

# Reach Africa Birding and Getaways



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## **RICHTERSVELD/BUSHMANLAND**

**10 DAY TRIP**      10 to 19 August 2012



This trip combines the sparsely populated semi-desert of Bushmanland with its exciting and highly desirable South African endemic birds with the stark beauty of the vast mountain desert known as the Richtersveld.

Bushmanland is most famous in birding circles for hosting one of the world's highest diversities of larks, with an amazing 14 species occurring regularly. Its stony plains are scattered with low bushes, punctuated by broken country and the occasional dune field

The Richtersveld region stretches from Steinkopf and Port Nolloth in the south up to the Orange River and from Alexander Bay to Vioolsdrif. The Ai Ais Richtersveld Transfrontier Park is a small part of this, in the loop of the Orange River. This park is in one of the most undeveloped and inaccessible areas in South Africa.

What is it that makes this region so wonderful, mysterious and magnificent?

The Richtersveld is a desert of ever-changing vistas-contorted mountains with awe-inspiring names like Mount Terror and Devil's Tooth, narrow valleys, wide plains and rocks fashioned into bizarre shapes by wind, rain and extremes of temperature. The mountains of the Richtersveld are truly awe-inspiring and lovers of remote places will find endless pleasures in its richness. The rock and mountain formations, the different colours and textures are unbelievable.

## **THE DESTINATIONS**

We leave Johannesburg bright and early at the start of what promises to be a memorable and rewarding trip. We travel via Kuruman and Upington to our first overnight stop at **Kenhardt**, where the Bushmanland leg of our trip begins in earnest.

The next morning we bird the area around **Kenhardt**, towards Brandvlei which is excellent country for Sclater's and Stark's Larks and Burchell's Courser. Karoo Korhaan and Double-banded Courser may be seen at the roadsides and Black-eared Sparrowlark is often present in the area

After our morning birding exploits, we take the gravel road between Kenhardt and **Pofadder**, where we spend the night at the very comfortable Pofadder Hotel

Pofadder is a stereotypical South African one-horse town. However the surrounding area offers excellent birding across a diversity of habitats, from arid, rocky gorges and dusty plains to lush riparian vegetation along the Orange River, some 50km north of the town. Birds to look out for include Karoo Long-billed, Stark's and Sclater's Lark, Karoo Chat, Burchell's Courser, Short-toed Rock Thrush, Dusky Sunbird and Black-headed Canary. A small breeding group of Rosyface Lovebirds occur at Onseepkans the Namibian border post on the Orange River and the giant nests of Sociable Weavers, often with a resident pair of Pygmy Falcons, are common in this part of Bushmanland.

After 2 nights in Pofadder, we depart bright and early on day 4 for the Namaqua National Park, Kamieskroon

We travel via the Ghaamsberg and Namies Mountains where we will be looking for Cinnamon-breasted Warbler, Short-toed Rock-Thrush, Black-headed Canary, Black-eared Sparrowlark, Karoo Korhaan and Karoo Eremomela.

The prize for this area, however, is the richly coloured dune form of the Red Lark which is, in fact, one of the commoner birds in the area.



Closer to Kamieskroon, we travel through Aardvark Kloof, one of western South Africa's great endemic bird sites. The diversity of habitats here supports a bird community that will leave any desert bird enthusiast spellbound. Cinnamon-breasted Warbler's calls echo through the roadside boulders, while Red Larks display nearby. Other specials include Large-billed and Karoo Long-billed Lark, Karoo Eremomela, Grey Tit, Fairy Flycatcher and White-throated and Black-headed Canary

We spend our next night in Skilpad Rest Camp, Namaqua National Park. The chalets are set against a hillside and offer breathtaking views of the valley below.

The Park is best known for its spectacular display of wildflowers in early spring. This is also the best time to visit the area, as many of the birds are opportunists which move into the area and breed after winter rain. Cape Clapper Larks, performing their courtship displays, are usually abundant and the grating call of Southern Black Korhaan rings out in the early morning. Both races of Black-headed Canary occur when conditions are favourable and Layard's Titbabbler is fairly common. A pair of Booted Eagles has bred in some exotic trees near the Park reception for the past few years.

After some early morning birding around camp (and breakfast of course) we take our leave of Skilpad and travel via Springbok, Steinkopf and Lekkersing to the Ai Ais Richtersveld Transfrontier Park.

Our routing takes us through the Richtersveld Community Conservancy. The Richtersveld Community Conservancy is the last refuge of Nama people living what is known as the transhumance lifestyle - to migrate seasonally with their livestock from mountains to the river and so make sustainable use of the fragile succulent ecosystem. In recognition of this vanishing lifestyle, and of the rare botanical diversity it helps protect, the Conservancy has been declared the core of a new World Heritage Site.

Birding can be particularly rewarding after good winter rains. Black Harrier, Ludwig's Bustard and Black-eared Sparrowlark are often encountered and Karoo, Spike-heeled and Large-billed Larks are fairly common.

Rugged kloofs, high mountains and dramatic landscapes that sweep away inland from the Orange River divulge the fact that we have now entered the vast mountain desert that is the **Ai Ais Richtersveld Transfrontier Park**. This is a harsh and unpredictable land where water is scarce and life-sustaining moisture comes in the form of early morning fog which rolls in from the cold waters of the Atlantic ocean, sustaining a remarkable range of small reptiles, birds and mammals .A staggering assortment of plant life, some species occurring nowhere else, is to be found here, with gnarled quiver trees, tall aloes and quaint “halfmens” keeping vigil over this inscrutable landscape



There are four main landscape units in the Richtersveld: the Orange River and adjacent floodplains, gentle undulating plains distributed in the summer/all year round rainfall area, rolling hills and rugged mountains.

The forbidding and mountainous landscape belies the diversity of its succulent plants-the area boasts the richest variety of these plants in the world. One of the prime floral attractions is the intriguing

elephant's trunk or *halfmens* which grows in clusters on slopes, creating the impression of sentinels guarding their surroundings. There are moments of pure magic in life that are frozen forever in our minds. Here one gets to truly appreciate the incredible contrast of the lush life-sustaining oasis of vegetation alongside the Orange River and the sun-baked starkness of the dramatic rock formations that give South Africa's only mountain desert its unique character and appeal.

Birding in the Park is very rewarding and many of the dry western specials can be found. These include Ludwig's Bustard, Bradfield's Swift, Cinnamon-breasted Warbler, Namaqua Warbler, Orange River White-eye, Karoo Eremomela, Grey Tit, Cape Penduline-Tit, Tractrac and Sickle-winged Chat and Stark's, Sabota and Karoo Long-billed Lark.

Raptors are well represented, with Booted Eagle, Black-chested Snake-Eagle, Jackal Buzzard, Lanner Falcon and Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk occurring regularly. A night excursion into the hills surrounding the camp may yield Cape Eagle-Owl if we are very fortunate.

We spend three nights in the Park in fully equipped chalets in Sendelingsdrift rest camp, overlooking the Orange River. With the camp as our base, we explore the surrounding area and take in the magnificence of this truly awe-inspiring and unique mountain wilderness.

After a soul enriching experience, we take our leave of the Richtersveld wonderland and start our journey back to "civilisation". We depart bright and early for Port Nolloth, the only holiday resort on the Diamond Coast.

En route we visit the Orange River mouth and its associated wetlands. The Namibian part of the mouth was designated as a Ramsar site in June 1991. The river mouth, mudflats, marshlands, islets near the mouth and adjacent pans provide a sizeable area of sheltered shallow water suitable for concentrations of wetland birds,

which use these habitats for breeding purposes or as a stopover on migration routes. The bird population can be as high as 20000-26000 individuals. Lesser and Greater Flamingo, Black-necked Grebe, Chestnut-banded Plover, Caspian Tern, Little Bittern and Maccoa and African Black Duck are some of the more interesting species to be found here.

**Port Nolloth** is a small town, originally built to provide an export harbour for the copper from Okiep. The town has a strange desert atmosphere as it is on an arid and barren coastal plain, yet it holds some fascination for the visitor.

We spend one night in a charming guesthouse on the seafront.

Our primary birding targets for Port Nolloth are Barlow's and Cape Long-billed Larks. Both species occur in dunes around Still Bay, a few kilometers north of Port Nolloth.

Birds along the coastline include Bank and Crowned Cormorant, African Black Oystercatcher and various species of waders.



We leave Port Nolloth after breakfast and head inland.

We spend our last night at **Augrabies Falls National Park**, “the place of great noise”, near Upington. The Augrabies Falls are one of the natural wonders of South Africa and one of the six greatest falls in the world. We will probably feel “birded out” by now but for the stout hearted an excursion into the game area may yield some interesting species including Ludwig’s and Kori Bustard, Black, African Fish and Booted Eagle, Rufous-eared Warbler and Karoo and Spike-heeled Lark.