

SAVANNA BIRDING

In & around Satara

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The Satara region is a firm favourite with many regular visitors to the Kruger National Park. The open savanna habitat of this south-central region is what many foreign visitors envisage when they think of Africa – an isolated thorn tree or two breaking a vista of pale yellow grass.

Of course it's only typical in some areas, but it conforms more to the classic idea of an African savanna than does the bushier country found to the south. The extensive grasslands result in a concomitantly high carrying capacity for large grazers such as blue wildebeest and plains zebra, which in turn attract good numbers of the lions for which Satara is well known, as well as spotted hyaenas. Numerous watercourses such as the Nwanetsi, Gudzani and Mavumbye creeks criss-cross the plains. Together with artificial drinking holes, these provide water during the dry season and support a large resident population of impala, the main component in the diets of leopards and cheetahs. Add herds of elephants and African buffaloes and a sprinkling of white rhinos to the mix and you get an outstanding game-viewing area. But perhaps what not too many visitors realise is that an interesting array of birds forms part of this broader ecosystem. ▶





Above Bateleurs are often seen in the Satara region. The number of juveniles present is an encouraging indication that a successful reproduction rate is being sustained.

Opposite A typical savanna vista, with attendant grazing zebras. The open, flat habitat is ideal for birdwatching as it allows for unobstructed views.

Previous spread The magnificent Lappet-faced Vulture, the largest and most dominant of all Africa's vultures, is an uncommon resident and classified as Vulnerable. The major reserves are now a stronghold for this species.

The habitat in the Satara region tends to be more uniform than further south and comprises flat or gently undulating plains. Some parts are more open than others, and small to medium-sized seasonal rivers are edged with strips of thicker bush and large trees such as sycamore fig, jackalberry, Natal mahogany and sausage tree. Some rivercourses, such as the Sweni, have sufficient alluvial deposits to support stands of *Hyphaene* palms.

An outstanding feature of the plains are the large leadwood trees, many of which have succumbed to fluctuating rainfall regimes and form ghostly 'statues' that stand sentinel-like in the vast landscape. To the west of Satara the vegetation becomes noticeably thicker and bushier, while to the east the Lebombo range forms a rocky margin to the seemingly endless plains. Typically of savanna habitats, the Satara region shows a marked seasonal dichotomy: during the dry months from June to early November it is stark, bare

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and dusty, but after decent summer rains it transforms and softens into a mosaic of lush plains.

Regardless of the season, there is one early-morning route that often proves productive for birders. Head northwards out of camp along the H1-4 tar road and take the S90 turn-off to the right to travel north-eastwards into the basalt plains adjacent to the Mavumbye and Gudzani creeks. The massive Kori Bustard, reputed to be the world's heaviest flying bird and the species at the top of my list of Satara specials, is regularly seen in this area during the dry season as it stalks through the sparsely



grassed areas in pairs or small groups. An even larger bird, the Common Ostrich, is best sought from Satara northwards.

At the other end of the scale, numerous flocks of small birds fly to and fro or scabble argumentatively for seeds in the dusty patches. Among these are Chestnut-backed Sparrowlarks, best identified in flight by their black underparts; it's worth taking the time to admire the attractive male with his chestnut back and white ear patches. Southern Grey-headed Sparrows, Red-billed Queleas and female and non-breeding Long-tailed Paradise and Pin-tailed whydahs also gather in flocks here. In exceptionally dry years, irruptions of Grey-backed Sparrowlarks and Lark-like Buntings occur as the birds move in from their normal range in the western part of the country to benefit from the more advantageous feeding conditions.

Closer to the junction with the H1-4 tar road the tiny Desert Cisticola can be seen, but be careful not to mistake it for the Zitting Cisticola (or vice versa). Sabota Larks, identifiable by the prominent white supercilium, are common here and sing melodiously from the tops of small thorn trees. Equally vocal, Red-crested Korhaans are easily located as the males call throughout the day.

As the season progresses, the rains arrive and transform the habitat. The show culminates in late summer



with an impressive finale as hundreds of thousands of Red-billed Queleas arrive to feed on the seeding grasses and swarm in locust-like super-flocks across the Satara plains. And if there are hundreds of thousands of queleas in the vicinity, it goes without saying that there are untold millions of their prey, large insects feeding on the grasses.

The Palearctic migrants, their departure now imminent, join the resident birds in making the most of the bounty. Of course, the combination of species differs each year but, at its best, hundreds of Amur Falcons and smaller numbers of Lesser Kestrels crowd the dead leadwood trees, Montagu's and Pallid harriers quarter the open areas and Lanner Falcons swoop in to prey on the smaller passerines. Groups of Marabou and White ▷



Above Red-crested Korhaan males are easily located as they call throughout the day.



ALBERT FRONEMAN

Above, right The Sweni bird hide is a great stopping-off point and is one of the few places in Kruger where Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters can be seen.

Opposite, left Breeding intra-African migrants, Red-breasted Swallows arrive in late winter and most depart again for equatorial Africa during March/April.

Opposite, right Several pairs of African Scops-Owls as roost right in the Satara Restcamp.



storks march through the tall grass, gulping down large grasshoppers by the beakful, European and Southern Carmine bee-eaters flock overhead, and Wattled Starlings breed in colonies that measure hectares in extent. Perch-hunters such as Lilac-breasted and European rollers, and Magpie, Red-backed and Lesser Grey shrikes seem to occupy every available bush, and the damp grasslands ring with the 'whit-whit' calls of countless Harlequin Quails. This birding bonanza is not restricted to the Mavumbye Plains area and, given the right conditions (optimal rainfall being a key), can unfold anywhere in the region.

Satara is also a particularly good place to view large raptors, partly because the open habitat allows unobstructed sightings. Indeed, the numbers in which these birds occur validate just how important large conservation areas are for them. Martial Eagles are by no means common, but most stays of two nights' duration or longer should produce at least one good view of these magnificent birds.

The bountiful lion population ensures that all five of the local vulture species are kept well provisioned, and they are often to be found in the vicinity of large carcasses. Lappet-faced and White-headed vultures, two of the most striking of all raptors in my opinion, seem to be more abundant here than further south in the park, while Cape Vultures fly in from the western escarpment on extended feeding forays. In the mêlée around a carcass they are best distinguished from the common White-backed Vulture by their larger size, lighter plumage and pale eyes (in the adult birds).

Bateleurs are often seen as they effortlessly patrol the lower flight zone, the numbers of juvenile birds indicating that a successful reproductive rate is being maintained. Not classified as raptors but nonetheless still impressively predatory birds, Southern Ground-Hornbills may be observed relatively frequently on the plains around Satara as they stalk about in small family groups. Their striking good looks even earn them a closer look and a photograph or two from non-birders.

Although the opportunities to get out of your vehicle are fairly restricted in this area, two spots at which you can do so are definitely worth a mention. Nwanetsi picnic site is justifiably popular for indulging in a slap-up breakfast, but for birders it's worth walking up to the vantage point, which overlooks a rocky stretch of the Nwanetsi Creek. Greater Painted-Snipe can often be seen at the water's edge below. This sought-after species is polyandrous, and the female has the brighter, more striking plumage, while the duller, more discreetly coloured male is tasked with rearing the offspring. Not too far distant, the Sweni bird hide is also a good stopping-off point and is one of the few places in Kruger where Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters can be seen.

Along the busy S100 dirt road, which skirts the Nwanetsi for nearly 20 kilometres and is a rewarding route for both bushveld birds and big game, Red-breasted and Mosque swallows are fairly common. Grey-headed Kingfisher, a summer visitor, occasionally permits extremely close approach and presents unmissable photographic opportunities.

On the opposite side of Satara Restcamp, Nsemani waterhole can offer some excellent wader viewing in early summer when the water level is still low. The first stretch of the dirt road heading north to the Timbavati picnic site is good for Double-banded Sandgrouse, so keep a watch for pairs foraging along the side of the road.

Back at camp, there's some productive birding to be had. Satara is probably the prime location in the entire park for African Scops-Owl, as several pairs roost in the camp despite the hustle and bustle of visitor traffic. There are a few regular roost spots in the gardens in front of reception, where the owls tolerate all manner of inconsiderate behaviour by visitors, and there are several other, less well-known spots throughout the camp. Pearl-spotted Owlets also roost and breed in the camp; there's a fairly reliable spot close to the outdoor movie theatre.

The usual restcamp birds abound. Satara is the best place to see African Mourning Dove in the southern half of the park, although recent reports indicate that the species may be spreading southwards. Red-billed Buffalo-Weavers, African Grey, Southern Yellow-billed and Red-billed hornbills, Burchell's, Greater Blue-eared and Cape Glossy starlings and Grey Go-away-birds could be among the more interesting species that will crowd around your feet to jostle for any crumbs that drop 'accidentally' while you have your early morning, pre-birding rusk and cup of coffee.

The numerous dead trees scattered around the camp provide feeding and nesting sites

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for all four species of bushveld woodpeckers (Cardinal, Golden-tailed, Bearded and Bennett's), as well as Black-collared and Crested barbets. The barbets are hosts for Lesser Honeyguide, an easily overlooked species that can best be located by its unobtrusive 'prrr-whit-whit-whit' call.

When in flower, the shrubs growing next to some of the huts are visited by Marico Sunbirds, and in hot and dry conditions the small water feature in the middle of A-circle attracts seed-eaters such as Blue Waxbills, Red-billed Firefinches, Yellow-fronted Canaries and hordes of the frustratingly similar female and non-breeding *Vidua* species. Red-headed Finches, which had not previously been recorded in the Kruger National Park, have been seen here on

several occasions, often accompanying the resident Cut-throat Finches. As with Grey-backed Sparrowlark and Lark-like Bunting, this may represent a seasonal range expansion under certain conditions. Another species in which such movement has been recorded is White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, groups of which have nested along the main tar road just north of the Tshokwane picnic site. There's always a chance to add something new to your Kruger list!

Seeing the Kruger National Park through the eyes of first-time visitors is always refreshing, as they are usually astounded by the numbers and diversity of birds and the quality of the sightings on offer. There are people who will argue that Kruger is 'too popular' and isn't 'wild' enough, with its tar roads, shops, cafés and restaurants, and they may be right. But I would rather dwell on what the park is than on what it isn't. It is a fantastic birding destination, with a wide variety of habitats and enough infrastructure to make it easy to visit, as well as the superb game-viewing that gives it an extra element of excitement and placates all the non-birding spouses out there. □