

# RIVER RAMBLE

## *Skukuza to Lower Sabie*

The Kruger National Park is a favourite destination for many local and international birders, combining as it does a huge and varied birdlist with an unparalleled diversity of mammals and other fauna. As discussed in the first article in this series (see the April/May 2011 issue), each region of the park has a specific set of birds that are sought by serious birders. In this article, Leon Marais explores the Skukuza region. ▶

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEON MARAIS



*The call of Africa... The African Fish-Eagle is one of the more common large raptors seen along the Sabie River.*

CHRIS MARTIN



ALBERT FROMEMAN

**Top** Looking downstream towards the old railway bridge. In the early mornings Skukuza restcamp is wonderfully quiet as most of the residents are out on game drives and the day visitors have not yet arrived. It is the perfect time for a birding walk in the camp grounds.

**Above** The Water Thick-knee is mainly nocturnal but may be seen during the day in the vicinity of the river edges and wetlands it frequents.

Skukuza restcamp is the largest camp in the Kruger Park and it also serves as its administrative headquarters. It has sufficient accommodation for about 1 300 visitors and 750 staff members, which makes it seem more like a small village than an intimate-with-the-bush restcamp. Large numbers of day visitors, who embark on day trips into the reserve from hotels outside the park near White River, Hazyview and the Paul Kruger gate, add to this population. Many arrive in convoys, hoping to see the Big Five in a day, and they invariably stop off at Skukuza for a meal and to do a spot of shopping.

It's not surprising then that on a daily basis this is the busiest part of the park, and the H4-1 Skukuza–Lower Sabie Road is colloquially referred to as 'Eloff Street' by the safari guides. But human traffic notwithstanding, the Sabie River valley can provide some fantastic birding and, if you cover your vehicle with enough 'We brake for birds' stickers, you may just find a modicum of peace from the big-cat seekers.

The habitats in this region include a distinct riparian zone, with both rapids and sluggish stretches of river, thick reedbeds lining the pools, and some well-developed

riverine forest featuring large trees such as Natal mahogany, matumi, jackalberry and sycamore fig. Further from the water, the vegetation is dominated by dense thickets of horned, scented-pod and flaky-bark acacias, magic guarri, various raisin-bush species and stands of tamboti trees. Even further from the valley, the bush opens up into the highly productive knobthorn and marula savanna whose large trees and park-like landscape are the setting for animals such as giraffe, kudu and impala in abundance.

A look at the map will indicate various options for routes in the region. My regular early-morning outing is a circular drive along the H4-1 river road, over the high-water bridge and back along the H1-2 via the Sand River. From the main intersection outside the camp you drive downhill to the river before joining the Sabie River road. Here groups of Marabou Storks, the avian equivalent of spotted hyaenas, often roost in the vicinity. Not far from the junction a series of pull-off areas affords views of the main river channel. It's always worthwhile stopping here and spending five minutes or so scanning the river and reedbeds.

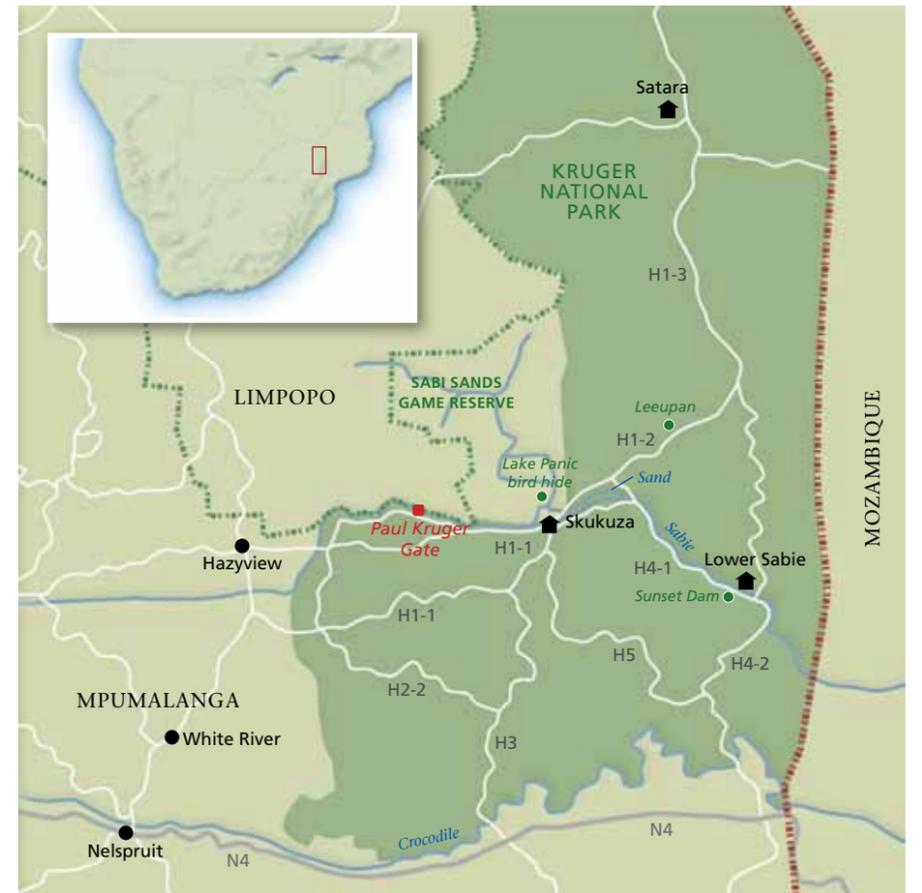
The nasal call of White-fronted Bee-eaters is often heard; they nest in holes

in the undercut riverbank and hawk insects from exposed perches in the immediate vicinity. A scan may reveal a couple of Little Egrets hunting fish and frogs in the water, while the African Black Duck, a river specialist, can also be found along this stretch of river, as likely to be seen in flight as dabbling in the shallows. When there are enough sycamore figs bearing ripe fruit, you'll see (or more usually hear) Trumpeter Hornbills as they fly over the river, giving their loud, wailing calls. African Fish-Eagles are usually conspicuous, as they perch in the large trees lining the river and periodically deliver their evocative duets. In summer the rather less impressive Wahlberg's Eagle is also fairly common along the river road. A migrant visitor from further north in Africa, Wahlberg's breeds here during the southern summer and, despite its various colour forms, can be recognised by the slight crest on its head.

As the road moves away from the river for a distance, it passes through some sodic areas with characteristic pale clayey soils before once again running alongside the river course. Here there are a few more lay-bys where a patient early-morning vigil may produce an African Finfoot perched on a river boulder or gliding along close to the reeds. Keep a keen eye out for this species as it's easy for the novice to dismiss it (especially the female) as a Reed Cormorant or a 'duck'.

Water Thick-knees can usually be seen at the water's edge, while a scan of the thickets on the opposite bank may turn up a resting leopard. A species on many birders' want list is the White-crowned Lapwing and it sometimes frequents this stretch of river. It's a vocal bird and often first detected by its call. This attractive *Vanellus* species' very specific habitat requirement – exposed sandbars along large rivers – makes the Sabie River valley one of the few regular places to see it in the Kruger National Park. During rainy periods, however, it may also be found along road verges in the company of the ubiquitous Blacksmith Lapwing.

Following the course of the river as it heads downstream, you should make use of the high-water bridge, a popular viewing place for those looking for game: chacma baboons often lounge on the railings, a pod of lazy hippos occupies the pool upstream



A patient **early-morning vigil** may produce an **African Finfoot** perched on a river boulder or gliding along close to the reeds

and elephants feed and drink along the river during the heat of the day. Giant and Pied kingfishers can usually be found close by and often perch on the bridge railings; one particularly cooperative Giant Kingfisher often lets you approach to within less than a metre. Wire-tailed Swallows are the common hirundines found near water in the region. They are frequently mistaken for White-throated Swallows by up-country birders as they show the same deep blue metallic upperparts, but they can be distinguished by their bright rufous crown and the absence of a black bar across the throat. A pair of Saddle-billed Storks often frequent the shallow braided river channels on either side of the northern end of the bridge, while groups of vultures, including White-backed, Hooded and the occasional Lappet-faced and White-headed, gather on the sandy banks to bathe in company. ▷

In summer a stake-out on the golf club terrace may produce a sighting of **a pair of brilliant Broad-billed Rollers**



ALBERT FRONEMAN



On the other side of the river the road turns south-west as you head back towards Skukuza, skirting the northern bank of the Sand River, one of the permanent tributaries of the Sabie. On a couple of occasions on cool, overcast mornings I've had the 'bird of the trip' along this stretch in the form of Gorgeous Bush-Shrike, a localised and hard-to-see species that's worth spending time and effort locating if you hear it calling from the thickets between the road and the river.

If you stay on the southern side of the Sabie River, an alternative route takes you straight down the H4-1 to Lower Sabie restcamp, where Sunset Dam can produce some great waterbirds such as Woolly-necked and Yellow-billed storks, African Openbill on occasion, Black-winged Stilt and summer waders such as Ruff, Common Greenshank and Wood and Common sandpipers. It always pays to scrutinise all waders as you may be rewarded with a Green Sandpiper or other less commonly seen species. On the way back to Skukuza in the heat of the day, Verreaux's Eagle-Owls are periodically seen in the trees between the road and the river, forced by the heat from their secluded spots to find more exposed but breezier roosts.

Back at Skukuza, there are some specific birds to look out for in the camp, where, of course, the general rule of respecting the privacy of others is paramount. The path leading from the restaurant area past the W.A. Campbell Museum, between the guest cottages and around toward the Selati Restaurant, is a good place to look for Bearded Scrub-Robin, which prefers shady spots with a thick layer of leaf litter. I don't believe that it's necessary to use play-back calls to attract this species (or any other resident camp birds), as a careful search will often produce results. And if you don't find the bird, well, that's how birding goes sometimes!

White-browed Robin-Chat is another camp special, albeit more common, which is usually first located by its loud calling from a dense thicket or hedge. Ashy Flycatcher, also best viewed in the camp grounds, is often found in the trees on the restcamp lawns, hawking insects from exposed perches. Piping calls emanating from the tree-tops may indicate the presence of Crowned Hornbills, one of the park's less commonly seen *Tockus* species. Other birds to look for in the camp include Col-



MARIETJIE FRONEMAN



lared Sunbird, Thick-billed Weaver, Green-backed Camaroptera and African Goshawk (displaying overhead). Red-faced Cisticolas frequent the reeds along the river walk, where there have also been recent sightings of Green Twinspots.

When on an extended Kruger National Park birding tour it's important to be able to get out of the vehicle as much as possible and in this regard Skukuza is unbeatable. The nearby Lake Panic bird hide is becoming increasingly popular, especially among photographers. Some of them are prone to hog the best spots for hours on

end and punctuate the quiet with machine gun-like bursts of camera shutters whenever there's a bit of action to capture. The birding here can be very good, however, with quality views of Goliath Heron, African Darter, African Jacana, Black Crake and Pied and Malachite kingfishers almost guaranteed. The antics of the breeding Lesser Masked and Village weavers, which locals perhaps take for granted, are always of immense interest to foreign birders.

Further on, past the turn-off to the hide, the road passes through thick vegetation where Gorgeous Bush-Shrikes may be heard (but less often seen). The boardwalk to the Skukuza nursery is a good place to find Red-backed Mannikins. In summer a stake-out on the golf club terrace may produce a sighting of a pair of brilliant Broad-billed Rollers, either in the large dead tree sticking out of the 9th/18th-hole water hazard or in the stand of fever trees on the opposite side.

If you have the time to venture slightly further afield, most southern Kruger itineraries usually include Satara restcamp, another great birding area 92 kilometres to the north of Skukuza. And during the wet months, I highly recommend a stop-off at Leeupan, an exciting birding ▷

**Opposite, above** An intra-African migrant, the beautifully coloured Broad-billed Roller is always a rewarding sight.

**Opposite, below** The raucous call of the African Jacana is one of the characteristic sounds of the Lake Panic bird hide. The birds are often seen on the waterlilies directly in front of the hide.

**Above** The bird hide at Lake Panic has become justifiably popular with photographers as it offers quality views of many waterbird species.

**Left** The Bearded Scrub-Robin is often found close to the guest cottages downstream of the restaurant area at Skukuza. Remember that day visitors aren't permitted to walk freely around the non-public areas, and in all instances should respect the privacy of other camp guests.



ALBERT FRONEMAN

**It always pays to scrutinise all waders** as you may be rewarded with a Green Sandpiper or other less commonly seen species

spot close to the main H1-2 tar road and not too far from Skukuza. When the pan is full, the growth of waterlilies and aquatic vegetation is abundant and provides ideal conditions for skulking rallids and other water-associated species. African Pygmy-Geese regularly breed here, their brown, green and white plumage providing such perfect camouflage in among the flowering waterlilies that a hasty birder might well fail to detect them. Another two relatively unusual summer visitors to Leeupan are Allen's Gallinule, a noisy species that prefers thick vegetation but occasionally flies over to a new spot, and Lesser Moorhen. Both these species breed in seasonally

inundated pans. Patient observers may also find a Dwarf Bittern 'hiding' in the aquatic vegetation.

In addition to the birds mentioned, the Skukuza region offers some great general bushveld birding, so while you're looking out for the specials you'll no doubt rack up a large number of other species to create a respectable list. Numbers aren't necessarily the best indication of the enjoyment derived from birding, but when quantity and quality of sightings combine, a truly memorable experience results. That's where knowing the specific habitat preferences of an area's special bird species can make all the difference. □

**Above** Allen's Gallinule is an unusual summer visitor to the area. Although it prefers to skulk in dense vegetation, you may be lucky and get an opportunistic view of it out in the open.

**Right** The vociferous White-browed Robin-Chat is fairly common in the Skukuza camp grounds. These two were bathing at a tap that had been left running.

