



BirdLife South Africa Avitourism Division  
Self Drive Itinerary

**Birding Route Name:** Southern KwaZulu Natal Birding Route

**Self Drive Itinerary Name:** Pietermaritzburg and surrounds - Day Trip Option A

**Habitats:** Dams, wetlands, Afromontane forest, cultivated fields, cliffs

**Duration:** 6 hours - Drive (1 hr) – Benvie (3/4 hrs) – roadside birding (2/3 hrs) – Howick Falls (45 mins) – drive to Pmb (25 mins)

**Distance covered:** ±160kms

**Costs:** Fuel – R130  
Benvie Farm – R20 pp  
Karkloof Crane & Conservation Centre – R20 pp

**Itinerary updated:** January 2010

### Itinerary

#### **Benvie**

From the N3 take the Howick north/ Tweedie off-ramp (exit 107), turn right at the stop sign and drive along Main Rd for 3 km's. At the 5th set of traffic lights, Main and Zeederberg Rd intersection, turn left onto the Karkloof / Rietvlei road. Travel along this road for approx. 33 km's, the tar becomes gravel, looking out for a signboard signing York / Hanover and L'Abri to the right. Drive 3 km's until you see the signs for Benvie, take a left onto the D583 and Benvie Farm will be in front of you. Follow the birding signs to the parking area. To access Benvie Farm you will need to phone and make arrangements prior to arrival; +27 (0)33 502 9090 or [tomrob@mweb.co.za](mailto:tomrob@mweb.co.za). The 150 year old gardens at Benvie offer some fantastic birding opportunities, and early morning is particularly good! Shy, retiring species such as **Lemon dove**, **Orange ground-thrush**, **Chorister robin-chat**, **White-starred robin** and **Buffspotted flufftail** can be quite confiding and relatively unbothered by your presence as you stroll through the gardens. Listen out for the high-pitched shrieks of **Cape parrot** as they fly over, or settle in some of the tall trees on the property. The other 'garden' specials to look for are **Forest buzzard**, **African wood-owl**, **Knysna turaco**, **Narina trogon**, **Scaly-throated honeyguide**, **Olive woodpecker**, **Mountain wagtail**, **Red-backed mannikin** and **Green twinspot**. Listen out for the soft, sibilant call of the **Forest canary**.

Leaving Benvie after a good 3/4 hrs birding, head back the way you came. On the road out, after 1.2 km you will pass through a lovely patch of Afromontane forest that provides some excellent

forest birding. It is recommended to park somewhere on the road-side and stroll up the road. Forest birding can be tricky, and it is useful to be familiar with the birds' calls. Olive woodpecker, African emerald cuckoo (summer), **Grey cuckooshrike**, **Blue-mantled crested flycatcher**, **Olive bush-shrike**, **Cape batis**, **Barratt's warbler**, **Chorister robin-chat**, **Yellow-throated woodland warbler**, **Bush blackcap**, **Sweet waxbill** and **Forest canary** are all Afromontane forest specials that can be seen in this delightful patch of forest.

### **Mount Alida Rd and Karkloof Crane and Conservation Centre**

At the intersection with the main Howick – Karkloof rd, turn right towards Mount Alida. Roadside birding along this road can be very rewarding. Check all grazed grasslands, cultivated and fallow fields carefully for **Denham's bustard**, **Southern ground hornbill** (uncommon), **Blue**, **Grey-crowned** and **Wattled crane**, **Southern bald ibis**, **Red-necked spurfowl** and **Buffy pipit**. Drive for 3.6 km's from the point where you join the main road, and turn right onto the D584. The low, rocky outcrops on the right support **Buff-streaked chat**, **Long-billed pipit** and **Eastern long-billed lark**, and the open grasslands should be scanned for **Banded martin** (summer), **Pale-crowned**, **Wing-snapping** and **Cloud cisticola**, and **Yellow** and **Yellow-crowned bishops**. The large wetland on the left in the valley bottom regularly holds a pair of **Wattled crane**, so stop and scan the area carefully.

Return to the main road and turn right. The large dam on your right 5.3 km's from the D584 intersection, is a good place for waterbirds, and in particular **Maccoa duck**, **White-backed duck**, **South African shelduck** and **Cape shoveller**. At this point you can turn around and take a leisurely drive back towards Howick. You can continue to bird, looking out for raptors perched on the roadside or soaring overhead. **Martial eagle**, **African crowned eagle**, **Long-crested eagle**, **Jackal buzzard**, **Forest buzzard**, **Black sparrowhawk** and **Rufous-chested sparrowhawk** are some of the species you may see. The **Forest buzzard** and the very similar **Steppe buzzard** are difficult to tell apart, but remember the **Steppe buzzard** is a summer visitor to southern Africa, while the **Forest buzzard** is resident, so any potential buzzards seen in forested areas in winter are almost certainly **Forest buzzards**. As you continue your drive, and once you reach the tarred section, scan any ploughed fields for all 3 species of cranes which are regular in this area. Look out for the Karkloof Crane and Conservation Centre on the left. The Centre is at the entrance to Gartmore Farm and has an interpretation centre as well as 2 hides overlooking small dams, and offers a further opportunity for seeing **Blue**, **Grey crowned** and **Wattled cranes**.

### **Howick Falls**

The next stop is Howick Falls. As you drive down the hill into Howick take a left at the traffic lights and drive straight through town looking for the Howick Falls sign, and turning left. Drive to the end of the road where you will see a parking area. The viewing platform overlooks the cliff face where the Umgeni River plunges 100 m to the valley below. **Cape rock-thrush**, **Familiar chat**, **Mocking cliff-chat**, **Red-winged starling**, **Black** and **Alpine swifts** are often seen from this viewpoint, and a pair of **Lanner falcon** nest in the cliffs nearby. **African crowned eagle** breed in the reserve, so listen and look out for this magnificent raptor. Walking away from the falls, take a walk along the road that skirts the edge of the bushveld looking for **Red-throated wryneck**, **Olive woodpecker**, **Southern tchagra**, **Olive bush-shrike**, **Southern double-collared sunbird** and **Streaky-headed canary**.

If you would like to stop for a bite to eat or a drink before heading back to Pietermaritzburg, Howick is part of the Midlands Meander route and there are a number of restaurants and coffee shops in the vicinity. Ask in any of the shops near the Falls for a Midlands Meander map (R5), and see what takes your fancy!