

This November 2010, I was privileged to travel on a trip organised by Grahame Snow of Reach Africa Birding Safaris to the Ntsikeni Nature Reserve.



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Day 1: The trip started off by a short detour on route north of Harrismith to a dirt road observing Blue Korhaan, Spike-heeled and Red-capped larks. Marutswa Nature Reserve was the next venue where we observed the endangered Cape parrot. Some parrots were squabbling with a Rufous-chested Sparrow-Hawk vying for a place atop of a dead tree. Thirteen parrots were observed in total.

Day 2: This started off in the Xumeni forest early morning, producing Grey Cuckooshrike, Olive Bush-Shrike(buff form), Orange Ground-Thrush, Knysna Turaco, Sweet Waxbill, Yellow-throated Woodland-Warbler, African Emerald Cuckoo, Narina Trogon and some more Cape Parrots. We then proceeded to upper Creighton where Malcolm Gemmell joined us. We were very fortunate to observe two Broad-tailed Warblers, displaying for all that they were worth in the tall grass. While looking at them, Black Saw-wings flew around us in numbers.

Two African Black Ducks flew by while Yellow-billed Ducks paddled in a small dam nearby. A Half-collared Kingfisher was also found sitting motionless, observing the water over a small stream nearby. Next bird found was a Black Cuckoo singing away merrily. The bonus came as we were departing from the area i.e. Red-headed Quelea. At least 18 males were counted.

Early afternoon saw us depart for Ntsikeni with rain threatening. Entering the gates at Ntsikeni and negotiating the dirt road was a bit wet, no muddy experience. The song "Slip Sliding Away" came to my mind as our 4x4 Microbus picked a hair raising route along the road. However the rain abated that evening and the weather for the following days was superb.



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Day 3: The pièce de resistance of the trip was to find the rare and elusive Eurasian Bittern. Next day, tongue in cheek we set off early; I mean very early down to the edge of the vlei. We scanned the reeds for an hour; nothing. Undaunted we continued, then surprise; the Eurasian Bittern appeared, neck and bill erect, body motionless, light colour markings and

possibly a young bird. While scanning we saw at least three pairs of Wattled Cranes; one pair had a youngster in tow. Grey Crowned Cranes were present in numbers, and the occasional Denham's Bustard in courtship display.

On return to the lodge some of us felt inspired to climb up one of the gorges to the ridge which juts into the Ntsikeni peak. On route 3 Ground Woodpeckers were spotted as well as Malachite Sunbird and Wailing Cisticola nearby. Near the top we were welcomed by a Sentinel Rock-Thrush as if he were inviting us to birding heaven.

Then from nowhere appeared a Bearded Vulture just overhead. I estimate no more than 20 meters above us. What a view! A very close encounter indeed!

We walked to the next gorge and looked down; there atop a large boulder was the male Drakensberg Rockjumper displaying. Walking back across the ridge we flushed Red-winged Francolin and Kurrichane Buttonquail. An Eastern Longbilled Lark also appeared along the way.

Wild flowers littered the ridge in all sizes and colours everywhere one looked.

Descending from the ridge via another route nearer Ntsikeni peak we followed the course of a small mountain stream covered over with boulders and edged with Ouhout bushes. About half way down a Barratt's Warbler excelled himself; his voice at full throttle and exposed for all to see. Further down both a male and female Buff-streaked Chat gave us an uninterrupted view. Just before reaching the lodge we saw Drakensberg Prinia.

Later during the day we had excellent views of Yellow-breasted Pipit and Secretary Bird on a nest. We also saw African Rail and Marsh Owl.



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Day 4: Up early again!

We arrive at the edge of the vle, and while setting up the spotting scopes we saw Pale-crowned Cisticola. Less than 10 minutes later the Eurasian Bittern was spotted; clearly exposed, sometimes preening, sometimes moving, sometimes disappearing and then reappearing. A superb sighting!

The bird had darker markings than the one seen the day before.

During our stay numerous Striped Flufftails were heard, but not seen.

Day 5: Our final day.

We left the control gate at Ntsikeni and descended through the rather bleak looking Pine plantations-suddenly there was a small patch of indigenous forest which boarded either side of the road for about 100 meters. Here we saw Bush Blackcap, Chorister Robin-Chat, Olive Woodpecker, Bar-throated Apalis, S DC Sunbird, Paradise Flycatcher and Cape Batis. The forest proved rather productive. Had we more time no doubt there were many more species to be found.

What a wonderful ending to a truly memorable birding trip. The experience will be cherished for a long time.

Thank you Grahame; last but not least thanks also to our feathered friends.

Roy Allen



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