



BirdLife South Africa Avitourism Division
Self Drive Itinerary

Birding Route Name: Southern KwaZulu Natal Birding Route

Self Drive Itinerary Name: Pietermaritzburg Day Trip (Option B)

Habitats: Afromontane grassland, afromontane forest

Duration: 9 hours - Drive (1¼ hrs) – Highover (2/3 hrs) – drive (1½ hrs) – Marutswa (2/3 hrs) – drive to Pmb (1½ hrs)

Distance covered: ±230kms

Costs: Fuel – R230
Highover Wildlife Sanctuary – R25pp
Marutswa Forest Boardwalk – R20pp

Itinerary updated: January 2010

Itinerary

This round-trip takes in the spectacular Mkomazi Gorge from Hella-Hella Pass, high-altitude grasslands to look for the Critically Endangered Blue swallow, and an excellent example of Afromontane forest at Marutswa Forest Boardwalk, before returning to Pietermaritzburg. Please remember Blue swallows are summer visitors to South Africa, so they are only at Highover from late November to late March. Please note: it is essential to notify Highover of your proposed visit on +27 (0)33 212 3171 / +27 (0)33 212 9411 or highover@telkomsa.net

Highover Wildlife Sanctuary

From Pietermaritzburg head out of town on Alexandra Rd, this eventually becomes the R56, towards Richmond. After approx. 37 km's take a right into the village of Richmond onto Shepstone Street. Drive through the village and take the signposted left turn to Hella-Hella and Eastwolds. After 11 km's the road becomes gravel, continue along this road for a further 11 km's before seeing the Highover Wildlife Sanctuary sign where you turn left. Follow the drive for 100m to the reception and parking area. An entrance fee of R25 pp is payable, and remember to collect a map and the key to the reserve. Return to the main road, turn left, and cross the Mkomazi River bridge - look for **Mountain wagtail** and **African black duck**. In the thick bushveld alongside the river, **Grey-headed** and **Olive bush-shrike**, **Crowned hornbill**, **Knysna turaco**, **Garden** and **Icterine warblers** (summer) and **Brown-backed honeybird** may be seen. As you continue up Hella-Hella Pass to the top (± 2km's), look out

for **Forest** and **Jackal buzzards**, **Verreaux's eagle**, **African crowned eagle** and **Black stork**. Also look for **Lazy cisticola** and **Swee waxbill**, common along this road, and on the rocky wooded slopes you may be lucky to spot a **Striped pipit**. Once on the plateau and in the Reserve, turn left and follow the track that runs parallel with the fence, for about 500m. Park off the road and walk into the grasslands, as you may flush **Black-rumped buttonquail** (rare), **Black-winged lapwing** and **Common quail**. **Blue crane** are regular visitors to the plateau, so scan the grassland carefully. **Broad-tailed warblers** and **Yellow bishops** also favour moist grassland, and check all well-vegetated seepage lines for these birds. Up to 4 pairs of Blue swallow breed on this grassy plateau, and if at first the swallows are not around, be patient as the birds range widely in search of food, and must return to feed their chicks. **Blue swallows** are listed as Critically Endangered in the Red Data book, so please be careful not to disturb these extremely sensitive birds, and do not approach too closely.

After you are satisfied with your **Blue swallow** encounter, return the key to Reception and head back up the Pass and on towards Marutswa Forest. From the Reserve gate at the top of the Pass, continue along the road for approx. 27 km's towards Eastwolds. At Eastwolds take a right onto the R612 towards Donnybrook. About 17 km past Donnybrook the road splits, take the right-hand road (R617) to Bulwer, which is a further 5 km's from the intersection. Once in Bulwer, look for an Engen garage on your left and shortly thereafter you will see the Marutswa Forest Boardwalk signs where you turn right (GPS: 29°55'27.23''S, 29°51'36.10''E). Travel down the gravel road for a few hundred metres before a second sign, where you turn right again, following the road to the parking area of Marutswa Forest Boardwalk (GPS: 29°48'28.88''S, 29°47'02.38''E). The forest has a series of trails running through it, the majority of which are unpaved, with a number of lookout jetties, decks and view points. These paths are often muddy and slippery, so wear suitable footwear.

Marutswa Forest is well-known for its **Cape parrot**, though the flock generally leave the forest in the early morning (before 07h00) to go foraging in the surrounds. Just past the main buildings on the lower trail are a few tall, dead gum trees where the parrots are often seen. Overcast and misty mornings delay their departure from the forest, and if there are breeding individuals, the parrots return to Marutswa forest regularly throughout the day, so a stop at Marutswa may well prove worthwhile! The other special Afromontane forest birds in this forest are **Orange ground-thrush**, **Bush blackcap** (southern Africa endemic), **Knysna turaco** (southern Africa endemic) and **Yellow-throated woodland warbler**. Also seen regularly at Marutswa are **Narina trogon**, **Green twinspace** and **Southern ground hornbill**.

Head back to the R617 and at the intersection turn right towards Pietermaritzburg. Follow the R617 through Deepdale, Boston and Mpopopheni, before joining the N3 to Pietermaritzburg.