

BIRDING IN BOTSWANA

Three hundred and sixty-five is a nice round figure – and that's the total number of species our group of seven, led by Japie and Ralie Claassen, totted up during our recent trip up north, starting on Friday 4 and ending on Sunday 20 November 2011.

Japie runs Karoo Birding Safaris from their base in Beaufort West and the guided tours stretch from Namibia in the west, to Botswana in the north to KZN in the east and the prescribed itinerary produced far more than promised –as this tale will tell.

Vivienne, Lorna, Kay and Yours Truly were loaded up by Japie in the northern suburbs of Cape Town, with Cherry joining us in Paarl. The Karoo didn't disappoint and served as preparation ground for us to get our birding eyes focused for the trip ahead and we ticked off Karoo Longbilled Lark, Double-banded Courser, Black-eared Sparrowlark and Karoo Korhaan where we watched them gobbling up locusts.

Up at the crack of dawn and into the Quantum for two laughter, adventure and of course birding. Between and Victoria West good birds were a breeding pair of Hamerkop, Jackal Buzzard and Chat Flycatcher. The area West hosted Karoo Korhaan, a flock of Lesser Kestrels backed Cisticola and at the dam over breakfast (jaffles good) we added Glossy Ibis, Great Crested Grebe and a common duck species to our list.

Ralie, Vivienne & Cherry bird while breakfasting



weeks of fun, Beaufort West Booted Eagle, around Victoria and Grey-never tasted so number of the

Quips from the group gave rise to new species: Pale Chanting Goshawk became a Pole-dancing Goshawk, a Secretarybird was described as wearing running shorts and Cattle Egret became Cattle Heron. (It was going to be a l-o-n-g trip!)

Reports Japie, "Between Victoria West and Britstown we had more Black-eared Sparrowlarks and saw our first South African Cliff Swallows". Heading for Kimberley we added Blue Crane, White-throated Canary, Secretarybird, Large-billed Lark, Greater Kestrel, Ludwig's Bustard, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, European Bee-eater, Kalahari Scrub-robin and Red-breasted Swallow.

Kamfers Dam outside Kimberley is a disaster: Flamingo numbers have declined due to the high water and the best birds are between the N1 and railway line where Purple and Squacco Heron, Glossy Ibis and White-faced Ducks were sighted. Come the rainy season and the railway line also will be flooded and maybe then something will be done to rectify this mess. At the Big Hole in the city itself we picked up Bradfield's, Alpine, White-rumped and Little Swifts. We also picked up Graham who had driven up from Mthata.



Owned by De Beers, Dronfield Nature Reserve was a great overnight stop where we added Brubru, Banded Martin, Fawn-coloured Lark, Orange River Francolin, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Barn Owl, Jacobin Cuckoo and Kori Bustard to our list and Graham and I flushed a Barn Owl from its roosting place which gave Ralie the opportunity of explaining the composition of its pellets to us. We also got to see white rhino and gemsbok.

The De Beers-owned homestead at Dronfield

"The pan in the Dry Harts River south of Vryburg still has a bit of water", writes Japie, where many water birds had congregated including Great White, Yellow-billed and Little Egrets, Purple Heron, White-winged Tern, Spur-winged Goose, White-faced Duck, Ruff, Sandpiper. On the northern side of town Falcon with Lesser Kestrel, Lanner

Having collected the last of our group Thabazimbi - our third night was spent at afternoon birding produced a pair of Whydah, Cape Longclaw, Barn Owl and heard them so for me personally it was first time that was particularly rewarding. (blesbok, giraffe, kudu, springbok, zebra, impala, warthog and steenbok to name tortoise and ground squirrel.



Ralie, Ansie & Graham

– Ansie, who had travelled in from the Mafikeng Nature Reserve and late Coqui Francolin, Long-tailed Paradise Spotted Thick-knee. I've only ever seeing a Red-chested Cuckoo for the We also saw plenty of mammals eland, sable antelope, red hartebeest, but som, as well as mongoose, leopard

Crossing into Botswana mid-morning we were met by a Montagu's Harrier swirling over the open fields. Then towards Gaborone a venue of Lappet-faced, Cape and White-backed vultures were thermalling high in the sky.

Next stop was Woodlands Lodge outside Francistown with more birds along the Tati River including White-crowned Shrike, Willow Warbler, Greater and Lesser Honeyguide, Tropical Boubou, Jameson's Robin, Violet-backed Starling, Comb Duck, Black Cuckoo and Gabar Goshawk. Moving further north Japie was pleased to note that the Boulder Chats are still at the hills on the way to Nata, although Vivienne and I did not get to see this elusive species. Other birds on the way include Tawny Eagle, Temminck's Courser, African Cuckoo and African Hawk Eagle.

The two-day stay at Kasane produced a feast of birds with Collared Palm-thrush welcoming us at Water Lily Lodge fronting onto the Chobe River, which is the lifeblood of the northern part of Botswana. Its source is in the Angolan highlands where it is called Kwando before weaving its way across the Kalahari to become first the Linyanti, then the Iyambezi, the Chobe and finally the great Zambezi.



A morning trip by boat, captained by Captain, on the river gave rise to Slaty Egret, Rock Pratincole, Long-toed Lapwing, Broad-billed Roller, African Skimmer, Collared Pratincole, Whiskered Tern, Black Kite and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. It is difficult to get my mind around the fact that the imminent rains (from November to March) that flow in from Benguela Plateau catchment zone in the central regions of Angola will only be felt and seen in the Delta in six months' time.

Driven and guided by Dukwi, we embarked on a game drive through Chobe National Park the second afternoon. We were very disturbed at the state of the countryside which has been decimated by elephants that are breeding out of control. There are 120 000-plus jumbo in the Park and one doesn't have to be a rocket scientist to see where that's leading. Botswana's a signatory to the CITES Agreement and as such is prohibited from culling elephants, but it would seem that this remains an acceptable and even preferred method of controlling the elephant population. No, I am not even going to go there, as it's too sensitive a subject, but if something isn't done soon, disaster is looming in the Park.



Our stay at Mowana (means baobab tree) Lodge produced 7 sunbird species: Coppery, White-bellied, Shelley's, Collared, Scarlet-chested, Amethyst and Purple-banded; also, Northern Grey-headed Sparrow, Luapula Cisticola, White-backed Night Heron and Yellow White-eye. On the game drive we could add Bradfield's Hornbill, Black-chested Snake Eagle, Common cuckoo, Saddle-billed Stork and Barred Owllet. And it



was on the sixth day – 9 November that I experienced what for me has dream 10 years in the making: "a tree full of Carmine Bee-eaters. These birds have taken to making their ground, the banks of the river and having been washed away last cannot begin to describe the emotion the flush of red, the touch of they scudded about the sky in search their brood.



at 07:20 – been a full of enterprising nests on the their tunnels season. I of seeing turquoise as of food for

No camera can capture the colour of the Carmine Bee-eater

Fun and games as we packed up to move west through the Caprivi: Graham's cellphone is nowhere to be found – or heard. Scratch here, dig there and then the sound of its ring deep in the trailer where he had stored it in his luggage! This escapade became the butt of many a ribald tease, all in good faith.

At Island View Lodge we saw Schalow's Turaco, Swamp Boubou, Ashy Flycatcher, Purple-banded Sunbird, Brown Firefinch, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Grey-headed Bush Shrike, African Quailfinch, Plain-backed Pipit and Rufous-bellied Heron. The thousands of Openbill Storks, Pelicans, tens of Black Herons Yellow-billed Storks, White-tailed Coucal, Brown Firefinch



Weather reports forecast a thunder shower, but we copped '40s. Still, every lodge we full advantage of.

nearby pans teemed with birds including Pygmy Goose, Great White and Pink-backed and Slaty Egrets, hundreds of Marabou and backed Duck, White-browed and Coppery- and Shelley's Sunbird. heat wave in Namibia; there was a relieving only 20% of it as the gauge rose into the early stayed at had a swimming-pool which we took *Japie has his own way of cooling off*

We followed the Kwando River heading west (intrigued by the “Bum Hill Camp” sign) destination Mazambala Island Lodge. Believe me, it wasn't for want of trying that we were not able to pick up Arnott's Chat and Racket-tailed Roller along the way, but we did tick off Rufous-bellied Heron, Meyer's Parrot, Coppery, Purple-banded and Shelley's Sunbird, Spectacled Weaver and Senegal Coucal.



Breakfast buddy

Over dinner we learned of a guest who had been walking back to camp and was purportedly bitten by a black mamba, but owner André ventured that this was unlikely (as the visitor reported absolutely no pain). It is likely that her ankle had been grazed by the reptile as it slithered by. Nevertheless, said guest received due medical attention immediately and I would venture will be attending church quite regularly from now on.

Travelling through Bwabwata National Park we ID'd Purple Roller, Brown Snake-eagle, Cuckoo Hawk, Broad-billed Roller, Wood Pipit, Secretarybird, Bateleur and Dickinson's Kestrel. Close to Divundu we had a beautiful sighting of a pair of White-faced Owls with two juveniles in a tree, a pair of European Hobbies soaring overhead and an African Harrier Hawk.

Heading for Shankara Lodge we found White-crested Helmet Shrike, Rufous-bellied Tit and Brown-backed Honeybird, Striped Kingfisher, Red-chested Cuckoo and Red-footed Falcon. Shankara Lodge hosted Black Cuckoo, Giant Kingfisher, Square-tailed Nightjar and Sth Black Tit. Then a lifer for Japie and Ralie: some Sharp-tailed Starling. The next morning and heading for our next destination we saw Common Swifts, Mosque Swallows and Dark Chanting Goshawk. The group repaired to the deep bush seeking out Souza's Shrike while Vivienne and I remained near the vehicle. “Wouldn't it be funny if that bird turns out to be what they're looking for,” chirped Vivienne, pointing to a tree where, blow me down, George, said shrike was perched, happily minding its own business.

A visit to Mahango Game Reserve produced a pair of Wattled Cranes with a half-grown chick, Osprey, Slaty Egret, Double-banded Sandgrouse and Meve's Starling.



You better believe it!

We're now in the panhandle where the Okavango River enters Botswana near Shakawe and at Drotsky (“hyena's lair”) Lodge (after Martinus Drotsky, the first white man to see the famous caves we spent most of the day on the river, led by Salvation, and saw a good variety of birds including Grey-headed Kingfisher, Chirping Cisticola, White-backed Night Heron and Meyer's Parrot. Says Japie, “It's the first time I've seen 10 Burchell's Sandgrouse” which had alighted on the sand banks to drink. We also had good views of Osprey, Fulvous Duck, a lonely Ruddy Turnstone, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Little Bittern and Greater Swamp Warbler. We failed to spot Lesser Jacana, but did find Pel's Fishing Owl – on two occasions.

Moving onto Maun we sighted along the way Barred Wren-warbler, Yellow-billed Oxpecker (where have they all gone?), Curlew Sandpiper and Wahlberg's Eagle. We stayed at Island Safari Lodge in Maun and there in the river right before our eyes we had the joy of watching a family of Allen's Gallinule while Pygmy Geese flew up- and downstream.

Towards the end of a long and hot day the group gets to be a bit 'bos' and suddenly a cow becomes a horse and it's “a new old lifer”. Abdim's Stork plus Secretarybird plus Tick Bird equated to a newly formed auditing company and on Sunday we could hold a Service with Mosque Swallows and korhaans. And the Senegal Coucal takes on a new identity as the Sandton Kugel.

After good rains these past few years the water continues to flow out of the Delta and the Boteti River makes its way strongly towards Serowe. En route to Palapye (north of Mahalapye – first Ma then Pa) around the southern edge of the Magadikgadi Pans Pied Babblers and Pink-billed Larks were added to the list. Leaving Palapye on the 20th we saw a couple of Lesser Spotted Eagles which turned up after the previous day's rain.

We passed uneventfully through Ramatlabama border post and in Mafeking bid farewell to Boereplaas resort north afternoon was spent the evening at the had our last serious Shaft-tailed Whydah, Violet-eared Waxbill, eye, Red-billed Firefinch River Francolins. Close found our first Abdim's while we were in



High fives for his hole in one!

Ansie. Overnight at of Vryburg (our playing putt-putt and restaurant) where we birding which included Barred Wren-warbler, Orange River White-and more Orange to Hartswater we Storks which arrived Botswana.



Bye-bye at Boereplaas

Back in Kimberley we said had left his vehicle at Dronfield reminding him not to pack his suitcase. Then, making good West in time for a nap and a supper at the Claassen's home regaled us with stories of their *veldskool* that Ralie teaches at. consultants on the development



fond farewells Nature cellphone in time, we swim before where this travels and In between all of wind farms



to Graham who Reserve, teasingly the bottom of his reached Beaufort enjoying a last likeable pair elaborated on the this they also are nearby.

It's been the trip of a lifetime under superb tutelage. I've seen so much, learned a great deal and made good friends along the way. The accommodation was excellent, the driving outstanding (how Japie managed to turn on a ticky, trailer and all, amazed us), Ralie's catering rivalled many a restaurant and if ever you have the penchant to visit Botswana – or other prime birding destinations in Southern Africa - I can highly recommend Karoo Birding Safaris. Call Japie on 023-4142980 / 083 724 7916 or email him at karoobirding@beaufortwest.net and while you're about it, check out www.karoobirding.wetpaint.com