



BirdLife South Africa Avitourism Division
Self Drive Itinerary

Birding Route Name: Southern KwaZulu Natal Birding Route

Self Drive Itinerary Name: Sani Pass Day Trip

Habitats: Afro-alpine grassland, Protea grassland, cliffs and scree slopes

Duration: 8 hours - Drive (2 hrs) – Sani Pass (5/6 hrs) – drive to Pmb (2 hrs)

Distance covered: ±370kms

Costs: Fuel – R300
Lesotho border fees – R8 per vehicle

Itinerary updated: January 2010

Itinerary

This return trip takes in the spectacular Sani Pass, which ranges in altitude from 1 600m to 2 800m. The accompanying change in vegetation along this altitudinal gradient provides a wide range of habitats, and the result is a superb species-list, particularly rich in endemics.

Please note: Sani Pass is only accessible by 4x4 vehicles, the border post is open strictly from 08h00 – 16h00, and passports are essential. Pack some warm clothes as the top of the Pass can be cold even in summer. If you do not have a 4x4, the walk from the South African border post to the top of the Pass is 8 km i.e. a 16 km return trip. Alternatively there are a number of bird guides for hire, with their own 4x4 vehicles.

Head out early in the morning, around 05h30, to make the most of the day and to get to the border post shortly after it opens at 08h00. From Pietermaritzburg take the N3 towards Howick, taking the Howick South / Underberg off-ramp. Follow the R617 past Midmar Dam on your right, through the villages of Boston and Bulwer, and in Underberg look for a right turn signed Himeville. Drive through Himeville, and after approx. 2 km's look for a signed left turn to Sani Pass (29°43'12.54"S, 29°31'17.53"E). The road up Sani Pass is currently being upgraded to a tar road, so be prepared for roadworks. Drive past the Sani Pass Hotel for approx. 4 km's before looking for a dense woodland of stunted trees on either side of the road, commonly known as Ouhout (*Leucosidea sericea*). This thicket is excellent for **Bush blackcap**, **Barratt's warbler**, **Sweet waxbill** and **Brown-backed honeybird**. Continue up the Pass, and stop wherever you are able to find a suitable site to park off the road. From these points scan the boulder strewn *Protea*-grassland for **Malachite sunbird**, **Gurney's sugarbird**, **Ground woodpecker**, **Cape rock-thrush** and **Buff-streaked chat**. **Red-winged francolin**

also occupy these lower slopes, but are replaced by their close relative, the **Grey-winged francolin**, once you reach the top of the Pass. At the South African border post ([29°36'11.49"S, 29°20'22.24"E](#)) **Greater double-collared sunbirds** frequent the red-hot pokers, while **Barratt's warbler** and **Drakensberg prinia** are common in the riverside thicket a short distance beyond. In a similar situation to the francolins, where one species replaces another at higher altitudes, the **Drakensberg prinia** occurs in the lower reaches, and is replaced by the **Karoo prinia** further up. Keep an eye overhead, looking for **Horus swift**, **Bearded vulture** and **Verreaux's eagle**. Just before the top of the Pass, on the steep, rocky roadside, look out for 2 more southern Africa endemics, the **Drakensberg rock-jumper** and **Drakensberg siskin**. Another endemic, one that nests in the sheer cliffs at the head of the pass, is the **Cape eagle-owl**. Once at the top and through the formalities of the border post, fairly common around the buildings of the Lesotho border post are **Sentinel rock-thrush** and **Drakensberg siskin**. The top of the Pass marks the limit of distribution of typical Karoo birds such as **Sickle-winged chat**, **Layard's titbabbler**, **Fairy flycatcher**, **Yellow canary**, **Grey tit** and **Large-billed lark**, and these species do not occur below the summit. Sani Pass is thus the closest location to see such Karoo specials from anywhere in KZN. From the border post, drive straight for a short distance before taking a right and heading to Sani Top Chalet. This place is well worth a stop, even if just to have a local beer or hot chocolate before heading on! The pub also serves meals, so if you haven't brought breakfast or lunch, then this is your chance to eat. Take a stroll to the west of the chalets, and scan the boggy plains for **Southern bald ibis**, **Sickle-winged chat**, **Large-billed lark** and **Mountain pipit** (summer). Drive back to the main gravel road and follow it into Lesotho, heading for Mokhotlong. If unsuccessful on the Pass, the **Drakensberg rock-jumper** can be found in any suitable rocky habitat interspersed with low scrub along this road. Drive this road for approximately 5 km's, searching any karroid scrub for the karoo specials mentioned earlier. If you choose to return to Pietermaritzburg, be sure to give yourself sufficient time to get through the South Africa border post by 16h00. However, there are several accommodation options available in the area if you prefer to stay overnight.

Accommodation options

* Sani Pass

Sani Top Chalets

Top of Sani Pass, Lesotho, GPS: 29°35'04.64"S, 29°17'09.85"E

R280 - R500 pppn, DB&B

Tel: +27 (0)33 702 1305 / +27 (0)82 715 1131

E-mail: sanitop@futurenet.co.za

Guided tour options

* Button Birding Tours: +27 (0)39 833 1029

* Sani Pass Tours: +27 (0)33 701 1064 / info@sanipasstours.com

* Major Adventures: +27 (0)33 701 1628

* Thabo Tours: +27 (0)33 701 2888