

South Africa

29 July–13 August 2010

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Cape Sugarbird

Leaders: Mariana Delpont and Vaughan Ashby

A personal account by John Sirrett

Day 1 We left Heathrow on a South African Airways flight from Terminal 1 at Heathrow early evening for our direct twelve-hour flight to Cape Town.

Day 2 There being only an hour time difference we arrived at Cape Town Airport early morning where we were met by our delightful local guide, Mariana Delpont, and transferred to two eight-seater Mercedes minibuses. It was comfortable travelling with only six in each van. It was 11°C and overcast. The weather on our trip ranged from overcast, cold, 6°C with added wind chill, to a warm and sunny 27°C. It was mostly warm, and it did not rain: though some early Cape mists possessed a damp drizzle-like quality.

First bird at the airport just had to be an alien bird species – House Sparrow, they were common. Feral Pigeon, European Starling and House Crow were all added once we were underway. A conspicuous recent arrival to South Africa, the raucous Hadada Ibis, which was almost unknown on the peninsula ten years ago, is now a familiar sight and sound in Cape Town’s suburbs, and it was not long before we encountered parties feeding on roadside verges along with smaller numbers of Egyptian Geese. Both species were extremely common throughout our tour in suitable habitat. We also commonly encountered large parties of roadside Helmeted Guineafowl, often in large numbers. (Cape) Kelp Gull and **Hartlaub’s Gulls (E)** were much in evidence as we made our way to our first destination. Hartlaub’s Gull is a non-migratory breeding resident endemic to Southern Africa. Their distribution is linked closely to that of the kelp beds found from Cape Agulhas in the Western Cape to Cape Cross in Namibia. Watercourses glimpsed as we speed through Cape Town’s suburbs held Black-winged Stilts, boldly patterned Blacksmith Plover, Red-knobbed Coots, freshwater Long-tailed (Reed) Cormorants and Sacred Ibis, whilst (Cape Turtle) Ring-necked Doves, Speckled Pigeons and a White-necked Raven were perched on streetlights. We would rarely mention any of these species again; just tick them on the daily log.

Our first stop just past the historic naval village of Simonstown was at one of the two mainland colonies of the endearing and globally threatened **African Penguin (E)**, formerly known as the Jackass Penguin because of its loud, peculiarly braying call. Our first encounter was with a penguin waddling beneath our vehicle, which was parked next to a sign saying, “Warning, please look under your vehicles for penguins”! The African Penguin typically breeds on offshore islands from Namibia to the Eastern Cape Province but here they are found on a secluded sandy beach that nestles among imposing granite boulders bordered by dense coastal thicket. The thicket was punctuated by the red flowers of the Cape Honeysuckle Bush and white daisy flowers of ‘Blombos’, around which Cabbage White and Dotted Border butterflies patrolled. Dassies or Rock Hyrax sat openly on the rocks. Ranks of the penguins,

nesting here since 1985, lay about in the sand dunes just a few feet from boardwalks and chain-link fences from where they were easily photographed. We saw perhaps 250 of 3000 birds supposedly present. Two **African Oystercatchers (E)** were seen on the shore, (we had passed four on our way to the colony). Fewer than 4,800 individuals of this striking endemic still grace rocky and sandy shores from Namibia to the Eastern Cape Province. Although it is one of the world's rarest oystercatcher species, we found it conspicuous on the Cape Peninsula. More than half the world population occurs within 300 km of Cape Town. Large numbers of cormorants roosted on the offshore boulders most of which were **Cape Cormorant (E)**, the adults all blue-black with yellow gular patches and the immatures brown with paler underparts. The maritime Cape Cormorant was seen in large numbers whenever we were anywhere near the coast. Adult and immature **Crowned Cormorants (E)** were found, shorter tailed and with a noticeable crest. Numbers of Great Crested Terns offshore loafed on rocks. The surrounding thickets held Speckled Mousebird making mousebird the second of the ten families of birds found only in Africa that we had now seen. Other birds which would become common over the coming days included **Cape White-eye (E)**, **Karoo Prinia (E)**, "Grey-backed" **Red-headed Cisticola (NE)** and **Southern Double-collared Sunbird (E)**. There are five races of the very common Cape White-eye in the Western Cape. These include *atamorii* inland in South Cape Province and *capensis* in West Cape Province; both have grey breast and belly. Some authorities consider the Cape and Orange River White-Eye (with its peachy buffy flanks, which we would commonly encounter around Augrabies Falls) as separate species. The loud 'chleet-chleet-chleet' and faster 'tit-tit-tit-tit' calls of the Karoo Prinia was one of the most common bird sounds we would hear on our trip whilst the Southern Double-collared Sunbird was the commonest sunbird we would encounter: two races of the sunbird were involved (*albilateralis*) in Western Cape Province and (*chalybeus*) further north. Other common birds seen here included Brimstone Canary, the striking Cape Robin-chat which we would see every day, the drab Cape Wagtail, the black and white and long tailed Common Fiscal (Fiscal Shrike), Laughing Dove, Tinkling "Levaillants" Cisticola and Red-winged Starling, all of which inhabited the thickets through which the footpath to the colony passed.

It was warm and relaxed and we took lunch at the Boulders Bay Lodge Restaurant where a number of us elected for fish and chips with a beer with which to swill them down with. We set off again making a roadside stop overlooking the sea and rocks below. Here we were shown the locally common **Bank Cormorant (E)**. A party of ten were seen amongst Cape Cormorants and twenty of the larger, more widespread White-breasted Cormorants. The Bank Cormorants were identified by their white-rumped breeding plumage, lack of any bare facial skin, pot-bellied appearance, and small, bumpy crests. It is an elegant Benguela endemic, which has suffered a massive population decline (only 4900 breeding pairs remain) and has a propensity for the unusual; it is the only cormorant to build its nest from fresh kelp, which it plasters to seaside boulders with its own droppings. Moreover, it is unique among birds in that its extraordinary turquoise eyes change to red from top to bottom as it matures, so that some individuals have bizarrely two-tone eyes! We had been in South Africa no more than four hours and had already seen all five species of cormorant that occur including the much-prized endemics.

Contented, we moved deeper onto the cape peninsula. At the tip of the peninsula is the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve which has a vast tract of the vegetation referred to as fynbos. Characteristic fynbos plants include large broad-leafed proteas, low small-leafed *Ericas* (heaths) and grass like restios (reeds). We drove across the reserve looking for fynbos birds. The sunshine bush (*Leucadendron discolor*) glowed on hillsides punctuated by wild cape iris. Our van pulled to a halt. **Orange-breasted Sunbirds (E)** were feeding on top of an *Erica*; two beautiful males glowing in the sun and a rather drabber female. **Cape Sugarbirds (E)**, with their distinctive silhouettes, were feeding on top of the proteas so that two top ten endemics had given us crippling views. Orange-breasted Sunbird was often the most abundant species in coastal fynbos, where it was easily located by its characteristically metallic call. Cape Sugarbird, which appeared equally as common perching as it did on the flowerheads of the protea bushes, is one of just two species of sugarbird, which together constitute Southern Africa's only endemic bird family. This was the third of our endemic African bird families ticked off, leaving a further three possible. Common Ostrich, Peregrine and White-necked Raven were also here. Ostriches were common and there was evidence of breeding. We saw antelope, the majestic Eland and beautiful Red Hartebeest and visited the Buffelsfontein visitor centre. Here we added another African sunbird, Malachite Sunbird, the candescent green plumage of the male reflecting strongly as it sang from a tall tree. **Cape Grassbird (E)** was located after some searching with several males singing whilst **Jackal Buzzard (E)** (an endemic we would encounter regularly), Southern Double-collared Sunbird, and Yellow Bishop were also seen. Mariana negotiated our exit from the visitor centre with some difficulty, following an exchange with the wardens who had convinced themselves our telescopes were cameras with which we were illegally filming! We moved on to Cape Point, the most south-westerly point of the African Continent, adding the black and white **Fiscal Flycatcher (E)**, **Cape Francolin (E)**, the beautiful bushshrike **Bokmakierie (E)** (of the southern cape race) dueting with their mates, the first of many **Cape Buntings (NE)** and Rock Martin along the way.

It was the end of the first day with the sun setting over the rocky headland of the Cape of Good Hope as hundreds of Cape Cormorants streamed by. Birding seemed relaxed and the prized birds easy to get. We checked into Afton Grove Country Retreat, in Nordhoek on the Cape Peninsula for the first of three nights, and were soon tucking into butternut soup and fruity beef curry with sweet saffron rice, washed down by inexpensive, quality, South African wines. We were joined at diner by our host, Chris Spengler, fellow birdwatcher and excellent company.

Day 3 We rose at 6.00am for breakfast duly medicated for our pelagic but soon learned that it had been cancelled. I don't think any of us were surprised as although it was pleasant and calm when we went to bed we had all heard the wind get up in the night. Our consolation was a full English cooked breakfast, which, only the brave would have tackled had we been going on a pelagic. As we gathered at the vans we watched Hadada Ibis and Pied Crow and several Cape Canaries in the trees around the garden amongst the many Cape White-eyes and introduced Common Chaffinches. Pied Crow was the common crow, seen in almost all cape habitats.

We drove out the short distance to the Black Hills to set off up the Jonkersdam Trail in search of Cape Siskin. As we parked there was the sign reminding us that there were Chacma Baboons living here too. The sign said, sternly: "Never try to take your food or belongings back from baboons – they may become aggressive!" The kopjes (hillocks) all around were covered with a dense growth of fynbos, the yellows of the sunshine bush standing out against various shades of dull green. Aloes flowered high up in the rocks. Cape Siskin is said to be one of the trickier fynbos endemics to find during a short visit, albeit a common bird in its preferred habitat, and so it proved. It was very windy which was not conducive to good views of any bird let alone a small, mobile seedeater. The birds kept their heads down. It seems churlish to say we saw only Bokmakierie, Cape Grassbird, Cape Robin-chat, Cape Sugarbird, Cape White-eye, "Grey-backed" Cisticola, Karoo Prinia, Malachite Sunbird, Orange-breasted Sunbirds, and White-necked Ravens! We returned to Afton Grove for coffee before setting off for Kirstenbosch. Few gardens can match the sheer grandeur of the setting of Kirstenbosch, set against the eastern slopes of Table Mountain. It is one of the great botanic gardens of the world: entirely devoted to South Africa's 7000 species of indigenous flora. The Gardens cover 36 hectares: the protected mountainside supporting natural forest and fynbos along with a variety of animals and birds. It was an absolute privilege to be there. We did however find the gardens relatively quiet in the strong southeast winds. Yes, there were Cape Francolin, Cape Robin-chats, and Cape White-eyes, Egyptian Geese, Hadada Ibis, Helmeted Guineafowl, Malachite Sunbird, Red-winged Starling and Southern Double-collared Sunbird and we added species to our list: African Dusky Flycatcher, Familiar Chat, Olive Thrush, Red-eyed Dove, Sombre Greenbul and **Southern Boubou (E)**. The birds were all very confiding, and very photographable, and the gardens were beautiful. But I think we were expecting more but were disappointed that we could not find the resident pair of Spotted Eagle-owls, particularly following on from missing Cape Siskin at Jonkersdam. We retired to the Silver Tree Restaurant in the gardens for lunch, dining on a mix of salads and hot dishes.

Bodies restored Mariana decided to take us back into the gardens for another go at the owls. It pays to be persistent in birding, and although we did not find the owls, in short time we did find, **Forest Canary (E)**, male and female **Cape Batis (E)** and a pair of Lemon (Cinnamon) Doves which seemed to make up for our misses. We moved on to the water-treatment ponds, open water, and reedbeds of Strandfontein. Good varieties of waterbirds can be found in such habitat and we were not disappointed. Greater Flamingos were very obvious and in no time at all we had good numbers of the endemic **Cape Shoveler (E)**. Other South African waterbirds included Cape Teal, Maccoa Duck, Red-billed Duck, the patchily distributed Southern Pochard and the fairly common Yellow-billed Duck. We added to the trip list Pied Avocet, Black Crake, Black-necked Grebe, Cattle Egret, Glossy Ibis, Common Greenshank, Great Egret, Little Grebe, Common Moorhen, Plain "Brown-throated" Martin, 'African' Purple Swamphen, Sacred Ibis and Spur-winged Goose. An African Marsh-harrier quartered the reeds, which held African (Little-rush) Bush-warbler and Lesser Swamp-warbler. Black-shouldered Kite was seen perched on a post. Several Grey-headed Gulls were seen amongst the many Hartlaub's Gulls present: completing our gulls list (Kelp, Hartlaub's and now Grey-headed) for the trip. The sun set on us and we retired for the day, wondering if our pelagic would take place the next day. Back at Afton Grove we once more sampled the fine wines and delicious Cape Malay cuisine.

Day 4 The day of our pelagic arrived. We rose before dawn, breakfasted lightly and set off for Simonstown. Here we boarded the 60-foot vessel Zest 11 for an 8–9 hour pelagic. We were taken were told large concentrations of pelagic seabirds can be found. The birding was excellent with rakes of Sooty Shearwaters and White-chinned Petrels crossing our bow. But nothing had quite prepared us for the moment when we would find the trawlers. The spectacular numbers of birds following the trawlers stunned most people into a jaw dropping silence. The grey-headed Indian subspecies of the Yellow-nosed Albatross, which is often regarded as a full species, and Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross were identified amongst the predominant Black-browed Albatross and smaller (Shy) White-capped Albatross present. Both (Southern) Antarctic Giant Petrel and (Northern) Hall's Giant Petrel (*Macronectes halli*) were present. Thousands upon thousands of White-chinned, flashy Cape or Pintado Petrels and Sooty Shearwaters were settled on the water darting into flight at our approach. **Cape Gannets (E)**, Kelp Gulls and (Sub-antarctic) Brown Skuas were lost amongst their number. Single Little Shearwater and Spectacled Petrels were good finds for those that saw them, and a few Wilson's Storm-petrels drifted through. Sandwiches and soft drinks were supplied at midday whilst we watched the spectacle in a self-imposed silence. We saw Cape Fur Seals and a Southern Right Whale. From July till November, whales migrate to the waters off Cape Town to mate and calf their young. The most common whale is the Southern Right Whale. It was considered the "right" whale to hunt because they tend to breed close to shore, are slow swimmers and their layers of blubber make them float. They are dark grey or black and are often covered in barnacles and callosities on their heads and have a rounded body and arched mouth-line. They lack a dorsal fin. Southern Right Whales can be up to 18m long, weighing 30–80 tonnes. Their large heads can make up a third of the body length. They live singly or in groups of three or four individuals. The testicles of Southern Right whales are likely to be the largest of any animal, each weighing around 1,100 lb. Not many people know that! Once landed it was back to the reality of Cape Siskin. There were the familiar Cape Robin-chat, Cape Sugarbird, Fiscal Shrike, Karoo Prinia, Malachite Sunbird, and Orange-breasted Sunbirds. A Spotted Eagle-owl being mobbed on the cliff face by Familiar Chats was an excellent find by Janice, before two Cape Siskin put in a brief

appearance. They were Cape Siskin weren't they? Not everyone saw them or agreed. We returned to Afton Grove Country Retreat, Nordhoek in falling light. Sunday night was chef's night off so we were taken to the Harbour House Restaurant in Simonstown where the stormy seas crashed against the glass, happy in the knowledge that our pelagic was done and could not be taken away from us.

Day 5 We were here again. This time all got good views of **Cape Siskin (E)** the males' white-tipped wings and tail distinguishing them from the superficially similar Cape Canaries present. A Cape Grassbird was an added bonus, you can never see too many of these endemics. It was back to Afton Grove to pack up. In the gardens an immature African Goshawk perched in a dead tree and was mobbed by Pied Crows (some had seen the male display flighting over the garden at first light.) The gardens feeders held Common Waxbill. **Cape Bulbul (E)** dodged around the garden, and a Garden Acena butterfly flitted over the lawn. As we were leaving someone commented "you could spend a fortnight here" – no one disagreed. We headed west towards Swellendam stopping briefly at some roadside pools off the N2. Three-banded Plover, Cape Shoveler and Common Sandpiper were added to the list. We moved on stopping for fuel. A forecourt reedbed held nest building **Cape Weaver (E)** and Southern Masked-weaver. Both weavers would be common from now on, as was the smart, but 'difficult to photograph', **Cape Sparrow (NE)**. We saw two races of Cape Sparrow the Western Cape race (*P.m. melanurus*) and the Northern Cape race (*P.m. damarensis*). Brown streaky (Southern) Red Bishops mingled with the sparrows. We stopped at a roadside coastal fynbos site for the elusive Victorin's Scrub-warbler. Cape Sugarbirds, Orange-breasted Sunbird, Cape Siskin, and, yes, Cape Siskin, were watched as we tried to persuade the warbler to respond to a tape. In the end it did respond. Calling back several times but not showing. We circled the spot from where it called but it was maddeningly skulking. A dark bird with long rounded tail eventually dashed Dunnock-like from the bush. Those closest were confident it was a **Victorin's Scrub-warbler (E)** an extreme skulker and a very difficult bird to get a view of. It would not respond to the tape or flush again.

We visited a coastal site near the holiday village of Rooi Els where the Hottentots Holland plunge precipitously into the sea, creating a spectacular stretch of coastline covered in mountain fynbos. Our target bird Cape Rockjumper, and Cape Rock Thrush, Ground Woodpecker and Verreaux's Eagle are all regular at this site. We spent a long time here whilst our CB radios were fixed and lunch fetched from the local chip shop but to Mariana's surprise we saw no Rockjumpers. There was Orange-breasted Sunbird, Piping Cisticola (Neddicky), "Grey-backed" Cisticola and a Verreaux's Eagle but little else. Remarks about the ringers were muttered. It had been hoped to avoid visiting Sir Lowry's Pass for Rockjumper for safety reasons: crossing a busy road and leaving the vans full of luggage in an unsecure car park. With the miss at the coastal site, we were soon at the pass and soon the fittest were storming down the ancient wagon track and climbing into Gantouw pass in falling light, with the not so fit slogging behind. Three Rufous or **Cape Rock-jumpers (E)**, two males and a female were called into a tape, and these magnificent birds performed beautifully once the directions were sorted out! There was even time to appreciate the beautiful variety of wild tulips in flower and look at the Klipspringers. It was dark when we pulled into the security of the Swellendam Lodge and Swellendam Country Retreat. Swellendam is the third oldest settlement in South Africa, situated at the foot of the Langeberg range, with the Agulhas plain stretching southwards towards the southern tip of the continent. A change to our itinerary meant the luxury of a two night stay here.

Day 6 We assembled in the gardens of Swellendam Country Retreat at first light, and after a continental breakfast began appreciating the quality of the surrounding birdlife. It was here we would see the only African Olive or Rameron Pigeon and the only tiny Cardinal Woodpecker on our tour. Olive Thrush, Speckled Mousebird, Common Starlings, Sombre Greenbul, Red-eyed Dove, Cape Canary, Southern Masked-weaver, Fiscal Shrike, Cape White-eye, African Goshawk, Laughing Dove, and Southern Double-collared Sunbird were also seen. A fortunate few including our guide had a brief view of Rufous-chested or Black Sparrowhawk. The rest of the morning was spent crossing the extensive wheatfields of the Overberg region south of Swellendam. Our targets were the elegant Blue Crane, Denham's Bustard, Agulhas (Long-billed) and Large-billed Lark, Cape Longclaw, Cape Sparrow, and Pied Starling. The striking Stanley (Denham's) Bustard was found fairly quickly, and in the opposite fields the southern cape race of **Karoo Bustard (E)**. The sought-after larks were more elusive. Each time we stopped and looked at a lark it was the distinctive Red-capped Lark a widespread species, small, white below and with a distinct red cap. We pressed on searching the roadside edges and wire fences along the cereal crops. The endemic **Large-billed Lark (E)** was the next to be located. A big lark with a thick-based, heavy bill, with diagnostic yellow at the base of the bill: its underparts heavily streaked in contrast to Red-caps, uttering a creaky gate song. We saw ten in all. As we pulled over to look at some roadside pools a Water Thick-knee took to the air, leaving Crowned Lapwing, Kittlitz's Plover, Red-billed Teal and Three-banded Plover. We saw our first **African Pied Starlings (E)** and Tinkling Cisticola. We were driving, stopping, looking. We found several hundred **Blue Crane (E)**, South Africa's National Bird. The elegant cranes with pale heads, black trailing tertials were feeding in sheep fields. Very photographable but a challenge to photograph without a sheep in the photo! Onwards we drove, another target, **Agulhas (Long-billed) Lark (E)**, sporting a long decurved bill and reddish brown upperparts, streaked breast, whitish belly: we saw seven. This left only the longclaw on the target list – for these we would have to wait another day. Our efforts had also added, African (Grassveld) Pipit, Common (African) Stonechat, Alpine Swift, Cape (Black Crow), Capped Wheatear, the distinctive Eurasian (Rock) Kestrel, **Karoo Scrub-robin (E)**, Namaqua Dove, Pin-tailed Whydah and a flock of 100 Red-billed Queleas to the list.

De Hoop lies three hours from Cape Town in the Overberg region, near Cape Agulhas, the southern tip of Africa: it is approximately 340 square kilometers in area. Our target species were Knysna Woodpecker and Southern Tchagra, two top species for the region.

We collected the **Southern Tchagra (E)** and Cape Griffon (Vulture), Fork-tailed Drongo, **Greater Double-collared Sunbird (E)** and Red-faced Mousebird. The woodpecker would elude us. Woodpeckers are not that common in South Africa and we would struggle to see their variety on this particular trip, but would have other compensations. We spent a long time at the De Hoop Nature Reserve Centre. Here a large open water the De Hoop Vlei added Darter, Black-crowned Night-heron, Great Crested Grebe and Great White Pelican to the list, and we were able to have another look at Cape Shoveler (E) and Southern Pochard. We worked the bushes along the water finding Bar-throated Apalis, Southern Boubou, and Streaky-headed Seedeater. Mammals included Bontibok, Eland and Grey Reebok and Steenbok. On our return journey back to Swellendam for the second night two Spotted Eagle-owls perched on the telegraph posts to be caught in our headlights.

Day 7 We awaked to damp mists predawn and the song of Olive Thrush, Cape Robin-chat, and Hadada Ibis in the garden of Swellendam Country Retreat. A continental breakfast later we were on our way into the foothills of the Langeberg ('long mountains') to Grootvanderbosch. Changes to our itinerary meant we would now only make one of the two planned visits to the Grootvanderbosch afro-montane forest. We pulled up at a roadside pool on the R322 and saw a pair of White-faced Whistling-duck, the only ones on our tour. Black Crake and Tinkling Cisticola were also here. It was late in the morning when we arrived at the Grootvadersbosch Nature Reserve in the Langeberg Mountains. The reserve comprises 250ha of indigenous forest the largest remaining example in the Langeberg, and our only visit to this type of habitat. Most of the thirty-five typical forest tree species including stinkwood, yellowwood, red alder and the dominant ironwood are present. The wood was eerily quiet, like the woods back home can be in winter. We were looking for Knysna Scrub-warbler, a localized endemic, which occurs in the riverine undergrowth of the forests and thickets along the south coast from Cape Town to the Eastern Cape. It is said to be an extreme skulker, with a wood warbler like penetrating, descending song. People I know have searched for Knysna Scrub-warbler trip after trip and despite hearing the song have still not seen the bird. We tried hard for the bird but we did not even hear it! The woods were quiet but we did locate a female Olive Woodpecker, which was excellent for as I said before, woodpeckers, were going to be at a premium on this trip and everyone got good views of the bird. We also encountered a small flock of birds, as one might encounter a tit flock back home, a flock of Cape Batis (E), Forest Canaries (E) and Olive Thrushes. Returning to the vans some glimpsed a Greater Honeyguide, heaping disappointment on those not quick enough to see it.

We continued north through the Tradouw Pass, a mountain pass in the Langeberg with spectacular scenic views. We needed a 'lift' after Grootvadersbosch and we got it at our next roadside stop. A **Cape Rock-thrush (E)** was seen as we drove along. We stopped to find a pair of these beautiful rock-thrushes and added a pair of Amethyst Sunbirds, Greater Double-collared Sunbirds, Klaas' Cuckoo and three new birds, including an endemic, in as many minutes, excellent. Moving on, a false call of Secretary-bird prompted a stop, which added our only Martial Eagle of the trip, the first of a number of African Fish-eagles and of many Pale Chanting-goshawks.

Our next stop was a quiet reserve near Robertson, located in the heart of the Little Karoo near the Bree River. The flora mainly consists of succulents, dwarf trees and various shrubs. Marianna checked us in and we began general birding. Karoo Scrub-robin ran along the hiking trail in front of us. As soon as we realised we were there to look for **Karoo Long-billed Lark (E)** the emphasis changed. Jaaps excellent hearing and knowledge of South African bird song soon located a bird. Prompting an invasion of the surrounding scrub until we located the lark, which gave exceptional views on top of the scrub from which it sang and engaged in song flight displays. Three (Acacia) **Pied Barbets (NE)** were another good find at this locality and the fourth of our endemic African bird families, ticked off, leaving only two more possible. A path along a reedbed out to an open water dam gave good views of **Rufous-eared Warbler (E)** and **Fairy Flycatcher (E)**. It also taught Jim the perils of wearing sandals in the bush as a three inch acacia thorn lasered its way through the thick sole into his foot.

There was quite a bit of motoring this day as we speed along the minor roads to Ceres and a staggering number of species were recorded, many now regarded as common. We saw African Fish-eagle, Common (African) Stonechat, Black-necked Heron, Black-shouldered Kite, Cape Bulbul, Cape Crow, Cape Francolin, Cape and House Sparrows, Cape Robin-chats, Cattle Egrets, Crowned Lapwings, Denham's Bustards, Fiscal Shrikes, Forked-tailed Drongo, "Grey-necked" Cisticola, Hadada Ibis, Jackal Buzzard, Malachite Sunbird, African Pied Starling, Red-knobbed Coot, Common (Rock) Kestrel, Southern Masked-weavers, Common Starlings, Sacred Ibis, Speckled Mousebirds, Common (Steppe) Buzzard, Yellow-billed Duck and Yellow Bishop, **White-backed Mousebird (E)**, the third species of mousebird added to our list, and White-necked Raven as we passed through the many small Karoo farming towns. The two best species as we moved through the Karoo being two Ludwig's Bustards and four **Karoo Bustards (E)**. We spent the Night at the Village Guest House, Ceres: really good a la carte menu and accommodation. Ceres is named after the Roman goddess Ceres, a name which is fitting as the valley in which the town is situated is extremely fertile and is a major producer of South Africa's deciduous fruit. It is situated in the *Warmbokkeveld* (Afrikaans: "warm antelope field") Valley about 170 km north-east of Cape Town in West Cape Province. It is well-known for fruit juices exported worldwide bearing the town's name. Christiaan Barnard, the first surgeon to perform a successful human-to-human heart transplant operation spent the early years of his medical practice in Ceres.

Day 8 We left Ceres at first light after breakfast we had 200 kilometres to cover on deteriorating roads before our overnight stop at Calvinia. Ceres is the gateway to the Tanqua-Karoo, an area of remote stony deserts and we wanted to see as much of the region as

we could whilst on route which meant birding as best we could from the van. Just outside town **Grey-winged Francolins (E)** were found feeding along the road verges. The lead van had passed them and did an about turn to glimpse them as they ran for cover. A short stop was made at an area of phragmites for **Namaqua Prinia (E)**, two birds readily responding to a tape. We also had our first nomadic **Black-headed Canary (E)** and **Dusky Sunbird (NE)**. We pulled into a picnic spot where birds were tame. So tame in fact that a female **Mountain Wheatear (NE)** coming amazingly close for bits of our food. In the surrounding bush we found more Black-headed Canaries, **Layard's Warbler (E)**, **White-throated Canary (NE)** and **Rufous-vented Warbler (NE)**, aka Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler. A Verreaux's Eagle soared above us and two **South African Shelducks (E)** flew through. We tried unsuccessfully for "Cinnamon-breasted" Kopjie Warbler. We then passed through the remote and barren landscapes of the Tanqua-Karoo into the Northern Cape Province.

The tarmac budget ran out and we were on to gravel roads in remote stony-desert. A short diversion to the base of an 'egghead' mountain in the Kloot Groot area was where we found our first **Karoo Chats (NE)**. Soon we also had our target **Yellow-Rumped Eremomela (NE)** aka Karoo Eremomela, a long-tailed, olive brown eremomela silvery white below with contrasting yellow undertail coverts. White-backed Mousebird and singing Bokmakierie occupied the thorny bushes. We next stopped at a large lake to view Pied Avocet, Three banded Plover, South African Shelduck, Greater Flamingo, two Karoo Bustards, Large-billed Lark, Pied Crow, White-throated Canary and **Yellow Canary (NE)**. Next stop was at the small picnic site at Peersboomskloof for lunch and to explore the rock strewn valley sides of the Koue Bokkeveld mountains for Kopjie Warbler. We drew another blank on Kopjie Warbler but added an elusive **Pirit Batis (NE)** and Pied Barbet as they moved through the adjacent Acacia sweet-thorn thicket. A Booted Eagle briefly hovered over the ravine before moving over the tops. A boggy seep with an adjacent reedbed was attractive to birds and over lunch we collected, Bokmakierie, Cape Bulbul, Cape Bunting, Cape Francolin, Cape Weaver, Cape Robin-chat, Fairy Flycatcher, Familiar Chat, Fiscal Shrike, resident Tinkling Cisticola, the noisy Karoo Prinia, and Rock Martins.

We had some mileage to cover and on we went. Birds of prey seen on telegraph poles included Black-shouldered Kite, Black-breasted Snake-eagle, many Pale Chanting-goshawks, Eurasian (Steppe) Buzzard, Jackal Buzzards, Common (Rock) Kestrel and Greater Kestrel. Whilst bustard stops produced three Ludwig's Bustards, Red-capped Larks and two more Karoo Bustards. Speeding along the unsurfaced gravel roads, Marianna shredded her driver's side rear tyre but there were plenty of volunteers available to help her change the wheel. Two Namaqua Sandgrouse fizzed through as the light fell. We passed through the Bloukrans Pass down into Calvinia for a night at Hantam Huis Guest House, Calvinia. Hantam Huis is an historical monument, originally a farmhouse, now converted to a quirky guesthouse. Calvinia on the Oorlogskloof River was founded in 1847, first under the name "Hantam", a Khoi-Khoi word meaning "Mountain where the red edible flowers bloom". After the building of the first Dutch-Reformed church the minister insisted in changing the name to Calvinia in honour of the Swiss reformer Johannes Calvin. Calvinia lies at the foot of the Hantam mountain range at a height of about 1000 metres above sea level. The vegetation mainly equals Karoo Flora, but some fynbos plants can also be found in here. Calvinia is the trading and service centre for the merino and dorper sheep breeders in the vicinity.

Day 9 An itinerary already under pressure would be put under more pressure today. We had to start by getting a new spare tyre. We also had to get a window repaired. The front window in Mariana's van had jammed invitingly open for opportunists. We spent the morning writing postcards, drinking coffee and photographing the town's birds whilst Mariana went from garage to garage. The best birds were over 200 White-backed Mousebirds and an African Hoopoe. Bob and I wandered to the edge of town to view a reedbed. There was a bird perched in the distance or was it a piece of wood? We called Jaap over as he had a 'scope. We all stared at the object with binoculars when over the top drifted a **Black Harrier (E)**. Wow! It flew slowly towards us along the edge of the reedbed settling out of sight no more than 15 metres away. My number one bird yelled Jaap. Stunning bird, stunning views. I ran to the nearby hall where the rest of the group were taking coffee. Moments later the hall was empty, and most got to see the bird as it made off, harried by Pied Crows.

Repairs complete we drove north along the R27 towards Brandvlei through the huge, near-empty landscapes of Bushmanland, in search of endemic nomadic desert birds, which move around unpredictably in response to rains and seeding grasses. It had not rained for a year and it would be hard work. Much of Bushmanland is portioned off as private sheep farms, but good birding can be had at the roadside, particularly when you have two vans stuffed with keen pairs of eyes. 50 km north of Calvinia we stopped at a pan which held water and a surprising number of water birds: an African Spoonbill, Plain "Brown-throated" Martins, Little Grebes, Maccoa Duck, South African Shelduck and Yellow-billed Duck. There was a nearby picnic site under trees where we took lunch. Careful searching of the trees and surrounding bush produced Long-billed Crombec and Namaqua Warblers. There were also several **Karoo Thrush (E)** which has traditionally been considered a subspecies of the Olive Thrush (with which it is known to hybridize), but is increasingly treated as a separate species. Our primary target in this area was the range limited "Red" Ferruginous Lark, a true Bushmanland endemic. We were also on the lookout for Black-eared Sparrow-lark, the difficult to find Burchell's and Double-banded Coursers, and Sclater's Lark. We had lost most of the day already so had to motor fairly fast pulling over when birds were seen. Our roadside stops produced small numbers of the common Karoo Long-billed Lark, **Pale-winged Starling (NE)**, the Cape race of Spike-heeled Lark, and a single **Stark's Lark (E)**. We were also looking for chats. It was hard work sorting out two **Tractrac Chat (NE)** from the common Karoo Chats (NE) by trying to determine the amount of white in the rump but we got there in the end and appreciated that the Karoo Chats were also much greyer birds, nowhere near as dark as portrayed in the field guide. Other chats

encountered during our 'chat halts' included the now familiar Familiar Chat and two similar **Sicklewing Chat (E)**, off-white below and rusty not white rump. We paused briefly over road bridges where South African Cliff Swallows breed, but we were too early, and they had not returned from their winter vacation. We arrived at the desolate little town of Brandvlei ('Burning Lake'). It was like a town out of one of Clint Eastwood's westerns: a very odd place to choose to live. We spent the night at Kolarita's Guest House safe and secure behind an electrified fence. The owners were very friendly and the food, considering how far off the beaten track we were, surprisingly good.

Day 10 After breakfast our landlord took us to see a roosting Spotted Eagle-owl in his neighbour's garden and we had very close views of this impressive owl as the camera shutters clicked. Little Swift were feeding over the town. We moved on to the outskirts of Brandvlei to where our landlord said birders had seen the "Red" Ferruginous Lark last season. We were not helped in our searches by the sun always being against us or by lorries rushing past showering us in dust. We did not find any "Red" Ferruginous Larks only small numbers of the short-tailed Spike-heeled Lark, and large rufous and grey, Karoo Long-billed Lark. We chased a few larks, which skulked under bushes before flying a long way away, coining the phrase "next stop Namibia". We flushed a Cape Hare zigzagging away as it shot across the desert. Chat Flycatcher and African Pied Wagtail were new for our list. We had 200 kilometres to cover. A roadside stop on the R27 for chats gave us much better views of a number of the rather plain stocky Chat Flycatcher whilst two of the large Kori Bustards and **Namaqua Sandgrouse (NE)** flushed from the roadside. As we sped from Brandvlei to Augrabie the landscape changed markedly. The gravel roads from Ceres to Brandvlei gave way to tarmac again. The low bushes of Bushmanland gave way to semi desert, then gradually more and more golden *Stipagrostis* sp., grasses became evident amongst the granite koppies until we had complete grasslands of stipagrostis interspersed with low acacia trees and bushes. We came upon the first **Social Weaver (E)** nest built out of these grasses. There were 20 birds in attendance by their haystack like nest, which was strung from a telephone pole. We passed several hundred of these nests some in trees but mostly hanging from telephone poles. The nests are apparently constructed in such a way that the inside temperature never exceeds 30°C in summer or 15°C in the winter.

We stopped at the Quiver Trees Forest (Kokerboomwoud) south of Kenhardt for our picnic lunch. The extraordinary Quiver Trees have an estimated life span of 450 years. The San (Bushman) used the bark of the tree to make quivers for their poisoned arrows. Close by were two black **Southern Anteater-chat (E)**, which flashed white wing patches as they flew. We pulled back on the road and Vaughan's van had a puncture, more time lost. But despite setbacks we were now beginning to connect with our target birds, and we were also getting quite quick at changing wheels! We stopped in Kenhardt to see if we could get the puncture repaired, but the tyre was too full of large holes for them to repair, and the valve leaked. I wonder if Sir Malcolm Campbell had the same problems when he attempted to break the world land speed record here in Bluebird in 1929? We drove on but not before we had chased two "Red-eyed" **Black-fronted Bulbuls (NE)** around the streets. The "Red-eyed" Bulbul would be to be very common around Augrabies. We also saw our first Cape Glossy-starling aka Red-shouldered Glossy-starling and more Southern Ant-eating Chats (E). Deserts gave way to vineyards as we entered the Orange River Valley: Ten percent of South African vineyards are found along this area of the Orange River. We arrived at Augrabies Falls National Park where we were to stay for two nights. The sign read 'Welcome to Augrabies Falls National Park – Place of Great Noise'. We parked at the centre and a Hamerkop flew over. The only one we would see and an important bird. It was fifth of our endemic African bird families ticked off, leaving only one more, Secretary-bird, possible. Brubru sang loudly from the acacia trees; beautiful birds. Resident African Palm-swift and Alpine Swift (*Apus melba marjoriae*) speed over, briefly joined by a White-rumped Swift and an African Swift. We dined in the restaurant on a traditional menu of Yellowtail, Butterfish, Calamari, Ostrich, Springbok, Bontibok, Kudu or Bobotie (the national dish of South Africa) washed down by fine wines.

Day 11 We had a leisurely morning; those that wished could opt out but most chose to wander around with Vaughan looking for new species as the camera shutters clicked. We walked around the cabins and out on the boardwalks to where the Orange River plummets down the 56-metre Augrabie Falls. Rock Hyrax (Dassies) perched on every available boulder and Alpine Swifts and African Palm-swifts screeched down the ravine. **Ashy Tit (NE)**, African Reed-warbler, **Black-chested Prinia (NE)**, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Purple Heron and Southern Grey-headed Sparrow were all added to the list. The attractively peachy-flanked Orange River race of Cape (Orange River) White-eye was common in the acacia bush and riverine vegetation. We saw more of the distinctive darker Karoo form of Olive Thrush, and more Pied Barbets. We saw the multicoloured Cape Flat Lizards that sunned themselves conspicuously on the burnished granite, and the ridiculously long-tailed Ground Squirrel. After lunch, we boarded the vans for the grand Augrabies tour, driving around the arid savannah park in search of further species. Picturesque names such as Moon Rock, Ararat and Echo Corner are descriptive of this rocky region. Klipspringer and quiver trees stand in stark silhouette against the African sky. Brief views of the small unmistakable scaly-feathered **Scaly Weaver (NE)** brought the vans to a halt. It kept going – "next stop Namibia". A pair of Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters appeared briefly before putting in their own disappearing act. Chacma Baboons lazed about on the rocks, viewed our cameras with suspicion before slowly moving off. Our first viewpoint over the Orange River gave equally frustrating views of Black Stork and Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters. A small Klipspringer antelope moved slowly away. A second viewpoint gave prolonged views of a pair of Verreaux's Eagles soaring across the ravine. Near the vans a **Kopje Warbler (E)** appeared and a pair responded really well to Vaughan's tape. It was a warm old afternoon, so we were grateful that our third stop for lunch was covered. This was the best spot. On the boulder strewn river there were many Pale-winged Starlings, African Pied and Cape Wagtails. Vaughan found two more Kopje Warblers. Jim found Goliath Heron fishing in the shallows and Stuart a nearby Giant

Kingfisher. Bob spotted an African Fish-eagle and either the same or another pair of Verreaux's Eagles came down the ravine, where they were mobbed by a Lanner Falcon. The Lanner perched showing its chestnut cap. Then perhaps the highlight as Jaap picked up an African Black Duck, a species that favours fast-flowing rivers. It showed well diving in the river and sitting on the rocks below before flying off down river. Two Cape Clawless Otters were seen to swim down river. On our return we searched for larks. We saw more Karoo Long-billed Larks and nearby birds thought to be finches were clearly small larks. We chased them outside the vans but they always moved off ahead into cover before eventually disappearing. Most concluded they were **Pink-billed Larks (E)** but some thought they may be Stark's although Cape Clapper Lark was also suggested by one. A Cape Hare was flushed in our pursuit of the birds, which lifted off "next stop Namibia". Night Augrabies Rest Camp, Augrabies National Park where we found ourselves dining outside in the freshening wind.

Day 12 We travelled west along the N14 to the copper mining town of Springbok after some early morning birding. There was a distinct change in the weather. What had been pleasant to hot turned decidedly cool as a cold front came through, and strong winds added a chill factor that caught us all inadequately dressed. As we drove along the entrance road to Augrabies a mixed flock of passerines brought the vans to a halt. Here were 30 or so Black-throated Canaries amongst 150 Cape Sparrows and ten Common Waxbills. The black throats on the canaries were just becoming visible on these siskin-like birds, which flashed bright yellow-green rumps when they flew. Seventeen Cape Glossy-starlings watched the proceedings from the bushes.

We stopped occasionally to look at larks along the N14: they were all Spike-heeled Larks. The stops also produced Southern Ant-eating Chat and Yellow Canary. We took the turning off the N14 at Pofader to Onseepkans, and the vans went into curb crawling mode as we hunted for larks. Hours later Marianna would radio through to say do you know we have only covered 7 kilometers and we better get a move on! Spike-heeled Lark and Karoo Long-billed Lark were common though this was the last day we would see either. Amongst them we found a single Fawn-coloured Lark with its diagnostic white belly and fine speckled necklace. We also found **Sabota Lark (NE)**. A grey headed lark, greyish below its streaked necklace, with a bold, white supercillium, and a really stout bill with pale lower mandible. We saw four in all. Two big Kori Bustards flushed from near the roadside; we had now seen four of these uncommon birds. We stopped at a water tank where Namibian Sandgrouse were coming in and we counted 31, giving good views on the ground. Two female Pygmy Falcons brought Mariana's bus to a halt and Vaughan's bus back to the scene. We spent a bit of time enjoying these really lovely birds, and later saw a third also female. There seemed to be a shortage of males! We found a second water tank with many small birds coming to drink. There were **Damara Canaries (E)**, **Lark-like Bunting (NE)** Namaqua Doves, **Red-headed Finches (NE)**, and a single Red-billed Quelea. Further on after extensive roadworks, we reached the Namibian border and parked up to look for **Rosy-faced Lovebird (NE)**. After some unproductive searching, a local lady pulled over to ask what we were doing. After a short conversation with Marianna we were back in the vans down tracks and parked at a metal gate where her husband appeared to unlock a gate and take us onto their private island where the lovebirds were feeding. A short hop over rocks bridging a stream and he located the screeching parrot-like calls of lovebirds. We saw a lot of their blue rumps over the next half hour as one by one we got acceptable views of this pretty green lovebird that looked from its bright pink face as though it had embarrassed itself. We were very grateful to these extremely friendly locals, as without them, we would have had no chance of seeing the birds. There were a lot of other bird species by the river, mostly common. We got good views of Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters here and saw Lanner and pair of Pied Kingfisher. We also saw a flowering tree, which held as many as 20 Dusky Sunbirds.

We tried to eat our lunch on the hoof to save time as we had a long way to go to Springbok and needed to try another site at Aggenys for Ferruginous "Red" Lark. We were nearing the site when we came across three **White-quilled Bustards (E)** (aka Northern Black Korhaan) in display-flight. Impressive as we only need one more bustard to complete our list of possibles. The sun was setting when we reached the **Ferruginous "Red" Lark (E)** at the red dunes near Aggenys. Fortunately, we found one quickly singing from the top of a roadside bush. It crossed the road giving two more flight views before it and we decided it was time for bed. If only it could have been as obliging as the pairs of Southern Ant-eating Chats that were displaying from the bush tops! It was quite late when we arrived at the Okiep Country House Hotel for our overnight stay, a nice hotel, with very spacious rooms, good food and local wines.

Day 13 Our original itinerary had a pre-dawn start scheduled today to reach the town of Port Nolloth where we planned to search for three near-endemics: Barlow's Lark, Cape Long-billed Lark and Damara Tern. We discussed the previous evening the merits of sticking to this agenda but for many it was a bridge too far. We had a long way to go to Lamberts Bay and the Barlow's Lark would add another 280km to our journey with weather conditions very difficult (it was cold and windy) so no guarantee that we would see the birds. Not all were in agreement but the prospect of Protea Canary softened the blow of not going for the lark. We set off towards Lamberts Bay stopping first at Goegap Nature Reserve. The reserve is a wildflower garden situated in the rugged interior of Namaqualand, 15 km east of Springbok. It offers several Karoo specials among a classic Namaqualand landscape we had seen most of these but Ground Woodpecker had eluded us so far and was a target. At this time of the year the flowers should have been spectacular but there had been no rain for over a year and the daisies, pelargonium's, mesembryanthemums (midday flowers), euphorbia's and crassulas were in consequence a pale imitations of themselves. We added **Grey Tit (E)** to the list and but could not find the woodpecker. We were anxious not to arrive at the site in Paleisheuvel for Protea Canary, south of Clanwilliam, too late as the setting sun plunges the ravine where canaries into feed into shadow quite early. We got into the ravine mid afternoon and amongst the seventeen species seen found two (pairs) of **Protea Canary (E)**. Always on the move but eventually most got good views through

'scopes. And hey, were those Cape Siskins again? The approach to Lamberts Bay was reached before sunset, intentionally so we could search for "Black Korhaan": four Spur-winged Geese briefly fooling us into thinking we had succeeded. We added another Spotted Eagle-owl, our only owl species of the trip. There were many Kelp Gulls roosting on the fish-processing factory opposite the Lamberts Bay Hotel, where we stayed the night, about 280km north of Cape Town.

Day 14 After breakfast we returned to the area where we had looked for "Black Korhaan" the previous evening. A large bustard we saw was thought by some to be Kori, by others to be "Denham's" but disappeared in strong winds and at some distance. There were more than 200 Greater Flamingos on tidal pools and we watched Kelp Gulls dropping shellfish on the stony beach. Larks caused brief excitement until identified as the common Red-caps. Whilst the vans were refuelled the group had time to explore the Cape Gannet colony on Bird Island. It was rather special being so close to so many gannets. Many hundreds breed on Bird Island, which is connected to the mainland by a wide breakwater from the harbour. Cape Fur Seals were hauled out on the adjacent rocks, which were crowned with hundreds of Cape Cormorants. A purpose built gannet lookout enabled you get amazingly close views of the colony. Off the breakwater a White-fronted Plover was a good find whilst Hartlaub's Gulls and Great Crested Terns loafed on rocks opposite and Alpine and Little Swifts hawked over the town. We set off for Langebaan along the coastal R27 road stopping in dune areas to look for larks. At our first determined stop we had Yellow Canary and Streaky-headed Seedeater and eventually found our target **Cape Lark (E)**. This is a large, dark, big-billed hoopoe-like lark, which sings from short tussocks of *Erica*. As we headed down a toll road, brief views of adult Red Bishops and African "Grassveld" Pipits were had. At our lunch stop by the side of reed-fringed lake, we found Great White Pelican, African Spoonbill, Purple Swamphen, Booted Eagle, Purple Heron, Pied Kingfisher, Grey Tit, and African Sedge Warbler. Continuing the drive, Wattled Starlings, Black Harrier and "Denham's" Bustards were all seen.

We eventually arrived at the small saline pans of the Cerebos saltworks in Velddrif looking for Chestnut-banded Plover. There were many Lesser Flamingos amongst their greater cousins, mostly grey, dingy immatures. We did not see the Chestnut-banded Plover but four White-fronted and a single Kittlitz's Plover were found whilst a White-winged Tern was added to the list. A pleasant stroll out on a boardwalk on the wildflower reserve produced good views of **Orange-throated Longclaw (E)** and several of the near impossible to see **Cloud Cisticola (E)** shot into the air in aerial song flight. Nearby four Blue Cranes were with sheep and an African Marsh-harrier quartered the field. We made a roadside stop at a site for Cape Clapper Lark. "Black Korhaan" was called but it was those pesky Spur-winged Geese again. But Jaap could hear a bustard calling and it was eventually picked up closer than the geese. A fine male **Black Bustard (E)** "Southern Black Korhaan" amongst some bushes in the field. It gave stunning views in brilliant light and eventually took off and display-flighted over our heads. Excellent, all bustards present and correct so no need to scan the fields for them anymore. Our only White-throated Swallow flew past which was initially thought to be a Pearl-breasted until its black throat band was seen. The tape played to **Cape Clapper Lark (E)** encouraged a distant bird to sing back and views of two birds chasing each other fitting their description were had by some whilst an African Hoopoe watched the proceedings. Moving on, we spent the night at the delightful Glenfinnan Guesthouse in Langebaan and ate out at excellent Harbour House Restaurant in Kalk Bay.

Day 15 Some early morning birding from the guesthouse yielded Cloud Cisticola and Red-capped Larks in a rough field adjacent to the house whilst tucked away asleep under a bush a Spotted Thick-knee was another good addition to the list. We left the guesthouse and drove to the West Coast National Park where we parked up and walked down to the Seeberg Bird Hide flushing a Black-shouldered Kite from the fynbos on the way. The tide was out so we 'scoped from the front of the hide. African Marsh-harrier, Kittlitz's Plover, Common Greenshank, Eurasian Whimbrel, Caspian Tern and Ruff were seen whilst a pair of Black Harriers (E) engaged in a food pass in a scene that could have been taken from the cover of *Sasol Birds of Southern Africa*. Two Thick-billed Larks caught our attention in the dunes. At a viewpoint for whales a Black Bustard was flushed and offshore a Southern Right Whale breached. There was a tremendous carpet of wild flowers on view here and we were treated to more stunning views of Black Harriers. We paused at the visitor centre to use the facilities (Marianna had been very good about this throughout the trip and very few natural bush stops had had to be made). A Black-crowned Night-heron (only our second of the tour) was seen to fly from nearby trees and as we left, a Large Grey Mongoose crossed in front of us before both vans simultaneously screeched to a halt calling Secretary-bird. It was sixth of our endemic African bird families, the only one in its family, job done, albeit at the last possible moment. As we journeyed down the peninsula, the grasslands were dotted with animals including Mountain Zebra, Wildebeest, Kudu and other antelopes all grazing in a spectacular carpet of wild flowers. Large number of Wattled Starlings (perhaps 150) flocked in low bushes always just away from the cameras as we left the park having seen an amazing nine elegant Black Harriers. Arriving at our fallback site for Chestnut-banded Plover, we made short walk to the edge of the gypsum pools where we were treated to no less than 15 of these beautiful plovers. Back at the vans, we discovered we had yet another puncture but while this was kindly fixed by the helpful workers. A pair of Pearl-breasted Swallows made our last addition to our trip list. Heading into Cape Town, we made our final stop on a beach for a group photo against the backdrop of Table Mountain with three Crowned Cormorants on the rocks behind us to say goodbye! As we made back to the airport for our 18.40 return flight to Heathrow, House Crow was a tick for some and Hadada Ibis was the last bird we would see before takeoff.

Day 16 Early morning arrival back in the UK.