



# Finding birds in the KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

Covering a huge swathe of savanna in the north-east corner of South Africa, the vast and much-loved Kruger National Park easily ranks as one of the country's top birding destinations. Its 500 or so recorded bird species are just part of a large and varied cast of wildlife that attracts approximately a million visitors per year. While the majority of these undoubtedly come for the large toothed, horned and tusked mammals and probably don't even notice most of the birds they pass on their game drives, a sizable percentage are there primarily for the birds. For them, this 'bottom up' approach means that big-game sightings are an added bonus rather than the *raison d'être* for the visit, one in which an enthusiast can see up to 130 bird species in a day. ▶

TEXT BY LEON MARAIS



# PRETORIUSKOP

LEON MARAIS

Far from being a massive chunk of uniform savanna, Kruger comprises a mosaic of different habitats and as many as 21 major types have been identified. From the mopane-dominated scrub and woodland of the north to the open savanna grassland in the Satara region, the mixed knobthorn/marula woodlands around Skukuza, and the Malelane montane bushveld in the extreme south-west, each region supports a slightly different suite of birds. As a guide leading regular birding trips to three main areas – Satara in the south-central region, Skukuza on the Sabie River and Pretoriuskop in the south-western corner – I’ve come to appreciate the specific birds found in each of these areas and to know which species we are likely to see at each rest-camp. This helps considerably in building a respectable trip list, as when we have only one night at a camp we can concentrate on finding the birds that are particular to that camp and region.

For mammal fans, I think that the Pretoriuskop area must disappoint on most occasions. This south-western corner receives the highest annual rainfall in the park, varying from 600 to 750 millimetres per annum, and the tall, coarse grasses and *Terminalia*-dominated Pretoriuskop sourveld, as this veld type is known, don’t provide ideal grazing conditions. Quite simply, there are better areas in the park for game viewing. For birders, however, the Pretoriuskop region has plenty to offer as there are a number of species that seem to favour this area and are less common elsewhere.

Working through my detailed trip reports of tours to Kruger since 2005, I’ve

come to a figure of 29 species for which the Pretoriuskop region offers the best bet while on a southern Kruger Park birding expedition. Some of these I’ve seen only there (although this is not to say that they don’t occur elsewhere in the park), while others are common throughout the sanctuary but best sought within the Pretoriuskop restcamp grounds. With the benefit of this experience, I can now predict with a degree of accuracy as we pass a certain point on our route when we can begin to search for a particular species.

Heading south-westwards from Skukuza along the western portion of the Doispans Road, in the region of Nyamundwa Dam, the habitat changes from open mixed thornveld and marula woodlands to Pretoriuskop sourveld and, as soon as we turn south on the S3, I slow up and begin looking for the local specials on my list.

Savanna birds often move around in groups, particularly when it’s dry or after the veld has been burned. A good tactic is to drive slowly and look out for obvious species such as Fork-tailed Drongo and Southern Black Flycatcher, easy-to-see indicators of the presence of a bird feeding party. Once you’ve seen one or more of these birds, all you need to do is switch off your car’s engine and pay attention to the calls, as they will give you an idea of what other birds may be in the area. The soft winding song of Grey Penduline-Tit, one of the sub-region’s tiniest birds, should be listened for as small groups can often be found moving through the tops of the trees as the birds glean insects from the twigs and leaves. ▶

**Previous spread** African Hawk-Eagle

**Left** The high rainfall in the Pretoriuskop area creates numerous seasonally saturated, grassy depressions, such as this one along the Fayi Loop. Yellow-throated Longclaws and Croaking Cisticolas are two birds to look out for here.

**Opposite** Swainson’s Francolin

**Overleaf** Woodland Kingfisher



CHRIS VAN ROOYEN



For birders ... the Pretoriuskop region has plenty to offer as there are a number of species that seem to favour this area and are less common elsewhere



Another little bird, the Yellow-bellied Eremomela, which at eight grams is slightly heavier than the Grey Penduline-Tit, can often be found along this road as part of a mixed feeding party, also gleaning insects from the upper branches. The Green-capped Eremomela is yet another diminutive species to look out for in the broad-leaved woodland along the S3. Moving around in small groups, these eremomelas may at first resemble Cape White-eyes, but they are quite noticeable as they call noisily from the tree tops. With these mixed bird parties, it is frequently their movement that first attracts your attention. As you drive by, Yellow-throated Petronias flutter up from where they had been feeding on the road verge into the lower branches. Your presence will probably also elicit a response from several Neddickys, which frequently fly up onto exposed branches to scold with their harsh, electrical ticking call. Pale Flycatchers and Striped Kingfishers, the latter small and relatively dull for one of its kind, can often be found on the periphery of the bird party, hunting insects from exposed perches. Both White-crested and Retz's helmet-shrikes frequent Pretoriuskop sourveld areas, although the former is by far the more common species. Both are conspicuous as they fly in groups through the trees in follow-my-leader fashion, calling and bill-snapping as they go.



The cryptic Bushveld Pipit can also be found along this stretch of the S3. It is a bit tricky to identify, as most encounters involve seeing a small brown bird flying up from the road, going to ground further off and then disappearing into the bush. If you keep an eye on the side of the road as you drive, however, you can sometimes locate one of these pipits before it takes flight. It's a wonderful little bird, much easier to identify than some others of its kind, being small and heavily marked and often surprisingly confiding. Don't mistake it for Flappet Lark, however, another small, drab bird that may be found feeding at the roadside and is

distinguished by its lark-like stance, robust bill and less distinct markings.

Raptors are very well represented in Kruger and three species in particular feature on my Pretoriuskop hit-list: Lizard Buzzard, Dark Chanting Goshawk and African Cuckoo Hawk. The Lizard Buzzard, which is common throughout the section, is best sought along the Fayi Loop and Voortrekker Road, and can be located by its loud, piercing call. It also has the habit of flying in to perch with a characteristic vertical manoeuvre, flying along and then suddenly swooping almost upright into the tree as it lands. The Dark Chanting Goshawk is particularly common on the S3 and is easy to see as it usually perches in the tops of trees, with its erect stance, long red legs and red cere precluding any identification problems. (The juvenile bird is trickier, as it has >



**Opposite** *Playing follow-my-leader from tree to tree, White-crested Helmet-Shrikes are fairly common in the broad-leaved woodland of the Pretoriuskop area.*

**Above** *Flappet Larks are often found on the roads in the Pretoriuskop area, although they are more usually seen in flight, displaying high overhead and making their characteristic buzzing sound.*

**Left** *Often located by its 'whistle-and-pop' call, the Black-bellied Bustard is fairly common in the grassy areas around Pretoriuskop restcamp, with the Fayi Loop being a particularly good route on which to locate it.*

more barring and shows a pale eye.) Observations reveal that Dark Chanting Goshawks use bird parties to their advantage, for example in one particular instance when a group of small birds located a boomslang and were scolding it in alarm. This attracted the attention of a goshawk, which proceeded to clamber around the tree until it located the snake and then killed and consumed it.

On morning drives along the S3 I always watch for the African Cuckoo Hawk, a relatively rarely observed raptor with a distinctive 'floppy' flight pattern, which also has a tendency to perch in large dead trees. Flap-necked chameleons constitute a major part of this raptor's diet, so it is more common when conditions are moist, the vegetation is green and the prey is more plentiful.

On the approach to Pretoriuskop restcamp there are a number of large granite outcrops, such as Shabeni (the biggest), Pretoriuskop and Manungu, which are close to 700 metres above sea level. These projections provide additional habitat, attracting birds such as Mocking Cliff-Chat that should be sought on the rocks themselves, and Lazy Cisticolas and Striped Pipits that may be found on and among the rocks around the base of the koppies. Striped Pipit is another readily identifiable species, being as heavily marked as

its name suggests, with a slightly yellow leading edge to the wing and a distinctive, piping call. The thick grass around Shabeni is where I look for the Yellow-throated Longclaw. For LBJ fans, the robust Croaking Cisticola, with its frog-like call and relatively heavy bill, is also often found in the tall grass clumps. In summer the grassy plains to the east of the camp along the H2, with Nkumbi Mountain (shaped like a capsized ship) in the distance to the south, are another good place to look for Croaking Cisticolas, as well as Fan-tailed Widowbirds, Broad-tailed Warblers (in very wet summers) and Black-bellied Bustards. The grasslands along the Fayi Loop and on the Voortrekker Road to the south and south-west of the camp can hold Shelley's and Coqui francolins, two of the less common francolin species in the park.

A trip through the Kruger National Park inevitably entails a lot of time spent in the confines of the car. To counter that, visitors often apportion a good part of their day to investigating the restcamp gardens, most of which offer the perfect opportunity to do some birding on foot.

Pretoriuskop is a small camp, so it's easy to cover it in an hour or so and there are some great birds to be seen. The numerous

broom cluster figs, Natal mahoganies and other fruiting trees in the camp attract Purple-crested Turacos, and although you can also see these wonderful birds at Skukuza, I've undoubtedly had the best views in Pretoriuskop; the same applies to the Brown-headed Parrot. Top of the restcamp list is Bennett's Woodpecker, a species that is best sought here. I've had most luck with this species at the bottom end of the campsite, and have also seen it near the restaurant, where the soft-wooded flame trees provide good nesting sites. Also keep an eye on the camp's lawns for this woodpecker, as it often feeds on terrestrial ants.

The Red-headed Weaver is another wonderful camp bird, particularly the male in his striking breeding plumage, and it can be seen along the camp's southern perimeter. Even more brilliant is the breeding male Scarlet-chested Sunbird, one of the easiest sunbirds to identify by call; it is commonly seen in the restcamp grounds, especially when the coral trees are in flower.

In late winter some altitudinal migrants from the wetter regions to the west make their way down to Pretoriuskop. The walk along the fence from the lower end of the campsite towards the swimming pool leads you past thick stands of vegetation, where forest and thicket species such as Cape Batis and Blue-mantled Crested-Flycatcher can be seen. There have even been reliable reports of White-starred Robins in the camp grounds.

Birding should, of course, also be about special sightings and experiences in nature rather than simply aiming for a long tick-list. It's a good idea to be more proactive with your birding, concentrating not just on being able to identify birds, but also learning about which species occur in specific habitats and vegetation types, a vital step in becoming a better and more confident birder. □

**Left** *The stunning Red-headed Weaver can be seen in the restcamp grounds. Look for it in the thick bush along the fence on the southern side of the camp and in the sausage trees growing to the west of the reception area.*

**Opposite** *Southern Ground-Hornbill*



LEON MARAIS



GRANT ATKINSON