Tropic of Capricorn Loop often host Secretarybird, Red-crested Korhaan and Chestnut-backed Sparrowlark. After good rains, Harlequin Quail as well as migratory Pallid and Montagu's Harrier may be seen here.

Overnight at Letaba Rest Camp (one night)

Letaba is situated on the banks of the Letaba River within Mopani dominated savanna. The camp is well spread out with the highlight being a paved footpath which runs along the northern perimeter through broad leaved riparian vegetation and then back along roads skirting the southern perimeter of the camp offering the chance to see a number of species within the confines of the camp as well as out on the Letaba River floodplain.

Look out for Gabar Goshawk along the riverside path as well as a number of camp residents such as Red-Headed Weaver, Palm Swift, Bearded Robin, Red-capped and White-browed Robin-Chat and Grey Headed Bush-Shrike.

The floodplain of the Letaba River hosts a high number of water birds whilst a number of roads emanating from the camp run alongside the Letaba River and through riparian vegetation offering first class birding. Birds to look out for in the camp include Grey-rumped and Pearl-breasted Swallow, Green-capped Eromomela, Bennett's and Bearded Woodpecker, Orange Breasted Bush-Shrike, Pearl-Spotted Owlet and African Scops-Owl.

Specials include: Red-headed Weaver, Mocking Cliff-Chat, Orange-breasted and Grey-headed bush Shrike, Pel's Fishing Owl, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Saddle-billed Stork, Yellow-billed Kite, Eurasian Hobby and Marabou Stork.

Contact:

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Day 8: Kruger National Park

Satara Rest Camp (one night)

Satara Rest Camp is situated in Knob thorn and Marula dominated open savanna and offers a wide range of bushveld and grassland bird species including Kori Bustard, Southern Ground Hornbill, Harlequin Quail, Kurrichane Buttonquail and Secretary Bird. A couple of hours walking around the camp itself can yield a surprisingly high number of species including Bennett's Woodpecker, Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, Woodland Kingfisher, Burchell's Starling, Groundscraper Thrush.

The camp is host to a couple of pairs of African Scops-Owls which are easily located after dark by following their distinctive call. Pearl spotted owlets can also be found within the camp. It is often worthwhile having a look at the large Fever tree in front of the Restaurant. Several perennial rivers occur in the area with the riparian vegetation alongside the N'wanetsi River on the H1-3 road providing fantastic birding.

The night drive offered at Satara offers one the opportunity to see various different owl species including Wood Owl, Spotted Eagle Owl and Verreaux's Eagle Owl as well as different nightjar species. The nearby N'semani dam on the H7 road is often frequented by a wide variety of water birds including Saddle-billed Stork, Crown and Blacksmith Lapwing and White Faced Duck. Raptors are abundant in the area including Brown and Black-chested Snake Eagle, Lizard Buzzard, Martial Eagle and Steppe Eagle.

Other specials include: Common Ostrich, Sabota Lark, Lesser Grey Shrike, Red-billed Quelia, Lesser-spotted Eagle, African Mourning dove and Grey-backed Camaroptera.

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Day 9: Kruger National Park to Johannesburg

Tour Ends