

rocking!

BLYDE RIVER CANYON

TEXT LEON MARAIS

IT'S OFTEN TOUTED as the world's third largest canyon and, if that's not enough of a title, the largest 'green' canyon in the world. It starts near the forestry and tourist town of Graskop on the grassy heights of the Drakensberg Escarpment in Mpumalanga and ends where the Blyde River exits the canyon at the start of the savanna flats that stretch northwards and eastwards into the hazy distance. Rough estimates put it at 26 kilometres long and 762 metres deep on average, although the absolute difference between the heights of Mariepskop and the mouth of the canyon is some 1 372 metres, which is fairly impressive by any standards. To Americans visiting the area it probably seems small compared to the mighty Grand Canyon, but it's a striking place nevertheless. >

The Blyde (Motlatse) River Canyon can lay claim to being the world's largest green canyon.



MARIETJIE FRONEMAN (2)



LEON MARAIS

TUFA FORMATIONS ABOUND ... RESULTING IN OUTWARD GROWING CASCADES AND WATERFALLS, ALL SMOTHERED IN MOSS AND BEGGING TO BE SPOTTED BY THE LOCATION SCOUTS FOR THE NEXT J.R.R. TOLKIEN MOVIE



of both the high plateau to the west (the direction from which we've come), and the Lowveld to the east, where we're headed. This is usually the first introduction to some splendid local birds and you can expect to start encountering barbets, tinkerbirds, kingfishers, shrikes, sunbirds and the like.

An afternoon walk usually involves a meander to the Upper View Site to watch as the sun flushes the iron oxide-stained cliffs a vibrant orange, and to set up the scopes to scan for raptors. Again, as a result of the habitat diversity, a large proportion of South Africa's raptor species have been recorded here, and a late-afternoon vigil might produce Jackal Buzzard, Black-chested Snake-Eagle, Black Sparrowhawk, Rock Kestrel, Lanner and Peregrine falcons, and

possibly even Taita Falcon, African Harrier-Hawk, Booted Eagle, African Goshawk, African Fish Eagle, Cape Vulture or the canyon king, Verreaux's Eagle. The best time to see these birds of prey is very late in the afternoon and into the early evening, just before the light fades.

A morning walk along the Tufa Trail can prove immensely rewarding. The most productive part is often the stroll through the resort itself, as birds seem to congregate in the vicinity of the huts, lawns and gardens. A quiet tseep-tseep will often reveal the presence of a White-throated Robin-Chat calling from the thickets, while >

above Red-capped Robin-Chat is fairly common along the Tufa Trail.

top Just waiting to be explored... Water cascades over moss-covered tufa formations.

opposite The regal Verreaux's Eagle may be seen from the Upper View Site, which is known for producing good sightings of raptors.

FROM THE viewing sites on the western side, imposing red sandstone cliffs fall in vertical steps until there is enough of a slope for plants to gain a foothold. A solid green canopy covers most of the bottom of the canyon, giving rise to the claim of it being the largest green (or vegetated) canyon in the world, as both the Grand Canyon in the United States and silver medallist the Fish River Canyon in Namibia are desert canyons. The Blyde (Motlatse) River snakes its way along the bottom, with alternating sections of rapids and deep pools. Alongside the river and its tributaries, such as the Kadisi Stream, riparian forest grows tall, with large fig trees, quinine trees and waterberries draped with the

fearsome uMhluhluwe, or thorny-rope creeper, shading the path of the crystal-clear water.

Unique tufa formations abound as the hydrological conditions are ideal for the deposition of calcium carbonate, resulting in outward growing cascades and waterfalls, all smothered in moss and begging to be spotted by the location scouts for the next J.R.R. Tolkien movie. On the rocky higher ground more open bush dominates, typically comprising Ohrigstad mountain bushveld, while higher still the bush yields to open grassland studded with proteas and mountain cabbage trees. Such varied habitats coupled with the vast altitudinal range give rise to incredible natural diversity and result in some great birding.





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above Bar-throated Apalises form part of mixed bird parties that move through the resort gardens.

opposite, top The lower Blyde River is a more sedate version of its upper reaches.

opposite, bottom The margins of the lower reaches of the river are probably one of the best places in the country to see the sought-after and elusive African Finfoot.

White-bellied and Greater Double-collared sunbirds flit among the flowering plants and are particularly lively when the coral trees are in bloom in late winter and spring. Striped Pipits frequent the lawns, Brown-hooded Kingfishers perch hunt from above, while the buildings provide suitable structure for Familiar Chats, Cape Rock-Thrushes, Mocking Cliff-Chats, Red-winged Starlings and Speckled Pigeons. When the lawn grasses are seeding, Sweet Waxbills sometimes visit the area, while Cardinal Woodpeckers are often heard tapping on the dead limbs of the garden trees. Both Chinspot and Cape batises occur and they are often seen side by side as they glean insects as part of a bird party, which may include species such as Black-backed Puffback, African Paradise Flycatcher,

AS THE TOURIST CROWDS BEGIN TO GATHER, IT'S TIME TO DEPART, HEADING PERHAPS TO THE KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, WHICH IS AN EASY DRIVE AWAY

Southern Boubou, Bar-throated and Yellow-breasted apalises, Southern Black Tit, Spectacled Weaver, Brubru, Long-billed Crombec and Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird. It is worthwhile also keeping an eye on the sky in case of a fly-over by White-necked Ravens, Southern Bald Ibises or one of the aforementioned raptors.

On the Tufa Trail, the path winds alongside the river under a heavy, closed-canopy forest. Birds are

fewer in number here and although Red-capped Robin-Chat is fairly common along the trail, you'll probably find yourself spending more time enjoying the scenery than looking for birds. Keep an eye out for Mountain Wagtail, as a pair can often be found at the main Tufa Waterfall. Narina Trogons are occasionally seen in the forest canopy along the trail. Another wary species, African Black Ducks also frequent the quiet pools in the river and are usually seen in pairs as they explode off the water as you come around a bend and inadvertently spook them. The far end of the trail emerges at the Lower View Site, and the road back up to the resort can be quite prolific. Olive Bush-Shrikes call from the thickets, while fruiting fig trees attract Trumpeter Hornbills and Knysna Turacos. Olive Woodpeckers can often be found at the sharp bend in the road, where you will have a superb view of the Three Rondavels and the lower canyon.

After breakfast at the resort, depart for the Three Rondavels View Site, where you may be treated to a flyby by a raptor or raven and will at least see Lazy Cisticola, Cape Rock-Thrush and the impressive male Sekhukhune flat lizards basking in the morning sun. As the tourist crowds begin to gather, it's time to depart, heading perhaps to the Kruger National Park, which is an easy drive away or, for those who have more time in this area, the lower canyon is also worth exploring.

The lower Blyde River is a more mature and sedate version of its upper reaches, although the extensive damage caused by the January 2013 floods reveals that this is not always the case. The riparian forest is even more impressive here, shading the river as it twists through citrus country en route to join the Olifants (Lepelle) River north-west of Hoedspruit in the Blyde-Olifants Conservancy. >



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SHABEER BHOOLA



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You stand a good chance of seeing White-crested Helmet-Shrike in the dry savanna areas.

The dappled river margins provide ideal habitat for the elusive African Finfoot and indeed this is probably one of the best places in the country for this much sought-after and easily overlooked river specialist.

There are some appealing accommodation options along this stretch of the river, such as Blyde River Canyon Lodge close to the lower reaches of the canyon, and Blyde River Wilderness Lodge on the other side of the R527, where some time invested will normally deliver birding rewards. (Just be mindful of the other two African river specialists, the hippo and Nile crocodile, both of which are also present along the lower Blyde River.)

Half-collared Kingfishers can be found here, as well as the more ubiquitous Giant and Pied kingfishers. The fringes of the river attract typical forest and thicket-loving species such as the Red-capped Robin-Chat, Bearded Scrub-Robin, Southern Boubou, Green-backed Camaroptera, Ashy Flycatcher, Collared Sunbird, Tambourine Dove and Narina Trogon. Moving beyond the margins, the riverine forest rapidly gives way to dry savanna, where species such as Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Grey Go-away-bird, Bearded and Golden-tailed woodpeckers, Golden-breasted Bunting, Southern Black Tit, Rattling Cisticola and White-crested Helmet-Shrike can significantly increase your daily bird tally.

One of the main attractions for this area during the past 20 years or so was the Taita Falcon pair that nested above the R36 on the Abel Erasmus Pass near the J.G. Strijdom Tunnel. Until late 2012 it was easy to add this rare and localised raptor to your bird list and with the 'falcon man', bird guide Michael Kumako, on site to point out the species it was a sure bet. However, in late 2012 one of the pair disappeared, and although the latest news seems to indicate that one bird may still be seen intermittently around the roost site, the Taita Falcon has gone from being a more-or-less guaranteed sighting here to a 'maybe' at best. Michael still frequents the site, so birders passing through the area are encouraged to stop to see if he's there and if there may possibly be a Taita on view.

Lists and specials aside, the Blyde River Canyon area provides some decent and varied birding opportunities within an area of incredible natural beauty. There are a number of accommodation venues in the area, ranging from camping to

THE BLYDE RIVER CANYON AREA PROVIDES SOME DECENT AND VARIED BIRDING OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN AN AREA OF INCREDIBLE NATURAL BEAUTY

high-end lodges, and it makes for a great stop-off point on the way to the Kruger National Park. However, it deserves to be treated as far more than simply an overnight break on the way to somewhere else. The majority of my visits here comprise one night as part of a regional birding tour, and I always regret that I don't have sufficient time to undertake all the trails and walks and to discover some of its more remote corners. There is a wealth of exploring and birding to be done, and I'm sure that when I finally do get down into the bowl of the canyon on foot with those massive cliffs towering all around me, it will suddenly feel anything but small. ♦

Stay a while...

Forever Resorts Blyde Canyon www.foreverblydecanyon.co.za

A large resort with camping and self-catering accommodation options, and a decent restaurant. The grounds are extensive, and this is a great place from which to explore the upper canyon region. There are several trails that lead down into the nature reserve, and you could spend several days here walking the trails and birding in the area.

Blyde River Canyon Lodge www.blyderivercanyonlodge.com

Situated on an 85-hectare botanical reserve not far downstream of the Blydepoort Dam, this upmarket lodge has eight rooms and serves as a good place from which to explore the dam and lower canyon. Boat trips on the dam take you to see the highest active tufa waterfall in Africa, and offer a chance to see African Finfoot (which may also be seen on the river below the dam).

Blyde River Wilderness Lodge www.blyderiverwilderness.co.za

This small lodge is situated on the lower Blyde River on the other side of the R527, between the Abel Erasmus Pass and Hoedspruit. There are both self-catering and catered chalet accommodation options, and the restaurant provides great breakfasts and dinners. The river in front of the lodge is an excellent place to see African Finfoot, especially during the early morning and evening. Just be aware of the hippos and crocodiles.