

South Africa. Part One, Western Cape.

Contributed by Jos
Last Updated Sunday, 30 September 2012

A week-long loop starting and finishing in Cape Town. Incorporating the West Coast National Park, the remote expanses of the Tanqua Karoo, the fertile Agulhus Plain and excellent De Hoop nature reserve, this part of the trip then concluded with a number of localities around Cape Town itself, plus a super pelagic trip into the waters south of the Cape of Good Hope.

A trip to this region in the heart of their winter is always going to be a gamble with the weather and this trip was no exception - as South Africans shivered and complained of exceptionally heavy rain, stormy seas, flooding and even snow, we managed to wind through the region with only one day adversely impacted by the weather. 6 July. Airborn Again. Waving farewell to a Vilnius basking under a sweltering summer sun, off to the airport we went, destination one Istanbul for a transfer onto a Turkish Airlines night flight to Cape Town. A couple of coffees in Istanbul, Alpine Swifts hurtling around minarets to a setting sun, three Pygmy Cormorants doing a fly-over. At 1 a.m., onto the plane it was, a welcome return to African soil awaiting. 7 July. West Coast National Park. A brief stop to deposit a few passengers in Johannesburg, one Cape Wagtail the first bird to welcome me, then a hop of couple of hours to Cape Town, touchdown just after midday local time. Picked up a hire care - an alarmingly small Fiat - and hit the road, destination the beautiful West Coast National Park. Sacred Ibis and Hadedas on the outskirts of Cape Town, a squadron of White Pelicans taking a low-level fly-by as we ventured onto the N7 northbound. A little more than an hour or so later, we arrived - low rolling hills of strandveld, for now basking under a warm sun. A key locality for Caracal, I did have high hopes of encountering one of these sleek cats, the plan being to spend a couple of days here. Almost immediately encountered Angulate Tortoises grazing the verges, then the first Southern Black Korhaans, the males real stunners. Ostriches strutting, Karoo Scrub-Robins and Cape Robin-Chats emerging from dense thickets, a Layard's Tit-Babbler popping out for a few moments, all too soon I was getting back into the delights of birding in South Africa. Not the easiest locality to find mammals, the dense vegetation limits giving ample cover, but as the sun edged towards the horizon, Steenboks began to appear in clearings, along with a Common Duiker, the first Bonteboks of the trip and oodles of Cape Francolins and Southern Black Korhaans. For sunset, a rather early 6.00 p.m., we settled to watch the area around the Abrahamskraal waterhole. African Spoonbills, Cape Shoveler, Black Crakes and an African Rail amongst the waterbirds, noisy Cape Weavers in the emergent vegetation and Southern Double-collared Sunbirds buzzing in the strandveld behind, all very nice. As daylight faded, and the korhaans echoed their calls across the vlei, it was time to depart to find a place to stay. Bumping into a herd of Eland on the way, found a campsite in the neighbouring Langebaan, a Spotted Thick-knee rather unhappy to be dislodged as I erected my tent in the now darkness. Fish and chips in the town, most tasty indeed, then to sleep. 8 July. West Coast National Park, Veldriff & Lambert's Bay. Rubbish weather day! Woke at dawn to a drizzle rolling in from the south Atlantic, a wind kicking in to suggest little was going to change. And it did not, a major cold front was sweeping in, the rain gradually becoming heavier and the odds of picking up a Caracal dimishing with every minute that passed. Over in the West Coast National Park, Elands and Red Hartebeest huddled in a look of dejection, while any passerines brave enough to pop out of the depths of the strandveld got blown half way to the next hilltop! Bokmakieries and Pied Starlings added pleasant distraction, a quick return to the Abrahamskraal waterhole added most of the birds of the day before, plus Purple Swampheens, Levaillant's Cisticola and soggy Black-shouldered Kites on ghostly snags on the hillside. Being a bit of a wussy when it comes to rain, I decided upon a rapid change of plans for these first few days, the idea now being to zip up the remainder of the west coast this day, then cross over the Cederburgs to drop into the arid lands of the Karoo, almost certainly a destination that would be dry. Before departing however, I braved the rain a little to venture out to the Geelbek hide - a scamper across saltmarsh, then a dive into the relative shelter of the hide overlooking the bay. Cape Longclaws and more Levaillant's Cisticolas on the saltmarsh, plus an assortment of waders, including a notable Common Redshank - in terms of status, this was probably the best bird of the morning, the species being a vagrant to South Africa, generally only one or two seen per year, almost exclusively in the southern summer. African Marsh Harriers battled the conditions, ranks of distant flamingoes lurked in the murk. Having chucked a dripping tent into the back of the car, we then continued up the coast, the next stop being the excellent estuary and adjacent salt pans at Veldriff. With the weather showing distinct hints of improvement, it was actually a very pleasant couple of hours here, first birding from the road, then moving to the Riviera riverfront, watching from both the hide and a small quayside further up channel. I didn't bother entering the actual saltwarks, but the birding was absolutely top class nevertheless - plenty of waders, including a good number of the iconic Chestnut-banded Plovers, plus the usual assortment of Three-banded, Kittlitz's and White-fronted Plovers, all accompanied by dapper Avocets, noisy Black-winged Stilts and unseasonal Curlew Sandpiper, Curlew and Greenshank. More impressive however were the other waterbirds present - both Greater and Lesser Flamingoes in abundance, African Spoonbills paddling the shallows, rafts and rafts of Black-necked Grebes and, dotting posts across the water, three species of cormorant and African Anhinga too. Plus White Pelicans floating just metres off, thousands of Red-knobbed Coots, a Purple Heron rising from saltmarsh and an assortment of ducks including Southern African Shelduck and Cape Teal ...you could almost forget the weather was pretty dodgy! Adjacent strandveld added a Small Grey Mongoose, along with Southern Double-collared Sunbirds, a couple of Fiscal Flycatchers and Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk, while the journey north notched up the first Blue Cranes of the trip, plus Mountain Wheatear, a Goliath Heron and pair of African Fish Eagles at Eland's Bay. The previously white car was looking like it had already done the Paris-Dakar, a delightful cocktail of red sand and mud caking the car from top to bottom, the coastal dirt road a slippery sludge in places. A few kilometres along, we reached Lambert's Bay, the planned culmination of my route in this direction - on a small island barely a hundred metres or so off the coast lies a most impressive seabird colony, Cape Gannets by their thousand all crammed together, together with White-breasted, Cape and Crowned

Cormorants, oodles of Swift Terns and even a few African Penguins thrown in for good measure. Normally a most pleasant birding experience, the island can be assessed by a small causeway, a path then leading to a hide right in the midst of the breeding horders. We arrived however to a distinctively closed looking causeway! The reason soon became clear, the full force of the South Atlantic was pummelling the causeway, waves whipping over into the adjacent small harbour. As the gateway was not actually locked, and there was no sign saying we couldn't, we decided to brave the shower that the ocean was offering and darted along the causeway to the island. Municipal workers on the island greeted us, but seeing we had come a long way decided not to kick us off - Cape Gannets galore, a buzz of Swift Terns to and fro, Cape Fur Seals bobbing in the very active surf, the island was a treat as usual, albeit far stormier than I have ever encountered before. With still a couple of hours left till dusk, and the weather now quite a tad brighter, I then returned to the strandveld a little to the north - four Ostrich ambling along and a nice little selection of passerines in the coastal scrub - one Cape Penduline Tit, one Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, two Cape Clapper Larks, quite a few Karoo Scrub-Robins and a general assortment including Cape Robin-Chats, Karoo Prinias, Bokmakieries and White-throated Canaries. As dusk approached, eastward I turned, a short shopping trip into Clanwilliam, then south to Citrusdal and from there, up and over the Cederburg. What a drive, torrential rain on a winding dirt road in the dark, one minute rocky, one minute slippery. As rain finally began to subside, so dense fog set in. Amazingly, managed to notch up both a single Spotted Eagle Owl and, sitting on the road, a dripping wet Cape Eagle Owl. Poorly seen, but one Cape Porcupine also scurried across the road and, nearing our destination, one Karoo Toad and a couple of mice that turned out to be Namaqua Rock Mice. Finally arriving at the edge of the Karoo, we pulled into the primitive picnic site at Skitterykloof well after midnight, a glance upwards revealing a star-studded sky, the mountains an effective barrier to the rain. Caught one Namaqua Rock Mouse, put my tent up and went to sleep.

9 July. Tanqua Karoo (Skitterykloof, Eierkop and the P2250) Skitterykloof Dawn on the boulder-strewn hillside of Skitterykloof, key locality for Cinnamon-breasted Warbler. Strenuous activities required to clamber up the steep slopes, damp from an overnight mist. Scattered aloes and thickets of acacia a backdrop, plenty of birds active, starting with Layard's Tit-Babblers and Dusky Sunbirds in the valley bottom, progressing to Malachite and Southern Double-collared Sunbirds as I clambered up the rocks. Aiming for low cliffs at the top of the slope, a locality that has given me both the warbler and Ground Woodpeckers in the past, I paused to watch White-naped Ravens croaking their way by, stopped to admire a Mountain Wheatear and almost toppled off a boulder when I surprised a Red Rock Rabbit near the top of the slope, another darting off a little further along. Twenty minutes after reaching the clifftop, having slowly followed the ridge up the gully, a brief glimpse of a mouse-like bird darting across the rocks and into a hollow. Cinnamon-breasted Warbler, it just had to be. And indeed it was, a moment later, it reappeared some 50 metres or so away, now scurrying up the rockface itself, a classic little bird and quite kind enough to even stop a few moments to allow a little closer scrutiny. And with that, back down the slope I went, time for coffee and breakfast under the acacias of the picnic site, Cape Buntings and White-throated Canaries scrounging for scraps, Hadedas making an awful din to spoil the serenity of the valley. Eierkop The vast Karoo, plains of endless semi-desert, stunted vegetation and open skies, simply magic. Just 20 km south of Skitterkloof however are two small rocky knolls, one each side of the road. Essentially bare rock with an assortment of aloes clinging to their sides, the eastern hill is Eierkop, a fine place to spot and clamber to the top for stunning views over the plains all around. A dawn arrival is also usually rewarded with Karoo Korhaans calling, but my arrival some two or three hours later saw no such things. Still, not too bad - Spike-heeled Larks on the approach track, Namaqua Warblers around the base, a stunning male Black Harrier quartering nearby and quite a number of gaudy Malachite Sunbirds on the hill itself. The P2250 If ever there was an unassuming road, then this is it - a remote gravel road going from nowhere to nowhere, the nearest towns scores of kilometres away. For birds however, it is second to none, the Karoo plains stretching from horizon to horizon supporting all the key birds of the area. Even before arriving at the P2250, Karoo and Tractrac Chats begin to appear in increasing numbers, the latter real smart birds. Also a variety of other passerines, including Spike-heeled and Karoo Larks, plus Pale Chanting Goshawks and, a welcome mammal addition, two Bat-eared Foxes trotting along. At the junction of the P2250, the sun now pushing temperatures to a respectable 22 C, a Peregrine Falcon sat upon a roadside post and all too soon, further goodies began to reveal themselves. A stroll along a shallow drainage course produced, in addition to yet more Tractrac Chats, one of the specials that I was seeking - the dainty Karoo Eremomelas. Exceptionally mobile, frequently upping and flitting dozens of metres, aided by wind whipping their tails, the three birds gave me a good run-around before finally settling to offer good views. Also good numbers of Red-capped Larks here, plus a few Karoo Larks and one or two Namaqua Warblers. Some kilometres along, Tractrac and Karoo Chats all the way, a small roadside pool offered temporary home to three stunning Cape Teals, along with a Three-banded Plover and, in the adjacent thickets, a bustling colony of Cape Sparrows. By now late afternoon, we then turned down a remote side track and began to look for a suitable camp location. Ended up at dry river bed, occasional pools suggesting recent rain. Greater Kestrel adjacent, a Black-backed Jackal emerging from vegetation just yonder. After a coffee and a hastily concocted meal consisting of instant noodles, bread and mandarins, the lure of sunset got us moving again. Deciding to simply camp wherever we ended up, we awaited dark and then set off on a slow trawl of the area, dreams of Aardvark floating in my imagination. Not a particularly uncommon mammal here, I saw plenty of termite hills tunnelled open by them, but the mystical beast remained just that, mystical! I was not complaining too much however, two Cape Porcupines ambling alongside the road were most welcome, my first ever good views of this splendid animal. Also encountered a Cape Fox and another Black-backed Jackal, as well as two Spotted Eagle Owls. Another star-studded night, the mercury dipping to just 4 C, camp for the night was a lay-by under a strategically placed acacia.

10 July. Tanqua Karoo (the P2250 and further east). Jeepers, cold at dawn! A thick fog too, not something that was going to help me find Karoo Korhaans or indeed much else. Having parked the car by a remote track and wandered off into the pea soup, I spent the first hour of the day watching larks flit off into the gloom just before getting close enough to actually see what they were! Some pretty impressive termite mounds hollowed out by Aarkvarks though, even better when a Bat-eared Fox was peeping out of one. Being upon a

featureless expanse of semi-desert cloaked in fog, problem one of the day was actually refinding the car! Having meandered aimlessly for quite a while, presuming the car was 'just ahead', it began to dawn upon me that I had in reality no real idea of where I was! Random ambles onward, Tractrac Chats appearing here and there, a couple of Karoo Scrub-Robins scurrying out from cover and then I stumbled upon the track. Hmm, car to the left or right? I stabbed a guess at right, 15 minutes later so emerged the car from the gloom! Time for coffee. Then, like magic, the fog began to lift, the sun climbing to burn off remnants in low valleys. The lark shapes morphed into distinct species, Red-capped Larks the vast bulk, but also quite a number of Spike-heeled Larks and, better still, over the next half hour or so, Karoo Lark, Cape Clapper Lark and Large-billed Lark. A Pale Chanting Goshawk winged over, flocks of Namaqua Sandgrouse filled the skies with their liquid bubbling calls, a glorious sunny day was beginning. Some way off, a whole bunch of small holes caught my attention, a colony of some small critters no doubt, but presuming the occupants to be nocturnal, I did not really expect to find life on the surface. However, as we sat there and basked in the morning sun, a curious little sound seemed to be emanating from all around, a quiet high-pitched whistle. And then I spotted them, poking up from burrows, right little cute things, Brant's Whistling Rats. A slightest move in their direction sent them diving back into the holes, but by sitting quietly, bar the occasional slurp of coffee, I eventually managed to get a few coming up quite close, pictures duly achieved. The basic plan for the day was a slow drive eastward along the length of the P2250, then veer south along the base of the Roggeveld escarpment. Excellent birding most of the way, Capped Wheatear, Karoo Eremomela and a flock of Grey-backed Sparrowlarks amongst the early highlights and Pale-winged Starlings, White-naped Raven and Southern Ant-eating Chat a little later on. One of the best stops however was aside a temporal watercourse some kilometres along the P2250 - not only were there at least 300 Cape Sparrows in a very active colony, but also a flock of 30 or so Black-headed Canaries just adjacent. And in their midst, very nice indeed, two male Damara Canaries, my first new bird of the trip! Sixty kilometres further, as the Karoo began to give way to the Roggeveld escarpment, another stop produced more nice birds - Fairy Flycatchers in a vegetated gully, Cape Grassbird in a damp area of rank stuff and an assorted collection of Malachite and Southern Double-collared Sunbirds on a hillside. Familiar Chat, Karoo Prinia, White-backed Mousebird and Namaqua Dove rounded off the action. Dangerously low on petrol (there are no stations in the Karoo!), we then began to head south, fully expecting to find a fuel station at Matjiesfontain, some 90 km south on the main N1 highway. With the needle sitting on absolute zero for the last few kilometres, I was feeling rather pleased when we finally rolled into Matjiesfontain. It was rather less pleasurable to discover this was a mere village with no fuel whatsoever! Tailgating trucks and free-wheeling down hills, the next 50 km were spent with full expectation of not making it, but by some miracle we did indeed arrive at Touws Rivier without gonking out, the petrol station a most welcome sight. With a full tank, we then continued our journey, destination for the night, the pleasant town of Swellendam. With tent up and Olive Thrushes hopping on the grass, all too soon it was getting dark. Time to 'splash out' for a change, pizza in town this evening. 11 July. Agulhas Plain & De Hoop. A tad wet and wild at dawn, low cloud hugging the hills to the north of Swellendam. Fully confident that conditions would improve, I decided to delay my planned exploration of the Agulhas Plain by a couple of hours and instead head up to Grootvadersbosch, a patch of semi-tropical forest high on the slopes. A diabolical road in the rain, the car's progression from white to deep chocolate-red was just about complete by the time we arrived, even the roof managing to get a nice coating! The intelligent half of our pair decided a book in the car was the preferable option to a trampse through the dripping foliage of Grootvadersbosch, but off I went, donning waterproof trousers and coat. Wasn't actually too bad, the rain had already finished and quite a number of birds were popping out to shake themselves off - Sombre Greenbuls and Cape White-eyes in abundance, Cape Batis too. Typical of tropical forests, time would need to be out in to guarantee many of the specials of this habitat (Narina Trogons et al), but in the mere hour or so I gave it, I notched up quite a nice collection - as well as Greater Double-collared Sunbirds and Bar-throated Apalis in reasonable numbers, there were also several Blue-mantled Crested Flycatchers, one Yellow-throated Woodland-Warbler, an African Goshawk and an Olive Woodpecker. Bushbuck and Large Grey Mongoose were also encountered, the latter on the road just below the reserve. Sloshing back to the car, it was then time to resume my planned itinerary on the Agulhas Plain, namely a slow meander through the rich farmlands of the Overberg heading towards De Hoop Nature Reserve. Though much of the area is essentially a monoculture of sheep pastures and wheat, the area is surprisingly good for birds, an abundance of cranes, bustards and korhaans all occurring, alongside many larks and other birds. Studding the area, adding splashes of colour and variety of habitat, remnants of fynbos occupy occasional slopes. With the skies now blue and the sun warm, the birding was simply superb - from Buffeljagsriver to Malagas, it was birds galore all the way! Amongst the big birds, flocks of Blue Cranes every few kilometres, two pairs of Denham's Bustards, one pair of Karoo Korhaans, also one Martial Eagle, three Cape Vultures, abundant Spur-winged Geese, many Helmeted Guineafowl and, mostly farmed, Ostrich everywhere! It is however for the smaller passerines that the Overberg is frequently famed - and today was no exception: Capped Wheatears, Sicklewinged Chats, Stonechats, Pied Starlings and Red-winged Starlings, Fiscal Flycatchers, various cisticolas, numerous sparrows, weavers and canaries and, in abundance, larks and pipits. In these last two groups, sifting through the numerous Red-capped Larks and African Pipits, added extras were soon found - Large-billed Lark and Agulhas Long-billed Lark, along with Long-billed Pipit and Plain-backed Pipit. Also Jackal Buzzards, Alpine Swifts, Crowned Lapwings and Red-faced Mousebirds, plus plenty of Yellow Mongooses and, I assume a reintroduction, a solitary Black Wildebeest. At Malgas, I took the river ferry, a unique man-powered crossing, the car slowly winched across by friendly locals strapping a whip around a cable and pulling. Slow, but engaging. And from there, it was a short drive down to the gates of De Hoop Nature Reserve, more Blue Cranes en route and both Cape Sugarbirds and a Cape Mountain Zebra on arrival to welcome us. De Hoop is a magical place, extensive fynbos surrounding a 14 km long bird-rich vlei and stretching down to the sand dunes and beaches of the Indian Ocean. And choc'a'bloc with birds and big mammals, Ostriches and Bonteboks rarely out of sight, herds of Eland and roving bands of Baboons also common. Arriving late afternoon, my first port of call was the campsite on the edge of the vlei - a small gasp when I saw the water, absolutely

deeming with birds, never before have I seen quite so many birds on this vlei, there were literally tens of thousands of ducks and coots, dozens of White Pelicans and scores of herons, egrets and ibises. Oo wow I would have some fun the next day, I thought. For the evening however, I had other plans - with the tent up, and a wary eye to Baboons gathering, we set off on a small hike along the vlei, the sun beginning to set over the water. A Cape Serotine Bat came out for a flutter, Spotted Eagle Owls began to call on the opposite bank, but the target I sought would be in the water. I actually rated my chances as pretty low, but we had been walking for less than 20 minutes when I spotted a ripple in the water. And there it was, one Cape Clawless Otter swimming directly towards us. One Cape Clawless Otter with one gimormous fish! Directly onto the bank it swam, climbing out onto a rock right beneath us, we perched on a low cliff gawping down. A crunching of fish for the next quarter hour and more, then suddenly more Cape Clawless Otters - three swimming across the vlei together, first visiting a large sand island, then veering across towards us to spy on the fish-chomping individual below us. A splendid end to the day. 12 July. De Hoop. Dawn, dense thickets surrounding the campsite. One Spotted Eagle Owl perched in a gnarled milkwood, musical duets echoing out from cavorting Southern Boubous, Cape Robin-Chats emerging from cover in all directions. In these here thickets, a couple of specialities frequently lurk in the form of Southern Tchagra and Knysna Woodpecker. Both often fairly elusive, I meandered around, peering into bushes, wandering along the vlei a little - plenty of Fiscal Flycatchers, a couple of Sombre Greenbuls, occasional Bar-throated Apalis, even a fluky Rufous-cheeked Nightjar found roosting on a patch of bare ground, but 'the De Hoop Two' didn't seem to want to play ball, my best efforts drawing a total blank. Eventually gave up and began to wander back to my tent, African Black Swifts thundering overhead, a few Little Swifts and Alpine Swifts also milling. Troops of Baboons were climbing up from the cliffs to begin their foraging. Almost back at the tent, from one low bush to another, across flew a bird looking most tchagra-like. And indeed it was, not one, but a pair of Southern Tchagra appearing in the low crown of the thicket, very nice. Coffee at the tent, Southern Boubous hopping up for scraps, then time for a quick drive to the coast a few kilometres further south. Always a chance of Caracal in the coastal dunes, but our mammal tally included no cats - the main attractions being a herd of about 60 Eland, about ten Grey Rhebok, abundant Bontebok and, at the small end of the scale, two Vlei Rats. From atop a dune, an impressive view, white beaches stretching far to the east and west, low breakers of the Indian Ocean lapping and assorted birds congregating on the sand and rocky outcrops, Black Oystercatchers and Caspian Tern amongst. Far better however, rolling and flopping a little beyond the surf, early returnee Southern Right Whales, dozens of them all the way along. Most glorious it is to sit upon the sand with these giants in the blue waters just yonder, even more so when a pod of Long-beaked Common Dolphins began riding the waves too. Back at camp, Baboons had trashed my tent, the swines. No food inside, but still they had 'opened' the inner tent to investigate, naturally not bothering with the zipper. So nice to have a tent with an added window!!! Decamped and chucked everything in the car and then headed off for the highlight of the day, an exploration of the vlei and its thousands of birds. Walked about six or seven kilometres, stopping on outcrops every so often to scan the water. Countless thousands of Red-billed Coot and Yellow-billed Duck, many hundreds of Little Grebe, Cape Shoveler and Southern Pochard. And in amongst these teeming masses, Cape Teals galore, gatherings of both Spur-winged and Egyptian Geese, and, in flotillas the length of the vlei, White Pelicans, a minimum of 120 present. Careful scanning added a few extras - White-backed Duck (a flock of 12), Maccoca Duck (a single) and Hottentot Teal (two). Not only the open waters full of birds, but the banks too - dozens of cormorants (three species), plenty of Anhingas, quite a lot of herons and egrets (including Intermediate Egret) and smaller numbers of Greater Flamingo, African Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis and Hammerkop. Also many waders, predominantly Black-winged Stilts and White-fronted Plovers, but also including a pair of Water Thick-knees. By now mid-afternoon, black skies began to edge in from the west, the blue fast retreating. Through pastures full of Ostrich and a handful of Cape Mountain Zebra, we hurried. Bokmakierie and Cape Sugarbird en-route, Capped Wheatears hopping along, spits of rain began to fall just as we got to the car. And then the heavens opened, a deluge of biblical proportions hammering down. Oo er, time to leave - let's cut and run, off to cozy Cape Town ...a day earlier than planned, but the idea of a hotel room did seem quite appealing. Stopped for rather nice fish and chips in Bredasdorp, the towns roads looking like raging rivers, then pushed on to reach Cape Town a little after dark, the roads over Sir Lowry's Pass a tad dodgy in the poor weather. By some miracle, the rain let up just as we arrived, so after checking into our hotel, we took the opportunity to take a wander, popping down to the town's very nice Waterfront, shopping malls and restaurants with a real touch of class. 13 July. Sir Lowry's Pass & the Cape Peninsula. The following day I was due to embark on a pelagic into the waters south of Cape Town. One look at the conditions on this morning however suggested the trip was almost certainly going to be cancelled, winds blustering in from the east, the sea stormy and occasional squalls to liven things up. Darn, I thought, I'd only been hanging around the Western Cape for the previous week to await this sea trip! Anyhow, back to the present, I quite fancied a Cape Rockjumper to kick the day off, so heading back along the N1, all too soon we were again climbing the roads to Sir Lowry's Pass, splendid views across False Bay and back to Table Mountain. On the brow of the ridge, though quite sunny, the wind was just incredible - a slip of the hand and I think the car doors would have blown all the way back to Cape Town! What hope of seeing birds? Struggling against the wind, with occasional Orange-breasted Sunbirds making brave attempts to stay aloft, I soon understood I would need to climb to the summit and drop down to the hopefully sheltered western side. And that I did, majestic White-necked Ravens playing on the wind as I struggled to remain upright, a pair of Sentinel Rock Thrushes on one of the upper slopes. And, just as I had hoped, in the immediate lea of the summit, a broad ledge of grass and rock where the wind barely ruffled the blades, bliss. Here would be my birds. Five minutes later, I was perched on a rock with my quarry hopping and scurrying about in front, no less than five Cape Rockjumpers in all their glory, one even popping up just a few metres in front! Nice. Also Cape Bunting and several Familiar Chats. And then a glance to the east, 'oh crap', I muttered, the blackest of black skies racing in to obliterate the sun. No hope of getting back to the car I understood, the rain was just minutes away. I darted around the rocks, found a cubby hole and slunk inside, just in time! Down it came, a wild mix of rain and hail, the wind going sideways even in this sheltered spot. Warm and cozy in my

hole, I sat it out, the storm fortunately only lasting ten minutes. And then I legged it all the way back to the car, flushing a Cape Grassbird en route and arriving back at the car to the smirks of my companion who had again decided a book was preferable to masochism on a mountain. For the rest of the day, almost entirely sunny, we opted for a pleasant tour of the Cape Peninsula, the main stops being for a waddle with the African Penguins at Simon's Town, a short seawatch over False Bay (White-chinned Petrel and Subantarctic Skua the highlights) and a stroll in the mountains of the interior, the last producing Verreaux's Eagle, Cape Siskin and loads more Orange-breasted Sunbirds. Other highlights were coffee in Kommetjie, all four species of cormorant, six Black Oystercatchers and, naturally, the stunning landscapes throughout. Back in Cape Town, the inevitable news - no chance of the pelagic next day, winds forecast to batter on incessantly. Maybe the following day, they said. 14 July. Kirstenbosch & Rooi Els. With the pelagic cancelled, though still possible for the following day, I toyed with the idea of just cutting and running, the lure of the Kalahari most tempting. However, I eventually settled on the option to kill a day in the Cape Town area and gamble that the weather might calm down. Splitting up for the day, my partner in crime had desires for Great White Sharks in Gans Bay, the cage diving experience that offers the chance to virtually tickle the noses of these super predators. Being a total scrooge, I however opted for a far more sedate alternative, a day of leisure in the Kirstenbosch botanical gardens, the idea being to photograph Cape Sugarbirds. On the slopes of Table Mountain, Kirstenbosch is one of the world's great botanical gardens, an impressive floral mix of aloes, proteas and ericas set between manicured lawns and an extensive network of paths and trails. Eyes up, towering ramparts of Table Mountain rising to the sky; eyes down, birds flitting in each and every direction. Entering the gardens, birds are immediately apparent - Cape Francolins, Hadedda Ibis and Helmeted Guineafowl on the lawns, Cape Bulbuls and Cape Robin-Chats in the flowering beds, Southern Double-collared Sunbirds at every other flowerhead. A short stroll through indigenous forest and thick undergrowth along the Braille Trail added the first flocks of Cape White-eyes, plus Sombre Bulbul, Dusky Flycatcher and, after a bit of searching, a Lemon Dove. Eight Olive Pigeons also seen in adjacent tall trees. As I meandered up through the gardens I eventually reached the protea gardens - plenty of time spent here, a Rufous-cheeked Sparrowhawk one of the highlights, Sweet Waxbills and Forest Canaries amongst the others, plus very photogenic Dusky Flycatchers and Cape Robin-Chats. However, despite quite a number of circuits, I spectacularly managed not to see a single Cape Sugarbird, a species normally quite common here. Eventually I gave up and, as midday approached and the gardens began to attract more and more general tourists, I decided to leave. Still keen on photographing some Cape Sugarbirds, I then travelled round to the far side of False Bay to try my luck on the coastal fynbos at Rooi Els, another of the Cape's very spectacular stretches of coastline. A very good move this turned out to be, not only did I find a flock of eight Cape Sugarbirds almost immediately, but one just sat on a protea in the sunshine and posed for pictures just a few metres away, my photographic desires duly satisfied. Plentiful Orange-breasted Sunbirds also present, plus a Cape Grassbird, three Cape Siskins, a Fiscal Flycatcher and, on the cliffs above, one Verreaux's Eagle. For day that was spent 'killing time', I was most content, a Klipspringer on departure adding to the contentment, a troop of Baboons also seen, plus Cape Fur Seals in the sea adjacent. Back in Cape Town, good news all around - my friend had not been chomped by the Great White Sharks and, better still, all was go-go for the pelagic next day! 15 July. Pelagic Birding. Simon's Town, pre-dawn, six of us sheltering under the canopy of a quayside cafe, drizzle sweeping in. Hmm, this was not looking good! Though the forecast talked of cold fronts battering the Cape over the coming days, we were supposed to be sailing out in one of the few calm windows available. Boarding the small boat, with the taking of a couple of anti-sickness pills seeming most prudent, out of the harbour we motored out to greet the approaching dawn. Swift Terns, Cape and Hartlaub's Gulls quickly seen, as well as lines of Cape Cormorants on the buoys and the first Cape Gannets winging past. Half way to Cape Point, still in the relative calm of False Bay, we picked up a number of White-chinned Petrels, indicative that a cold front had passed over and an onshore wind was still blowing. Reaching Cape Point, the skies darkened and soon we were travelling through a rain squall, the boat offering little shelter as we lurched up and over the swells rolling in from the Southern Atlantic, breakers landing down on the boat. Clinging on to avoid a watery grave, I began to wonder how many pelagic birders end up overboard in these turbulent seas. Sooty Shearwaters arrived in small numbers to accompany us as we headed further out to sea, the weather soon improving with the rain initially replaced by mist and low visibility. Shy Albatross turned up out of the mist to trail our boat or wander off effortlessly on their long wings. Slowly, slowly, the mist evaporated, blue skies appeared and from there on, it was glorious sun all the way. Amazing. The key to success on these pelagics is to locate an active trawler on the continental shelf, preferably one lifting its nets. Normally radar is utilised to ease the search, but in the choppy conditions of this day, it was more a question of attempting to stand on the highest point of the boat and scan the horizons. The first trawler we located was unfortunately heading back to Cape Town and totally birdless, but a little later we spotted two vessels on the horizon. Heading in their direction, Sub-Antarctic Skuas began to appear and at 15 nautical miles off Cape Point we picked up Black-browed Albatross in small numbers, soon followed by the beautiful Pintado Petrels, surely one of the most exquisite seabirds in existence. A single Soft-plumaged Petrel did a fly-by and was soon followed by small groups of Antarctic Prions, birds that we were to see on and off for the rest of the day. This mixture of birds persisted as we approached the vessels, vessels that ultimately turned out to not be trawlers, but oil tankers sitting just beyond the horizon. This was disappointing, but with a switch to a westerly direction, the radar then managed to pick up a small vessel a few miles further out.

And thus we found the 'Aquila, a long-liner operating out of Cape Town. The Birding Gods were surely smiling down - not only had we found a fishing boat, but just as we arrived, so too did it begin to lift its lines and process the catch, a magnet to birds from miles around to pour in for a free lunch. The waters around the boat were bubbling with birds, a cocktail of Shy and Black-browed Albatrosses, Pintado and White-chinned Petrels, Sooty Shearwaters and Wilson's Storm Petrels. With the Aquila discarding material from the processed fish catch, we were able to just sit with birds milling in all directions and the delights of albatrosses and petrels bobbing on the waves just a few metres from us. Soon we picked

up several Southern Giant Petrels and amongst them, not the easiest of birds to distinguish, at least two Northern Giant Petrels. Most memorable it was to munch on our lunch with two a'penny Pintado Petrels floating past and a cloud of Sub-Antarctic Skuas hogging the skies above. Even a visit to the boats loo was eventful - while trying to concentrate on not falling over, you could not help but look out of the little window at a ginormous Black-browed Albatross looking in! And then, in the midst of this spectacle, a shout from someone 'Hey there's a white back!' Stone me, a fairly rare sight in Cape waters, but arcing across our portside was a huge Northern Royal Albatross, what a mega bird! Dwarfing the accompanying Shy and Black-browed Albatrosses, it soon landed amongst other albatrosses on the water little way distant. Not a very confiding bird, it resisted all attempts for us to pull up adjacent, again taking to the air and doing a fly past. Lost for a while, we then relocated it in another flock of resting albatrosses and as we viewed it, suddenly there was another! Two Northern Royal Albatrosses, a rare treat indeed.

With lunch over, a couple of hours elapsed and the trawler nearing the end of its processing, it was soon time to be thinking about a return to Cape Town. Just before departing however, suddenly another bird was found - surrounded by Shy Albatrosses, one very smart adult Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross bobbing about on the water about 15 metres off our portside, a very fitting finale to our time with the long-liner. With all on board in very good mood, the journey back was one of enjoying the sun and the few birds still passing, not least the regular flocks of Antarctic Prions and a few Sub-Antarctic Skuas and occasional Wilson's Petrels. Once past Cape Point, a meander along the coast allowed us to view some of the cormorant colonies, picking up all White-breasted, Cape, Bank and Crowned Cormorants. Also encountered an Arctic Skua, picked up a few African Penguins on the beaches at Simon's Town and concluded the trip with a pair of African Black Oystercatchers in the harbour. Approximate numbers of birds seen:

- African Penguin – several at the Boulder's colony, Simon's Town.
- Northern Royal Albatross - 2 birds.
- Shy Albatross – about 100.
- Black-browed Albatross – about 75.
- Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross – 1 adult.
- Northern Giant Petrel – 2 birds.
- Southern Giant Petrel – about 10 seen.
- White-chinned Petrel – common, at least 200 seen.
- Sooty Shearwater – about 25 birds.
- Pintado Petrel - a minimum of 300.
- Soft-plumaged Petrel – 1 bird on route out.
- Antarctic Prion - numerous sightings, mostly single and small flocks, about 100 bird in total.
- Wilson's Storm Petrel – mostly singles flying past, about 50 in total.
- Cape Gannet – about 200, mostly inshore.
- Sub-Antarctic Skua – about 25, mostly around the fishing boat.
- Arctic Skua - 1 in False Bay.
- Swift Tern – common in coastal areas.
- Hartlaub's Gull – common in coastal areas.
- Cape Gull – abundant in coastal areas, one offshore.
- Cape Cormorant – abundant in coastal areas.
- Bank Cormorant – about 25 at a breeding colony.
- White-breasted cormorant – common in coastal areas.
- Crowned Cormorant – one in coastal waters. Many thanks to Cape Pelagics for such an excellent day out, top marks to Dalton Dale, the guide for the day. Driving back to Cape Town, the weather was appalling, a wild wind and very cold rain. It transpired that it had been just like that all day on land, lucky we had been out to sea! ***** With the forecast speaking of flooding in low areas, snow on the high passes and gales set to hit the coast, we wasted no time - a quick coffee and fill of junk food in McDonald's, then straight to the road, several hundred kilometres lay ahead, an overnight drive taking us to the sunny lands of the Kalahari. For 'Part Two' of my trip, [CLICK HERE](#) Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park