Trip Report for ESA II
Guide Lee Gutteridge

Arrival Day – 7th Feb
We met in Johannesburg at the Birchwood, and planned our starting time for the morning. Not everyone was up to dinner, due to long airplane journeys. Once all our plans were in place we had a sumptuous dinner and then headed to bed, in anticipation of our birding adventure ahead!

Day 1 - 8th Feb
So, the next morning, as scheduled, at 06h30, Dobie, Tom, John, Bob’s number one and two from England and America respectively, Dan, Brian and Christine arrived nice and early for some pre journey birding in the lodge grounds. On our thirty minute stroll around the Johannesburg-style, forested gardens we saw about 25 species including the highly precocial Cape sparrow, the recently split Karoo thrush, red-faced and speckled mousebirds, sacred, glossy and hadeda ibis’s, grey-headed gulls and African paradise flycatchers amongst others.

We then departed on our journey northward via Pretoria. We stopped briefly at Pumulani and managed to see several species such as Horus, African palm, little and white-rumped swifts, southern red and yellow-crowned bishops, white-winged widows and many more feathered friends before we ate our delicious packed breakfasts and had a cup of tea.

We headed off next to Zaagkuildrift, a dry thornveld habitat much of the year...but due to the recent rains the road was a quagmire of puddles in many places, with small temporary pans of standing water! Our search for the beautiful northern black korhaan was rewarded with a single call...but no view! However, a Lesser honeyguide and some long-billed crombec, Cape glossy and Burchell's starlings, red-backed, magpie and lesser-grey shrikes, desert, rattling and zitting cisticolas and the beautiful blue-cheeked bee-eater were found in the drier parts of the Zaagkuildrift track, while the Kittlitz’s and three-banded plovers, marsh, common and wood sandpipers, red-billed teal, malachite kingfishers, white-faced and yellow-billed ducks were found in some of the seasonal pans. An amazing sighting was of more than eighty black-winged pratincoles flying in a synchronized flock! We also saw no less than four of the secretive lesser moorhens, which would rise out of the semi-inundated sedges, giving us a few seconds of viewing, and then sink back into the tangle below!
Due to the lack of dry country habitat and species (due to the quantity of rain in the preceding weeks) we made a quick forty-five minute detour to the arid thornveld east of the Nylsvlei and managed to secure an awesome sighting of a pair of crimson-breasted shrikes, one of our most strikingly coloured birds, as well as Marico flycatcher, white-browed sparrow-weaver, burnt-necked eremomela, great sparrow, purple roller and a black-chested snake-eagle. Then it was time to head back to our lodge, Kwa Indaba for dinner and a much needed rest! The team at Kwa Indaba had prepared a wonderful traditional ‘braai’ or barbecue, which was followed by a delicious Malva pudding! We completed our checklists in the evening and found we had seen over a hundred species! What a wonderful start...apart from the elusive korhaan. The rooms were very comfortable, with a thatched roof and fans to cool us after the scorching hot day!

**Day 2 – 9th Feb**

We rose early in order to bird in the gardens, and saw many dry veld species, including the tiny but vocal pearl-spotted owlet, crested barbets, Swainson’s spurfowl, and red-billed wood-hoopoes. We then headed out toward Zaagkuildrift again, in order to try and see the northern black korhaan that we had missed yesterday! On the way there we were lucky enough to see several lesser kestrels, perched on wires alongside the road, and a little egret in breeding plumage in a shallow, roadside pan. When we arrived at Zaagkuildrift we played the tape of the call of the korhaan over the clumped grassland and acacia thorn trees, and then we waited, hoping for an answering call. Nothing, no answer. Perhaps the bird had moved to another area? A zitting cisticola flew by, very close to the group, and we heard some desert and rattling cisticolas too, and then we noticed movement in the grass. The korhaan! He was making his way toward us, cautiously, wending his way through the sparsely grassed field. We stood breathless as he approached our silently waiting group to within 20 meters, before he launched himself up in the air for a fly-by display flight...illuminated by the rising sun...wonderful.
We then headed down to the Kruger National Park, a drive of around five hours through the seemingly never-ending Highveld grasslands. One really unusual event occurred west of Waterval Boven when we stopped to view a white stork near the road. We were quietly watching the stork, when I heard a call I recognized from the Lowveld, a thousand meters or so lower in altitude than where we now stood. It was a Stierling’s wren-warbler. Typically a low altitude species, this one was very much out of place, but there he was, in the scope, happily calling from the top of a tree fifty meters away! None of the other birders I discussed this sighting with have ever seen this species on the Highveld, so this was quite an unusual occurrence to say the least.

We continued down through the scenic mountains, searching as we went for interesting denizens of the hills and valleys of this stretch of the Drakensberg, or, as it translates, the Dragon Mountains.

We arrived mid-afternoon at Numbi Gate, our entry point into the world renowned Kruger National Park, and made our way to Pretoriuskop Camp in the south of the park. The name of the kop, or hill, derives from the fact that a young Boer, named Pretorius was buried here in the mid 1800's. This camp also lays on the trail of the old transport riders, who risked life and limb to carry supplies from Delagoa Bay (now Maputo) to the gold fields of the old Transvaal. Towns such as Barberton and Pilgrims Rest were booming during the 1860’s and 70’s due to the discovery of alluvial deposits of this precious metal, which shaped so much of South Africa’s history.

Two of the main navigational features of the region are clearly visible as you drive the roads around the camp. These are Legogote in the west, with its pointed craggy appearance, and Ship Mountain to the South, with its upside down ships 'hull shape'.

We headed out for a drive once we were settled in to the camps, and saw beautiful red-collared widowbirds, emerald-spotted wood-doves, little and white-rumped swifts, European rollers, woodland kingfishers, southern yellow-billed hornbills and the noisy bearded woodpecker drumming out his territorial call in a hollow tree. A large herd of elephant cows also put in an appearance, and
we were entertained by the antics of a young bull, full of bluster, repeatedly charging toward the coach and trumpeting loudly! This kind of antic is very common with these young four or five year old males, and is not dangerous...it is merely a little boy showing off!! The adult females merely continued to feed during this tirade, which soon petered out, but what an amazing experience it was for all of us!

We returned to camp just before gate closing, having also seen various antelope species, warthogs, and a pair of dour old buffalo bulls.

This evening I prepared a traditional 'braai' or barbecue for my team, with salads, cheesy breads baked over the open fire, and specially marinaded lamb...while the guests relaxed with a cold drink under the stars of a spectacularly clear African night.

After supper we headed out on a night walk and saw western barn owl and a pearl spotted owlet.

Day 3 – 10th Feb
We headed east this morning, in search if interesting birdlife on the road to Rondekop. Translated this means 'round head', or 'round hill' and it is the name of a granite hill where we could get out and stretch our legs). These granitic extrusions are very old, with some having been dated to over three billion years of age, making them some of the oldest rocks on Earth! From Rondekop we saw Eurasian golden oriole while we enjoyed morning coffee and rusks! What a treat. Interestingly we also watched a Speke's hinged-tortoise go by our feet as we stretched our legs.
Other birds we saw on our jaunt around the southern part of the park included the precocial and raucous fork-tailed drongo, African paradise flycatcher, rufous-naped larks calling from their treetop perches, sombre greenbul, terrestrial brownbul, plain and sand martins, white-throated, red-breasted, lesser-striped and wire-tailed swallows, willow warblers, red-faced cisticola, Cape white-eye, Cape, Burchell's and violet-backed starlings, red-billed oxpecker, white-browed scrub robin, spotted and ashy flycatcher’s, spectacled weaver, fan-tailed widowbird, broad-billed, purple and European rollers, southern carmine bee-eaters, blue waxbill, African pied wagtail and many more besides!

A special highlight for the day was a hybrid white-crowned blacksmith lapwing, which had us all searching the bird books (in vain) for a similar looking species!!

Mammals seen during our day in the field included dwarf mongoose, vervet monkey, African elephant, plains zebra, hippopotamus, warthog, giraffe, buffalo, greater kudu, blue wildebeest, impala and steenbok.

We also encountered a pack of wild dogs, and spent an half an hour with at least 8 animals which milled around our coach, calling and whimpering, producing a spectacular demonstration of the vocalizations of this highly social species, which is now listed amongst Africa's rarest carnivores.

In the evening we returned to camp to freshen up before dinner. The 'braai' we had last night was such a hit with our team that there was a unanimous decision that we would do another one this
evening, with lemon and herb and peri-peri chickens, and the customary salads and cheese-stuffed bread!

Day 4 – 11th Feb
Today we were to travel up north to Tshokwane, a picnic site alongside the Nwaswitsonto River, searching for some different species in the open grasslands and slightly drier woodlands that the area has to offer. Many species were found on this trip, but the two dry country bustards, the black-bellied and the red-crested eluded us!

However, we still saw ostrich, helmeted guineafowl, Natal and Swainson's spurfowl, white-faced duck, Egyptian goose, yellow-billed, saddle-billed, white and marabou storks, African spoonbill, striated and grey herons, black-winged kite, African harrier hawk, white-backed and white-headed vulture, bateleur, Wahlberg's and tawny eagles, Amur falcons in their hundreds, water and spotted thick-knees, the rarely seen white-crowned lapwing, as well as the black-smith and crowned varieties. Other species included African jacana, wood and common sandpipers, common greenshanks, bronze-winged courser, African mourning, red- eyed, laughing, Namaqua and ring-necked doves, purple-crested turaco, European, fiery-necked and square-tailed nightjars, African palm-swift, little, Horus and white-rumped swifts, speckled mousebird, yellow- breasted apalis, lilac-breasted roller, striped, woodland, malachite and pied kingfishers, crowned, red-billed, southern yellow-billed, grey and southern ground-hornbills, black-collared and crested barbets and the tiny chinspot batis. Many other species could be added to this list, including seven different types of shrike (grey-headed bush, brown-crown and black-crown tchagras, black-backed puff-back, magpie shrike with its long streaming tail and the migrant lesser-grey and red-backed shrikes).

Mammals were numerous, and included dwarf mongoose, white-tailed mongoose, chacma baboon, vervet monkey, thick-tailed and lesser bushbabies, spotted hyena, porcupine, lion, leopard, Large-spotted genet, African elephant, plains zebra, hippopotamus, warthog, giraffe, Cape buffalo, greater kudu, blue wildebeest, impala, grey duiker and steenbok.

Day 5 – 12th Feb
Today we travelled from the Kruger National Park, having seen some wonderful birdlife, and the famous 'Big Five' and headed for the birding paradise of Wakkerstroom.
Spur-winged geese, white-winged and whiskered terns, southern pochard, Cape shoveller, black-necked grebe, African purple Swamphen, African black duck and many other waterbirds were seen. Little rush-warbler also made an appearance near Chrissiesmere at a roadside pan. Glossy ibis also put in an appearance, along with the secretary bird in the open fields enroute. African fish-eagles were seen at roadside dams and Amur falcons lined the telephone wires south of Machadodorp.

We also saw common swift, European bee-eater, spike-heeled lark, buff-streaked chat, red-winged starling, southern anteating chat, white-winged and long-tailed widowbirds, striped pipit, Cape canary and Cape crow as we travelled. Just before town we saw a pair of magnificent grey-crowned cranes.

We arrived at our quaint little lodge with its Cape robin-chat and speckled pigeons perching in the manicured gardens and then headed out for a wonderful supper in the town bistro.

Day 6 – 13th Feb
This particular day was destined to be one of the most amazing days of birding. We were specifically heading out to look for some of the special endemics of this hilly grassland region. We found yellow-breasted pipit, African rock pipit, eastern long-billed lark and ground woodpecker, bokmakerie and Cape longclaw before breakfast!

Then we went north of the town searching for more specials, including the blue korhaan, Rudd’s, eastern clapper and Botha’s larks, white-backed duck, malachite sunbird, great crested grebe, southern bald ibis (which we saw in profusion!), secretarybird, rock kestrel, South African cliff-swallow and blue crane, all of which we added to our list!
Another sumptuous meal at the bistro was in order before we retired for the night!

Day 7 – 14th Feb
We started the day with a misty pre-dawn excursion to the wetlands on the edge of Wakkerstroom where we focussed on the reed and water loving species such as little bittern, black-crowned night-heron, giant kingfisher, lesser swamp warbler, African reed warbler, African yellow warbler and little rush warbler.

We also saw greater-striped and white-throated swallow flying around under the bridge too. The white-bellied bustard was our next target bird, which took us to the rural village of Dirkiesdorp, into this species preferred habitat. We had a fantastic sighting of a male displaying for a pair of rather disinterested looking females, before we headed for the forested lodge near Mkuze. On the way we saw our first long-crested eagle for the trip!

Along the way we also saw bully canary, bronze mannekin, grey-rumped swallow, African hoopoe and a Diederik cuckoo. Upon arrival at our lodge we took a short walk in the forest along a specially demarcated trail to see what we could find. Within moments we had encountered a flock of crested guineafowl...a highlight for all! We also saw eastern nicator and square-tailed drongo.

Day 8 – 15th Feb
Today we started with a very short session from the deck at the lodge before we departed and had a wonderful view of a four-coloured (formerly gorgeous) bushshrike and a southern boubou.
We headed to Mkuze and spent some time in the fig forest searching for some of the interesting species which inhabit this habitat, as well as the surrounding wetlands. We saw tambourine dove, South African shelduck, African pygmy goose, squacco heron, black-bellied starling, bar-throated apalis, green-backed camaroptera, purple-crested turaco, African yellow warbler, yellow-rumped tinkerbird and the raucous trumpeter hornbill bleating its baby-like call.

Whilst in the reserve we saw Osprey, pink-backed and great white pelicans, grey sunbird, blue-cheeked bee-eater, green-winged pytilia, yellow-throated petronia, dusky indigobird, willow warbler and several yellow-throated longclaw's to name but a few. When we headed back toward our lodge in the late afternoon we stopped off for a while at a beautiful floodplain and saw a profusion of Kittlitz's plovers and Senegal lapwing's and, incredibly, the numbers of each species were well in excess of a hundred birds! Just as interestingly there were at least four different races of yellow wagtail present at this site, each with their own distinctive features! What an end to the day!

Day 9 – 16th Feb
The next morning we continued our search for birds around the lodge, with a pre-breakfast session in the forest producing an immature African cuckoo, crested guineafowl, African wood-owl, bearded scrub-robin, Rudd's apalis, purple-banded sunbird and many other feathered creatures.

We then headed to the False Bay Park in search of Neergards sunbird, a rare and localized species. We only saw one of these very special sunbirds, but what a treat, along with purple-banded, amethyst and collared sunbirds. As we continued south along the coast we stopped off in some
grasslands near Bonamanzi to search for lemon-breasted canaries, of which we found a small flock! There were also some interesting mammals enroute, which we also took some time to watch.

Later we arrived at St Lucia, and we headed out to the boardwalk and started searching for birds on the mud flats of the estuary. We were instantly greeted with the sight of hundreds of waders, specifically groups of little stint and curllew sandpipers. There was also osprey which disturbed the wading birds into flight, some water thick-knee, common ringed plover, three-banded plover, Kittlitz’s plover and many other species.

**Day 10 – 17th Feb**

Early this morning we did another walk in the forests of St Lucia, on the Igwalagwala trail, which produced some wonderful birds such as Knysna turaco and brown scrub-robin, as well as lemon dove, bar-throated apalis, sombre greenbul and many others. We also took the time to look at a few interesting tracks and signs at various points on our trails, an insight into the nocturnal and secretive creatures of the bush! In the afternoon we birded the sugarloaf area again and also did a night excursion looking for owls, and we were rewarded by a great view of a family of thick tailed bushbabies...but unfortunately no owls!

Day 11 – 18th Feb

We then departed St Lucia and headed further south towards the Dlinza Forest with its famous canopy boardwalk, and headed up above the forests trees to search for more avian wonders. We had two high speed fly-by's of the eastern bronze-naped pigeon, as well as amazing sights of the grey cuckoo-shrike, black saw-wing, grey-headed bushshrike, black-headed oriole, white-eared barbet and square-tailed drongo. We then headed down into cool of the forest to walk on the gentle trail below the trees. We had amazing sighting of a pair of the rarely encountered spotted ground-thrush, as they scurried rodent-like along over the leaf litter. We also had an amazing sighting of another group of eastern bronze-naped pigeons in the Bishops Seat area. We were also lucky enough to hear a pair of green malkoha calling, which we eventually saw. One male Narina trogon also put in a brief appearance.
In the afternoon we headed toward the small village of Hilton, near Pietermaritzburg, where we would be staying, but instead of checking in for a restful afternoon we opted to try and see one of South Africa’s rarest and most sought after birds. We headed toward the farming area of Richmond in order to see if we could capitalise on a recent report of a blue swallow being seen in the area. We headed for some hilly areas, with grassland valleys, and small streams which were lined by beautiful tree ferns. We searched at about five different spots, looking for this small, dark blue beauty. Eventually, after several other wonderful sightings such as red-headed Quelea, jackal buzzard, Eurasian honey-buzzard, croaking cisticola and common stonechat we noticed a small dark bird perching in the valley below us...the swallow! Within a few minutes another swallow flew in, followed by a third. This was very exciting, and none of us were quite prepared to see them so well, with their flowing tail streamers! We headed off to our lodge feeling most satisfied, a feeling which was only compounded by a wonderful sighting of a forest buzzard!

**Day 12 - 19th Feb**

We awoke early and headed for a wetland and farming area nearby, in order to try and improve upon our brief sighting of the red-headed Quelea from the day before as well as to look out for red-necked spurfowl. We managed to hear the calls of African rails as well as enjoying a sighting of a cape Grassbird, a little rush warbler and an African reed warbler too! We also found a beautiful flock of red-headed Quelea.
We continued our journey after a delicious breakfast, and headed for an area of dense forest, and into a private garden, where we could search for more of the forest species. We found orange ground-thrush, forest canary, chorister robin, dark backed weaver, red-backed mannekin and many other species.