

BIRDERS' BEST

*Where the pros
choose to go...*

For most of us, birding is a hobby. For others, it borders on an obsession. We asked some of the country's top birders to share their Personal Best locations and species with us.

Sani Pass, KwaZulu-Natal

ADAM RILEY

high-altitude buzz

ADAM RILEY



Yn 80 birding tours to more than 100 countries, that was definitely the best day of birding I have ever had in my life!

This unequivocal statement was recently made to me by a highly experienced American birder after a day trip up Sani Pass. What a way to sum up what is undoubtedly one of the world's greatest birding spots and certainly my favourite in southern Africa.

Albeit currently a rugged 4x4-only road, Sani Pass is the most accessible

route from KwaZulu-Natal into the Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho. The actual pass is a seven-kilometre section between the two nations' border-control points, characterised by dramatic switch-backs on its very steepest section.

However, the great birding experience that is Sani starts lower down. From Himeville, the Sani road winds through green pastures and grasslands dotted with dams. Here, thousands of Amur Falcons hunt for insects during summer, Wattled Cranes and Denham's

Bustards may be seen, and the waterbodies are a haven to many hundreds of waterbirds, including Maccoa and White-backed ducks. Both species of southern African otters are also regularly encountered.

As you enter the rockier *Protea* zone, the avifauna changes and Malachite Sunbirds buzz around their favourite flowers, while the harsh calls of Gurney's Sugarbird are usually the first indication of the presence of these special birds. Buff-streaked Chats and ▷



Ground Woodpecker

ADAM RILEY



The co-founder and managing director of Rockjumper Birding Tours, Riley is able to indulge his passion by travelling the world, birding on a full-time basis.

Cape Rock-Thrushes sing from boulder tops, and family huddles of Ground Woodpeckers emit their rather gull-like shrieks. Thicker riverine bushes and *ouhout* stands contribute an element of mistbelt forest birding and rewards may include Olive Woodpecker and several endemics: Greater Double-collared Sunbird, Barratt's Warbler, Sweet Waxbill and the sought-after Bush Blackcap.

As you begin the winding drive up the pass itself, the habitat rapidly changes to the dry karroid vegetation that characterises the colder high Drakensberg plateau. Drakensberg Prinias are replaced by their Karoo cousins and dainty Fairy Flycatchers and Layard's Tit-Babblers flit about. Careful scanning of the distant slopes may reveal the mighty eland or the more delicate mountain reedbeek or grey rhebok.

The rocky sections harbour Grey Tits and the localised Drakensberg Siskin; African Rock Pipit may be tracked down if you are attuned to its lovely tremulous song; and here my personal favourite, the cheerful, energetic Drakensberg

Rock-jumper, also makes its home. Even on a dull, cold day these bouncy balls of colourful feathers are sure to warm the cockles of any birder's heart.

If that doesn't do it, a glass of *Glühwein* at the Sani Top pub will brace you for birding the escarpment above the pass. Flocks of dazzling Southern Bald Ibis can reach impressive numbers, both Cape Vulture and the elegant Bearded Vulture could be seen on sunny days, and the enigmatic Mountain Pipit occurs during summer. Other specials include Large-billed Lark, Grey-winged Francolin, Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Sickle-winged Chat and, if you are very lucky, a roosting Cape Eagle-Owl.

However, it's not just the birding that makes a trip up Sani Pass such a memorable experience. It's the combination of dramatic, world-class scenery, wide-open vistas, the silence of the high Drakensberg, stunning wildflower displays, blanket-clad Basothos living their lives little touched by the modern world and, ultimately, the sense of being away from it all.