

South Africa. Part Three, Kruger National Park & Swaziland.

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The jewel in South Africa's crown, the vast Kruger National Park boasts not only one of the highest mammal diversities anywhere in Africa, but also an impressive bird list totalling over 500 species. Covering almost 20,000 square kilometres, a visit of short duration is always going to be a mere scratch of its surface, even more so due to the range of habitats present and the significantly differing natures of the north and south.

With just a few days at our disposal, we began with a couple of days in the far north, staying at Punda Maria and visiting the superb Pafari area, before then travelling south, stopping at Shingwedzi and Satara. Thereafter, we left Kruger and crossed the border into Swaziland for a short visit to Malalotja, before re-entering South Africa to conclude the trip with a day in the Wakkerstroom area. 22 July, Kruger, Punda Maria. Dawn, northern Limpopo Province, 14 hours on the road, only 140 km or so left to go. Stopped in Makhado to stock up in the local supermarket, then took the R524 to the Kruger entrance, Vervet Monkeys on route, plus birds such as Grey Go-away Birds and Striped Kingfisher in the agricultural areas, the vegetation a lush mosaic of banana, maize and jacaranda. At the gates of the national park, the vegetation immediately reverts to the thick thornveld and acacia woodland typical of the north of Kruger. And along with the transformation, very obvious evidence that you have entered this park - decorating the road at very regular intervals, Elephant pool! Quite a bump if you choose to drive over some of the offerings! In the ten kilometres from the gates to Punda Maria, we were soon getting to grips with the local wildlife - gone were the Springbok and Gemsbok of Kgalagadi, the dominant mammals were now Impala, herds of them occurring virtually everywhere, a good couple of hundred noted in this single stretch alone. Also the first Nyala of the trip, two massive Buffalo lurking in thick bush and a loose association of Giraffe grazing acacia tops. Overhead, a circling mass of White-backed Vultures suggested a kill nearby, while other birds on this first section also included Martial Eagle, Brown Snake-Eagle and Brown-hooded Kingfisher. Of the camps in Kruger, Punda Maria is one of my favourites, not only set in an excellent area for birds, but also small and relatively untouristed. Critically, it is also the best camp for access to the fantastic Pafari area some distance further north, my plan for the next day. Arriving, we checked in, then again selected the most remote corner to pitch our tent, the tracks and trails of animals very visible just beyond. With the temperature a glorious 28 C and having been effectively driving since dawn the previous day, a small siesta seemed most apt - my friend collapsed on a mattress, I 'spilt' a few crumbs around the site. Like magic powder, it instantaneously turns the dusty ground into a theatre of bird action - Dark-eyed Bulbuls and Yellow-bellied Greenbuls bouncing about, one Kurrichane Thrush hopping in, Fork-tailed Drongos swooping in, Yellow-billed Hornbills too. Coffee brewed, then a quick wander around the campsite, Vervet Monkeys pranking around, plus a little flock of Blue Waxbills and quite a number of Grey-headed Sparrows. Siesta time over, grassland east of Punda Maria was calling - though still a little hot to really encounter too much, it was a nice introduction to the region's birds nevertheless, additions to the day's tally including Emerald-spotted Wood-Dove, Long-tailed Shrike, Brown-crowned Tchagra and Croaking Cisticola. Also dozens of Impala again, a couple of Scrub Hares scampering off through the bush, plus our first Tree Squirrels of the trip. Having completed a loop of some 30 km, we then returned to camp to relax for a while. A couple of hours before sunset, we set off for the Mahonie Loop, an excellent trail that harbours a number of regional specialities and is also rather picturesque to boot, mixed woodland rising over rocky knolls and into narrow stream valleys. Good birding throughout, Crested Francolins and Natal Francolins quickly located, plus a covey of the punk-haired Crested Guinea-fowls, a bird that always seems to look most stupid! Also quite a few squawking Brown-headed Parrots, two Golden-breasted Buntings and, hitching a lift on the first herd of Elephants we encountered, two Yellow-billed Oxpeckers (the only ones we were to see in Kruger). Didn't find most of the mouthwatering specialities that sometimes lurk here such as Eastern Nicator, Narina Trogon, Broad-billed Roller and White-breasted Cuckoo-Shrike. Still, couldn't complain - family herds of Elephants proved entertaining, plus saw quite a few more Nyala and, antelope of the day, the dainty Sharpe's Grysbok, three seen in total. Back at camp, I positioned my night cam and retired for a long deserved sleep. The camera was to capture a real surprise... 23 July. Kruger, Pafari & Shingwedzi. An hour pre-dawn, brewed up a coffee, tiptoed over to my night cam, zipped through the images ...nearly spit the coffee all over the screen! An animal I had not even thought about, an animal I have never even seen, but there it was, 2.30 a.m. slinking past, the spots and stripes of an African Civet! Hmm, what a little stunner, no prizes for guessing what I would be up to the following night! A little later, still under the cover of darkness, we slipped out of Punda Maria, the destination for the day being the riverine forests and savanna at Pafari, the most northerly extreme of Kruger National Park and right on the borders on both Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The journey up is largely through thick bush, fairly uneventful for the most part, but with the rise of the sun, bits and bobs did include a Steenbok, a Pearl-spotted Owlet, several Long-tailed Shrikes and large flocks of Golden-breasted Buntings, a total of at least 60 encountered. About 15 km short of Pafari however, the action began in style - blocking the road, a pride of Lions having a morning snooze. One big male, one lioness and two small cubs, all splayed out across the road, presumably soaking up the warmth from the dark surface. Morning rush hour with class, just us and the Lions, the pride eventually staggered to their feet and ambled along for a hundred metres or so before veering off into the bush. With the landscape now transforming, Baobabs appearing on rocky ridges, concentrations of Impala increasing and a few Kudu also emerging, we continued the dozen or so kilometres more to reach the broad Luvuvhu Valley. And what a splendid sight awaiting us, the area far more open and the numbers of animals most impressive, Warthogs trotting past, immense herds of Impala, gatherings of Nyala and occasional Plains Zebra and Kudu. Gangs of Baboon were trawling the area, climbing termite mounds and rooting through scrub, clear signs of Elephants were apparent everywhere. To this backdrop, the first birds of Pafari - both Yellow-billed and Red-

billed Hornbills, a flock of Green Wood-Hoopoes, roving Red-billed Buffalo-Weavers, abundant Meve's Starlings and much more. First port of call in this excellent area was the bridge of the Luvuvhu River. Ignoring for a moment the Hippopotamus that were flopped across sandbanks, this point allows both good observations of the river channels and the adjacent riverine forest, but also the skies above. A key site for assorted swifts, the presence of large flocks of wheeling Little Swifts was a good omen, hopefully the rarer cousins would be amongst them. The haunting calls of African Fish Eagles echoed from downriver, Wire-tailed Swallows flitted low over the river, Lesser Striped Swallow also present for a while. In the skies above, my scans eventually reaped the rewards - two Horus Swift (not very common here in the southern winter) and, much later, the real prize, two Mottled Spinetails and three Bohm's Spinetails, the latter a little bat-like thing, truly a speciality of northern Kruger. African Pied Wagtail and Black-headed Oriole also seen at this locality. Time for breakfast, I thought. The picnic site a few kilometres east of the bridge was a most exquisite locality for morning munchies - water boiling away on the stove, sandwiches disappearing up a tree in the paws of a thieving Vervet, occasional Nyalas wandering through, ranks of Crocodiles and Hippos in the adjacent river. And what birds, the freedom to wander without car rendering it all the better, Water Thick-knees and Goliath Heron on the river, Tropical Boubou in riverine scrub, Ashy Flycatcher and Southern Black Flycatcher in the trees, Kurrichane Thrush hopping across the picnic site itself, plus several Brown-crowned Tchagras and little flocks of Blue Waxbills and Red-billed Firefinches. Topping the lot, however, a right bevy of chat-type things - three White-throated Robin-Chats, one glorious Red-capped Robin-Chat, four Eastern Bearded Scrub-Robins and one White-browed Scrub-Robin, fantastic all. Also Black-backed Puffback, Meve's Starlings, Green-backed Camaroptera and assorted added extras. Yup, one of the better places to stop for breakfast. Heading on, we meandered further east along the river, the area not only rich in large mammals, particularly Zebra and Impala, but also remaining excellent for birds, flocks of White-crested Helmet Shrikes soon encountered, followed by a loose flock of White-crowned Shrikes. Also noted Chinspot Batis, Tinkling Cisticola, Brown-hooded Kingfisher and loads of Emerald-spotted Wood-Doves. Journey's end was Crook's Corner, vast open sand banks on the confluence of the Luvuvhu and Limpopo Rivers. A hide-out for bandits from days long gone by, a short paddle across the river takes you to Zimbabwe directly ahead or Mozambique to the right, in both directions via considerable numbers of Crocodiles! far better to just relax and enjoy the birds, White-fronted Bee-eaters on riverside perches, Golden-tailed Woodpecker and Terrestrial Brownbul in the woodland behind, White-crowned Lapwing on the sand banks out front, nice all round. And with that, we began our journey south, a final loop though the Pafuri area adding a Red-crested Korhaan, several Brown-hooded Parrots and, hitching a lift on Elephants, a flock of Red-billed Oxpeckers. Kruger is a vast place, distances are deceptively large and there are always plenty of distractions to slow you down - for that reason, our next stop for the night was Shingwedzi, not that far, but situated south of a large area of dense Mopani woodland, just about the hardest of the Kruger habitats to see anything in. We traversed this area with predictably little seen, the highlights being Kori Bustard and, even more so, five Roan Antelopes, not always an easy species to find in Kruger. I knew very little about Shingwedzi prior to arrival, but was to be pleasantly surprised - not only was it convenient for Kanniedood Dam, but it was also going to provide my best night in Kruger. Though quite late by the time we arrived, we still managed to squeeze a couple of hours in at the dam, very nice for for both birds and mammals, the former including Saddle-billed Storks and flocks of Yellow-billed Storks, the latter including Hippos, Waterbuck, Common Reedbuck and another Sharpe's Grysbok. A big herd of Elephants blocked the road on route back to camp, I was a little late, a definite no-no in Kruger! Dark descended, my tent was right at the camp's fringe, grassland and scattered acacia just beyond. I had high hopes of critters of the night appearing, a certain spotted and stripey thing now top of my list. I did not have long to wait - less than an hour after dark, shuffling sounds, I clicked on my light. Bingo! African Civet directly ahead! What a corker, nosing about between two acacias, totally unfussed by my presence. And then, stone me, another trotted in, brilliant. And if that weren't enough, two Large-spotted Genets also appeared, plus one Scrub Hare. With pictures of all, plus my night cam now set, I retired to my sleeping bag. Mighty roars of a Lion as a lullaby, not quite so soothing as the standard, but superb. Goodnight. 24 July. Kruger, Shingwedzi & Satara. A pre-dawn look at the night cam's capture, more shots of the African Civet, heaps of Black-backed Jackals. The very vocal Lion had not wandered past, but was still calling not far off. Leaving the camp shortly after, the first sighting of the day was a Spotted Hyena, shortly to be followed by four Nyala and, as usual, loads of Impala. Dawn on the Kanniedood Dam, a backdrop of grunting Hippos and Baboons clambering out of roost trees, birds a typical mix of water and bush, the tallies including four African Fish Eagles, 40 Yellow-billed Storks, three Openbill Storks, four Goliath Herons and, first of the trip, two Giant Kingfishers and one Green-backed Heron. Also bumped into Swainson's Spurfowl, plus Natal Francolin and Crested Francolin. From the dam, we opted to take a rather more remote route south, a loop that veered to the east along a gravel/stone road. This was a slight miscalculation - although we did see flocks of Cut-throat Finches and Golden-breasted Buntings, plus Double-banded Sandgrouse and five stunning Southern Ground Hornbills, we also shredded our tire mid-way, the sharp stones ripping into the side rim and rendering it a write-off. The official action one takes with such eventuality in Kruger is to wait until help arrives in the form of a passing tourist who can then alert rangers at the next camp to come to your aid. Hadn't seen another tourist all morning, so definitely wasn't going to do that! Hoping no rangers would happen upon us, or Lion for that matter, I emptied the boot of our considerable piles of junk and set to work, a full ten minutes later and a nice new tire was in place. Onward, we were on our way again! Slight compensation for our misfortune were a herd of eight Tsessebe and an African Hawk Eagle. Camps in Kruger can mend punctures, but ours was beyond that, so with some reluctance, I turned to the west at Letaba and left Kruger to buy a new tire in the nearest town. Thereafter to save some time, but meaning I missed the very good Olifants area, I travelled south outside the park and re-entered at Orpen, directly east of Satara, my destination for the night and an excellent area of open grass savannah. Satara Camp is rather large and quite popular, but its leafy nature also means it is good for birding, tame Red-billed Hornbills mingling with Burchell's Starlings outside our chalet (a touch of luxury for us this night), along with Grey Go-away Bird, Arrow-marked Babblers, Green Wood-Hoopoes and a variety of the more usual birds. I didn't really spend long looking round the camp

though. Instead, I took a drive to the grasslands and scattered acacia woods to the immediate east. A most splendid zone, birds in the acacia areas including Orange-breasted Bush-Shrike, both Brown-capped and Black-capped Tchagra and a flock of White-crested Helmet-Shrikes, while grassland species included typical birds such as Sabota Lark, Tawny-flanked Prinia and Tinkling Cisticola, with Ayre's Hawk Eagle and Red-crested Korhaan also noted. Highlight of the day however was not a bird, but again a mammal - crossing an area of open grassland, three lumbering hulks plodding along just to my left, adult White Rhinos in their full glory. Superb animals, but also a little sobering to see - poaching is reaching astronomical levels in Kruger and throughout South Africa, a military campaign now kicking in to tackle the highly armed gangs that are operating. As of July, over 65 White Rhinos in Kruger alone had been slaughtered in 2012, purely for the hacking off of their horns, a terrible toll. And here stood three, adults with magnificent horns, difficult to enjoy the moment knowing those very horns would likely lead to their eventual demise. Back at camp, Tree Squirrel scampered, Little Swifts circled above, African Scops Owls began to hoot as darkness fell. Set the camera, retired for the night. 25 July. Kruger, Satara & Lower Sabie. Out to the grasslands east of Satara again, another morning amble which turned out most pleasant. First bird of the day was a Burchell's Coucal in grass just outside Satara, soon after followed by several Double-banded Sandgrouse, a Pearl-spotted Owlet and a large flock of vultures that included both White-headed Vulture and Hooded Vulture. Birding highlight of the morning, however, was the crossing of a small gully, a stream trickling through and vegetation hanging over. On the one side, an assortment of usual birds such as Three-banded Plover and Black-winged Stilt, but on the other there was a bird that is frequently more than elusive - one adult White-backed Night Heron huddled on the bank under the branches of a tree. Next highlight was of the feline nature - poking up from long grass, a pair of ears and spotted crown, one Cheetah watching distant Impala with intent. Stopped and watched, a long wait of seeing basically tops of ears or absolutely nothing, but then suddenly the cat was up and staring with new intensity, a group of Impala had strayed a little closer. Then, POW, the cat exploded into action, dust flying as the Cheetah accelerated, the Impala erupting into flight, scattering and pounding off. The Cheetah veered towards one, basically a bullet in pursuit of high velocity bouncing bean! Through acacia, through long grass ...then vanished, the outcome I was not to see! I think however the Cheetah was not successful, the Impala seemed to be putting distance on the cat at last glimpse. Phew, that was a bit of exhilaration, must be time for breakfast! Back at camp, both Greater Blue-eared and Cape Glossy Starlings, plus a Hoopoe and several Tree Squirrels. The basic plan for today was to continue southward, stopping for the night at Lower Sabie. We had gone only about 20 km when a couple of parked cars on a side track led us to the second Cheetah of the day, another case of ears and half a head poking up from the long grass. We didn't stop. A little further, a large flock of swallows over a vlei prompted another pause, the results being a dozen or so Lesser Striped Swallows, two Mosque Swallows and several Wire-tailed Swallows, quite nice. Even more notable were stops at two waterholes - at the first, a White Rhino was just arriving for a drink, the beast making a most slow maneuver to reach the spot it wanted, while at the second, it was just a feast for the eyes - Goliath Herons, Black Crakes, African Jacanas, but most spectacular of the lot, one enormous Crocodile on an island in the centre with an Impala sticking out of its mouth, four legs splayed out in all direction!!! Also stopped for coffee at a picnic site, where the highlight was packs of Baboons attacking families to steal their food, with flocks of Yellow-billed Hornbills, a Crested Barbet and assorted starlings doing the same with rather less vicious methods. The next picnic site was also in some disarray with woman shrieking in the loo - a Baboon had somehow got in there and was none too happy at being stuck! African women are rather more adept at dealing with this than their European tourist counterparts ... armed with broom, two went marching in, ripples of laughter kept floating out, interspersed by yells, out came one running Baboon, glancing over his shoulder, no messing with them ladies! By mid-afternoon, we reached the Sabie River. A very picturesque area and rich in big game, Elephants and Buffalo in some numbers, Warthogs and antelopes abundant. It is also the most popular area with tourists, the massive Skukusa Camp just to the west and almost equally popular Lower Sabie to the east. Hmm, I was suffering cultural shock, the first time in the whole trip where tourist numbers were an issue. Ahead, a massive traffic jam, a Leopard had caught a Waterbuck and was apparently still sitting on it ...out of sight behind a ridge! After an enforced wait, we got passed without the temptation to linger with the crowd, then bumped into another crowd at what I believe was Lions, we again decided not to stop. Some kilometres on, just short of Lower Sabie Camp, is Sunset Dam - again quite a few other tourists, but the site is large and open, so the numbers don't impact on the experience. Loads of Hippos and Crocodiles, plus quite good birding here - a large flock of Yellow-billed Storks and African Spoonbills on one bank, White-crowned Lapwings and assorted other waders on the other, Grey Herons hitching lifts on Hippos mid-pool and various raptors overhead, including Tawny Eagle and Bateleur. Also Openbill Storks, Pied Kingfishers and Hammerkop. We then entered Lower Sabie Camp ...oo er, big camp shop with piles of souvenirs, several restaurants and a bustling car park and reception. I began to have some doubts as to whether I really wanted to stay. Retired to the restaurant on a veranda overlooking the river, decided to splash out on a lunch. Lesser Masked Weavers hopping about on the tables, White-fronted Bee-eaters and African Palm Swifts circling around, Hippos in the river beyond. All very nice, but we decided it was not for us. With only a couple of hours till sunset, we decided on a rapid change of plans. Drove south to Crocodile Bridge, left Kruger and continued even further south. As dark descended, we crossed the border from South Africa into Swaziland, a completely different world to the one we were leaving. Wound up the mountain roads in total darkness, eventually stopped a few kilometres beyond Pigg's Peak for the night. A big fat Red Toad was our first experience of Swazi wildlife. 26 July. Malalotja, Swaziland. Waking in the cool misty mountains of Swaziland, it was just a short drive to the gates of Malalotja, a reserve protecting an expanse of upland grassland dotted with all sorts of interesting birds and mammals. Having left Kruger, I really considered my trip over, so this Swaziland extension was essentially for relaxation, the cabins at this reserve rather deluxe and the area also offering easy birding in very pleasant scenery. On my last visit here, I had seen Blue Swallows sweeping across the grasses behind the cabins, Malalotja being one of the last localities for this endangered bird. This visit, at the heart of the southern winter, would see no swallows (they are summer visitors only), but hopefully most of the other specialities would be present. Passing through the gates, herds of Blesbok were

immediately seen, dozens of them grazing the slopes, congregating on areas recently burnt. Cape Longclaws fairly abundant, then the first corkers of the day, smart Black-winged Lapwings trotting across patches of burn. Checked into our cabin, lazed back in the comfy armchairs and brewed a coffee, ah nice. Cape Rock Thrushes sang from the roof top, Malachite Sunbirds flitted amongst flowers just yonder and a superb Red-throated Wryneck began calling in a small tree adjacent. Scattered herds of Blesbok stretched from hillside to hillside, a Common Reedbuck also seen. Soon the temptation to wander rekindled my energy, a drive punctuated with walks taking the next few hours. Another pair of Black-winged Lapwings, two a penny super-smart Buff-streaked Chats, several Mocking Cliff-Chats, a bevy of cisticolas that included Zitting, Wing-snapping and Wailing Cisticola. Other birds were not overly abundant, but the mix of species combined with landscapes made for a most enjoyable time. Also added Red-winged Starlings, Greater Double-collared Sunbirds, Yellow Bishops and quite a few Plain-backed Pipits, as well as Black-shouldered Kite and Jackal Buzzard. On the mammal front, in addition to the Blesbok, we eventually found a few herds of Black Wildebeest, several Plains Zebras, eight Grey Rhebok, two Mountain Reedbucks and, mammal of the day, a pair of cracking Oribi. Also Baboons, Warthogs and Rock Dassies. After bouncing the car off several boulders to try and reach a section a little lower, I decided the idea was folly, so paused a while to enjoy to close-quarter Secretary Birds, then nursed the car back up the bumpy slope, a few minor dents in the underside the only telltale sign. Sorry rental company! A couple more Red-throated Wrynecks near the cabins, plus a Cape Robin-Chat and single Ground Woodpecker, but the last highlight of the day came rather late on, a stunning Southern Bald Ibis dropping in to feed on the burnt grass a little above the cabins, four more flying over closer to dusk. A glorious sunset over the hills, Blesbok on the horizon. Retired to the cabin, a nice log fire burning away to keep off the chills. 27 July. Malalotja, Swaziland & Wakkerstroom. Dawn, forlorn hopes of an Aarkvark were predictably to come to nothing, no surprise there! Instead, on a canvas of rolling grasslands, the usual herds of Blesbok, three Black-backed Jackals heading for home and the two Oribi from the day before again picking their way across a rocky slope. A quick tootle around the reserve, adding Secretary Birds again, a couple of White-naped Ravens and both Bokmakierie and Cape White-eye around the cabin, then it was time to depart. Drove across half of Swaziland in search of a roadside stall I vaguely remembered from some years back, the reason superbly crafted furniture, perhaps the best in all Africa. Predictably failed to find it, or maybe it just doesn't exist any more, but did relocate a slightly more commercial venture, the craft centre at Swazi Candles. Proudly purchased a wooden carved Aarkvark, the ultimate critter of the night that yet again I had failed to find. And with that, I offloaded all my unnecessary luggage to a most grateful lady near the border, then headed back into South Africa, one last little destination up my sleeve, the famous Wakkerstroom birding hotspot. Hardly requiring an introduction, Wakkerstroom is the capital of South Africa for birds of the highland grass, the birds on offer including assorted bustards, korhaans and cranes, plus the highly localised Rudd's and Botha's Larks and Yellow-breasted Pipit. I had already visited this site a few years back, spending a few days in early summer when all the endemics and specialities were easily found, but given I was more-or-less passing, it seemed a shame to scoot by and not pop in. First up, rented a house in town that would serve as base for the night, then motored out of town to take one of the famous loops through farmland to the north. Thousands of Red-knobbed Coots and Yellow-billed Ducks, hundreds of Little Grebes, dozens of Egyptian Geese, Cape Shovelers and Southern Pochards, a few South African Shelducks, Hottentot Teals and assorted herons, ibises and cormorants, we had only driven a couple of kilometres and already an extended stop was in order! This rich vlei on the edge of town also boasted African Marsh Harrier, Purple Swamphen and Black Crake, nice start. About 10 km up, after a left turn onto a very dusty track, so started the next birding bonanza. Immense flocks of Long-tailed Widowbirds rising from roadside verges, both Yellow-crowned and Red Bishops buzzing all over the shop, loads of Pied Starlings and Cape Longclaws, Red-capped Larks appearing in abundance, no shortage of Spike-heeled Larks too. Five Swainson's Francolins scurried through rank grass, Mountain Wheatears and Sentinel Rock Thrushes perched atop mounds and broken buildings, Southern Ant-eating Chats adorned posts with great regularity. And in the midst of all of these, one Buffy Pipit, one Buff-streaked Chat, several Wing-snapping Cisticolas and an occasional Wailing Cisticola. Also, rather strange for animals more typical of the Kalahari, loads of Meerkat and Yellow Mongoose too, any field of short turf supporting one or both. Also added several Blesbok, but truly seemed to be heading for a big zero on two of the biggest birds of the area. White-naped Ravens drifted over, two pairs of Black-winged Lapwings strutted on burnt turf, Crowned Plovers too, and then, after the umpteenth scan, suddenly bingo on two counts, both of the big birds in a single field - two Blue Cranes and, better still, eight Blue Korhaans, simply devine. A little more touring and by now the sun was beginning to drop, Black-headed Herons stood in a long grass field, three Grey-winged Francolins crouched at the road's edge, time to head back to town. Did have hopes of watching the opening ceremony of the London Olympics, but Wakkerstroom is not exactly the most vibrant town at night, not a single establishment was open after about 6.00 p.m.! Darn cold too, the house we stayed not very warm either! Ah well, at least the birding had been good. 28 July. Wakkerstroom. Up early for a last zoom around the Wakkerstroom area, failed to find either Rudd's or Botha's Larks (much easier in the southern spring), didn't bother with Yellow-breasted Pipit. Did however find various other larks, plus a few more Blue Korhaans, as well as Black-winged Lapwings, Sentinel Rock Thrushes, Eastern Clapper Lark, Rattling Cisticola and flocks of Shaft-tailed Whydah. Back at the town vlei, rallidae-type birds included the oodles of Red-knobbed Coots and Common Moorhens, plus Purple Swamphen, Black Crake and African Crake. Adjacent, also found African Snipe and, in the reeds, Thick-billed Weaver, flocks of Village Weavers and a Lesser Swamp Warbler. And with that, chucked all of our gear in the car for the last time, drove to Johannesburg, seeing Grey-headed Gull on a town pool (the last addition to the trip list) and a bunch of suicidal Meerkats darting across the road. Coffee and Burger King at the airport, late afternoon flight out. Trip over, farewell South Africa. I am sure it won't be too long before I am back!