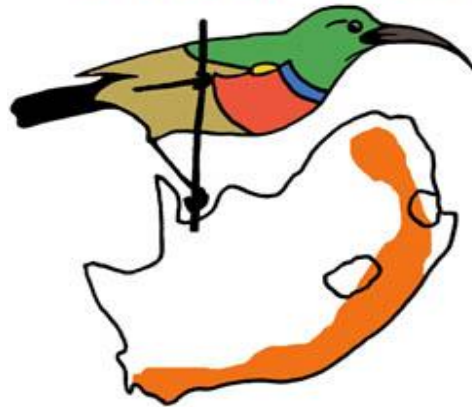


SABAP2



Atlasing South Africa from South to North: a family road-trip through South Africa's National Parks

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This is the story of a three-week family road-trip across South Africa during the winter of 2019, focused on South Africa's National Parks. Technically it had started a few weeks earlier with trips to Nature's Valley and Cape Agulhas, but this part documents the journey that included Mom. It ain't a family without Mom. And because I am me, naturally there is a strong bird focus, made all the more purposeful with the chance to contribute to the Southern African Bird Atlas Project. Since my contributions have all been from the Western and Northern Cape the last few years, I was keen to add some new birds to my BirdLasser Lifelist and extend my SABAP2 contribution map further across the country and into new provinces.

It had all started a few months before when Mom learnt that her sister was coming to visit from Germany and would start the journey off with a trip to Kruger National Park. It was clearly unacceptable that the cousins would get to see Kruger National Park before our children, so we started planning on how we could get there first to 'rendezvous' with the extended family. Of course, that means buying a WildCard to save on those 'conservation' fees, and once you have that, you may as well fit in a bunch of other parks along the way. Mokala, Marakele and Mapungubwe were all on my bucket list. Being between contracts meant I had time, but restricted finances, so camping was the only affordable way to do this given the high prices of SANParks chalets and other 'roofed' accommodation.

After several months of anticipation, on the first of August, after a long morning packing the Hilux borrowed from my dad, we were on the road to the **Karoo National Park**. This was to be one of the only 1-night stays, scheduled in to break up our journey from Blue Hill Nature Reserve to Mokala National Park. To celebrate the start of Mom's holiday, she'd booked us a family cottage, cottage number 1 near the camp's Fossil Trail. Now the camp at Karoo National Park is one of those annoying ones that intersects 4 pentads, so given limited time, you have to be choosy if you want to do a full protocol card (2 hours or more birding) on a limited time budget. Since the cottage fell into the pentad 3215_2225, this was to be the first target pentad of this expedition. It is a good one that includes the campsite and Klipspringer pass and a good 10km of the Potlekkertjie Loop. I gave brief thought to doing the Pienaarspas 4x4 trail, but R300 for the 6 km seemed like a bit of a luxury. I'd regret that decision after not getting Cinnamon-breasted Warbler, again, despite efforts at all likely looking outcrops on the way up the pass in the early morning.

The minimum effort 2 hours was spent with an afternoon walk through the campsite, a half hour predawn owl hunt (Spotty, yay!), and an hour and a half drive the following morning. In familiar Karoo territory, it was fairly easy to whip up 40+ species, with highlights being a Verreaux's Eagle perched at the lookout on the pass, and a family of three Ludwig's Bustards on the high plateau. Mom had chosen to sleep in, so it was rapid birding all the way, windows down to listen for birds, but heater on full blast to combat the cold, cold wind.

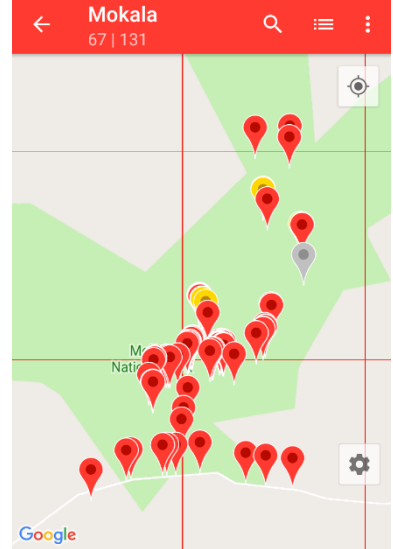





With **Mokala National Park** roughly 5 hours drive away (according to Google, always longer with kids), we were on the road by 9am, after breakfast (which is included in the night's accommodation) at the restaurant. A slow start of course: one has to navigate Beaufort West with its chaotic main street and high density of traffic cops. Otherwise the rest of the drive to Mokala from there is straightforward: N1 and N12 all the way. A strong north-westerly wind meant the skies were dusty-brown, and oncoming trucks wobbled and lent precariously to the east. We abandoned plans for a roadside lunch break for the shelter of the Kambro restaurant instead, wondering nervously what our first night of camping would be like. But the wind started to calm perfectly with our arrival at the reception, and we enjoyed a warm afternoon setting up tents at the Motswedi campsite, while Gemsbok, Warthog, Eland, Kudu, Springbok and Red Hartebeest drank at the waterhole nearby.

After our early braai, a hunt for scorpions left us disappointed, despite the dark night with only a distant, setting, new moon. However, the campsite Spotted Eagle Owl provided good views, as well as the soundtrack for the rest of the night. A big surprise was a ginger feral cat spotted in the wee hours of the morning. A pet abandoned by previous campers? A staff pet gone rogue? Symptom of a wider problem?



Our first full day started thick and furious, with all the habituated campsite birds doing the round of the breakfast table, including ridiculously tame Chestnut-vented Tit-babblers, Acacia Pied Barbet, Fiscal Flycatcher, and a Brubru, which also earned me a Golden Point in my BirdLasser bird-recording app. A Golden Point is for the first time you record a species in BirdLasser: a BirdLasser 'lifer' so to speak. There would be several more of these during the course of the day, including Black-faced Waxbill, Yellow-billed and African Grey Hornbills, Red-billed Oxpecker (on some giraffe), Violet-eared Waxbill, Green-winged Pytilia, and Marico Flycatcher.

Mokala is fragmented across 8 or so pentads, and given we only had 2 nights, I decided to concentrate on the 3 pentads around our camp. Our first game drive headed south from the Motswedi camp along the Tsessebe loop. Birds and game, including Tsessebe, were thick on the ground: it would take 2 hours to do the 10km, with distractions every few hundred meters. Granivorous species were abundant: a good grass cover through the acacia savannas providing ample food for the ubiquitous Scaly-feathered Finches, Sociable Weavers and other cutie birds. A highlight was the Pygmy Falcons in a Sociable Weaver nest at the park's reception at Mosu Lodge. On spotting the nest, it was awesome to see the fecal mat, of which I'd just learnt thanks to [research on the topic at the FitzPatrick Institute](#), and realized that some falcons must be nearby. Sure enough, there were the diminutive raptors resting in a nearby *Vachellia tortilis*, very habituated, and allowing great photo opportunities.

	 <p>Scaly—feathered Finch rivalled Red-billed Quelea for the status of most common bird.</p>	 <p>Habituated Pygmy Falcon at the rest camp.</p>
 <p>Campsite Acacia Pied Barbet. Photo by Elena Rosa Lee (8).</p>	 <p>Open woodland savanna typical of much of the national park, with stands of grass attracting many granivores.</p> <p>Right: Fawn-coloured Lark, the default Kalahari lark.</p>	



Walking the grounds at Mosu Lodge was a welcome stretch of the legs: there is not much room to move at Motswedi. Red-headed Finch and Mountain Wheatear reasons here for Mom to lift her binoculars, while I tried to disentangle the little granivores descending in swarms at the waterhole nearby, being Red-billed Quelea and Lark-like Bunting interspersed with a Golden-breasted here and there for colour. A Gabar Goshawk putting up a Red-billed Quelea flock was impressive. By the time we'd admired the displays of the Mofele Education Centre it was nearly lunch time!

To adequately cover the camp pentad, we'd have to do the Kameeldoring loop, passing the Stofdam bird hide, probably one of the most visited attractions in Mokala. It has previously been written that birding with kids means no visits to bird hides (Potgieter 2018). Charlie proved the point by falling off the bench in a loud thud, before being ushered out by a blushing Mom. Bits of wire outside proved far more interesting to him than the distant, lone Three-banded Plover in the muddy puddles. Unfortunately for me, other photographers had the best position for the Black-faced Waxbills sneaking down to the water edge, so I soon abandoned this impressive structure to re-join family.

As we headed back to camp a Rock Kestrel brought up the half century. I told Anja that at this time I expected a polite round of applause, but since cricket is not a thing for my wife of German descent, I had to bask in my land-mark to the chatter of Sociable Weavers instead. The final tally for the three pentads were 26, 35 and 51, with a reserve species list of 69. Certainly, I was disappointed not to get a Red-crested Korhaan, which pre trip preparation had led me to expect (7th most recorded species according to the atlas, running at 75 cards for Mofu at the time of the trip), and we dipped on our first opportunity for Golden-tailed Woodpecker, the name of which of course had elicited interest from the back-seat brigade of up-coming birders and photographers.



The following day was a predawn start to pack up tents and be on the road by 7am: we had a nine-and-a-half-hour drive across the grassland biome and into the northern savanna woodlands around the Waterberge: **Marakele National Park** in Limpopo province. These long drives are torture, not because of the African Litany of 'Are We Nearly There Yet', but because one can't even slow down to admire a Martial Eagle on a pylon, or double check which roller we were whizzing past. As the mountain loomed ahead after eons of flat grasslands, and Magpie Shrikes started to decorate the powerlines, we knew we were close.

At the reception, the guard asked if we'd been before and we replied in the negative, to which his response was to start decorating the photocopied park road map in pink highlighter, culminating eventually in the Lenong Viewing Point: "... where you can see the Cape Vulture colony, our main attraction."

"Great" I said, "so how long does it take to get there and what is the best time to be there?" I asked, hoping for and expecting an answer in the region of 'late morning'.

"As early as possible" came the reply.

"Really? So I should leave the camp at 6:30 and try and be at the lookout by 7:30?" I double checked. Pause from the desk agent before his response: "Yes."

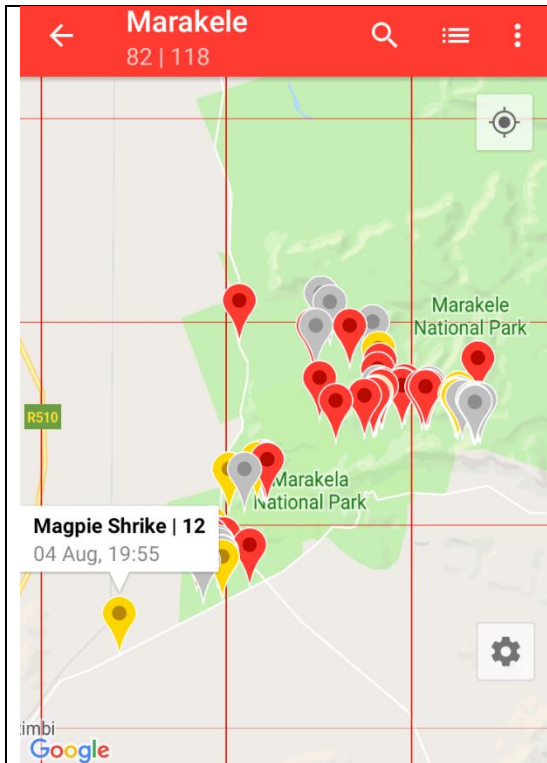
Mom, drily: "I'll set the alarm for 5:30 then."

The following morning, we spent the hour of prime birding and game viewing time speeding across Marakele so that we'd not miss out on those rare, early-flying vultures. We sped up the narrow mountain pass towards the hilltop bristling with telecommunication masts, scanning the skies and cliffs to make sure we weren't missing them. At the top, there were engineers working on various masts but no congregation of tourists. It was ten to eight, our early arrival delayed by two large, endangered, one-horned mammals blocking the road. Had we already missed the vulture spectacle? Eventually, we found the sign saying Lenong Viewing Point. We looked around for information on vultures or directions to the colony but found only a poster about butterflies. Confused we set off down a trail marked by yellow footprints not knowing what we were looking for. At this stage I was starting to panic that we'd made the long journey for nothing.

The panic transformed into a different kind when Mom said: "Please go find your daughter. She's wandered off that way." And there was no sign of her. Visions of Elena transformed into food for missing vultures at the bottom of a pile of rocks started to fill my mind. However, she'd safely navigated her way back to the car where she was busy taking photos of Cape Buntings. Retrieving Mom and Charlie we reached the conclusion after half an hour of mis-adventure that we must be at the wrong location. We got back into the vehicle to see if one of the other roads led to the colony. We were then informed by some of the engineers that we had been at the correct location and that we had not missed anything as the vultures could be seen all day long. We headed back to the view point, found a bench and unpacked snacks to wait. Our snacking soon attracted very habituated Capped Wheatear, Mocking Cliff Chat and Cape Rock Thrush but no Cape Vulture. So we asked Charlie to pretend to be dead on nearby rocks which he did very well because we did eventually spot our first vulture at roughly nine o'clock and realized the roosting colony was many kilometres away on the south facing side of the mountain, mostly out of sight.

By ten o'clock scores of vultures were streaming past us casting a beady eye on the ooh-ing and aah-ing small group of admirers below, the occasion made all the more special by all the anticipation. This is certainly a special ornithological spectacle, so in a way it was sad that we'd been the only campers from the moderately busy campsite to mission out to view them, and that there was absolutely no information on vultures at the location: the plight of vulture is dire and how much longer we'll be able to view them with hundreds being killed by poacher poisoning events is a real concern. Mom and I had been reminded of Colca Canyon in Peru, where busloads of tourists head out to view the Andean Condors rise from the valley below. Maybe we'd just been lucky on this day to have the mountain to ourselves and the engineers.





Crowd pleasing Crimson-breasted Shrike. Right: This female Mocking Cliff Chat was no tease.



While we could perhaps have spent longer, the rest of the pentads that we had traversed at speed beckoned, and our sedate birding pace was very rewarding. I was very surprised to see Gurney's Sugarbird as well as Malachite Sunbird on the *Proteas* around the viewpoint. Tawny-flanked Prinia had replaced ecological niche of Black-chested and Karoo Prinias from further south. Blue Waxbill was now 'common', and Bushveld Pipit made a nice change from African. During the course of our travels we'd also traversed from Cape, to Red-eyed and now Dark-capped Bulbul. Bushveld bird parties were a special treat, with foraging groups of Puffback, Brown-crowned Tchagra and Southern Black Tit. Mom picked up a Verreaux's Eagle soaring against the cliffs, delivering a green branch to its cliff-side nest.

Plans to enjoy the Bontle Campsite birds in the afternoon were scuttled when I realised I'd left my recorder on the mountain top while looking for Elena. She got to take photos of Crimson-breasted Shrike, Ostrich and Yellow-billed Hornbills while I got to watch the Cape Vultures descending back to their roost in the late afternoon. However, I did have a chance to catch up the following morning on the campsite residents. But then we were on the road again: northwards to Mapungubwe. I left Marakele with a definite sense



that I could have done better on the atlasing front: while I'd again done three full protocol cards, I certainly did not feel I'd visited all habitats: no good water spots, not enough time to explore the sections outside the park, and a lack of familiarity with some of the calls meant that although the total species list was 82, so handsomely beating Mokala, each of the pentads scored in the mid-thirties (2415_2730 has a species list of 245). However, the transition of habitats from the lowland mixed woodland to the upland grassland meant that each pentad had a near unique species list, so pretty impressive for a day and a half birding effort.

What we did not appreciate about Marakele is how perfect the temperatures were: although the early mornings were chilly, in the low teens perhaps, the days warmed up beautifully to the mid-twenties. Mokala had been hot-water-bottle requiring cold during the night and early morning: down to 3 degrees above freezing according to our camera trap thermometer, although days had been beautiful too. Now, our cold acclimatized bodies were in for a shock: arriving at **Mapungubwe National Park**, it was 31 degrees according to the weather report, and more according to campsite rumours. On the plus side, there is not usually a good excuse to eat ice-cream in winter.

Like many of the SANParks regular campsites, the Mazhou campsite is far away and tucked into a distant corner out of the way, while the premium roofed accommodation occupies prime spots. I was hoping it would be along the banks of the Limpopo, but there is no water source except for the overflow from the water-tank. Thus, despite being nestled among impressive Apple-leaf and Nyala-berry trees, the location is a little disappointing, reached shortly after driving the adjacent citrus farm. But again, first impressions can be very deceptive: by the time the tents were up the bird list was on 26 species, and the camp would continue to grow on us. Habituated Bushbuck were soon begging around the table, looking sorry for themselves as they snuffled for dry Apple-leaf leaves on the ground, while the ever-present Vervet Monkeys expertly raided unattended campsites. A distant rumble alerted us to a passing herd of elephant, which we watched from the dubious safety of the double strand wire fence that marks the camp boundary. But really it was the first night that was just a carnival of activity.

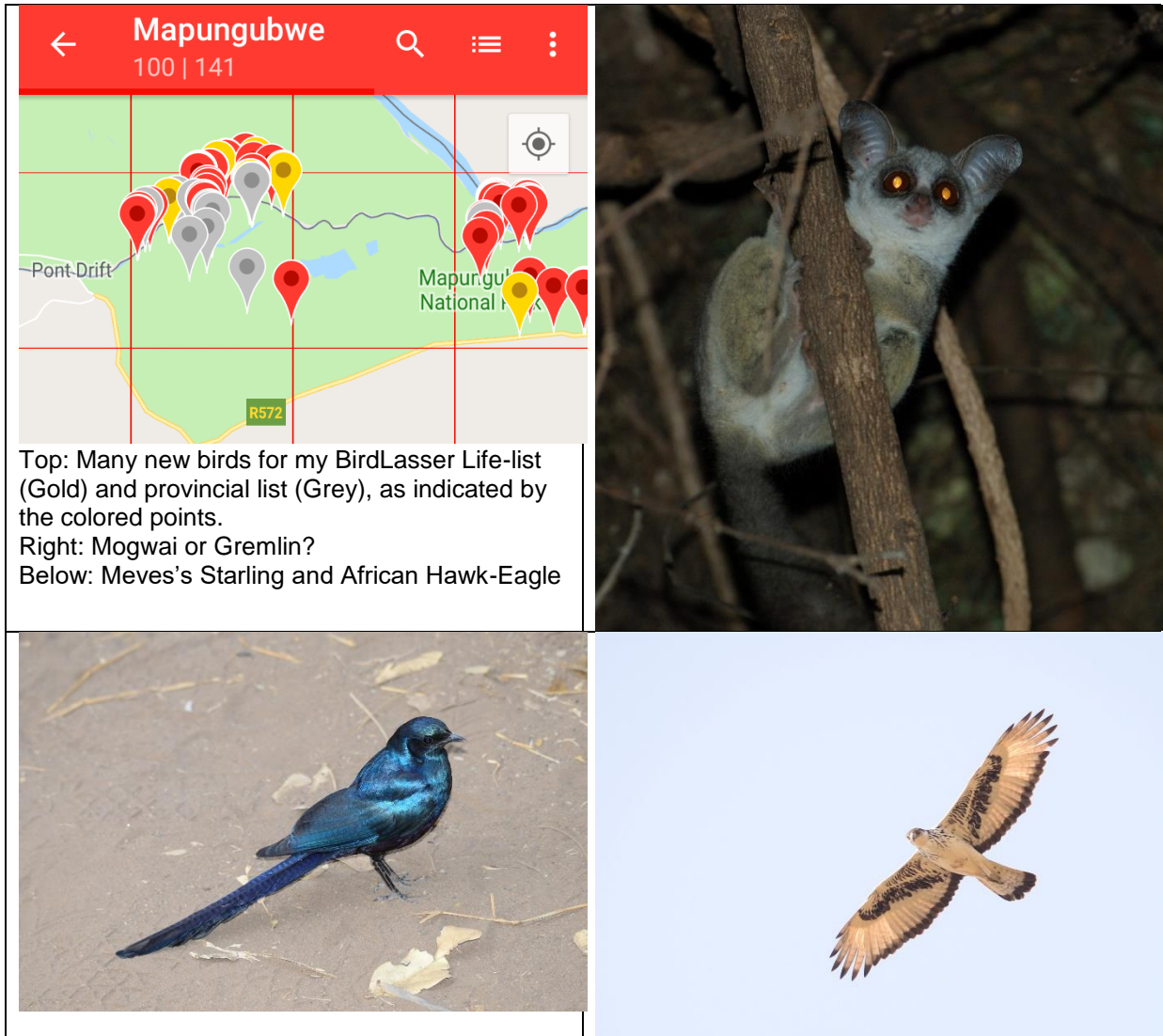


Mazhou got the owl award for favourite campsite.
Top: Pearl-spotted Owlet (Photo by Elena Lee)
Left: Barred Owlet, with the glowing eyes of a gecko

Eli and I tracked down a Pearl-spotted Owl at dusk. Then a Barred Owl flew into a nearby tree during dinner to enjoy its meal of an unlucky gecko. Scops Owls, while not seen, engaged in a calling marathon all through the night. Then there were the large number of Galagos (bushbabies): the spotlight beam seemed full of leaping orange eyes whenever one scanned the trees as the Lesser Bushbabies performed their incredible acrobatic leaps. It would then be a very sleep-interrupted night as the Thick-tailed



Bushbabies yapped and whined as they made their way more cautiously through the taller trees. Meanwhile, the Lion were arguing with the Elephant and Leopard, which from the cackles and whoops of the Spotted Hyaena and Black-backed Jackal was very amusing. The Impala, whose eyes shone like so many fallen stars each time we swept the torch around us, snorted their disapproval of proceedings. That we heard no nightjars during our two nights suggested they had departed for more peaceful places. To top it all off, the Lesser Bushbabies then figured out our tent was a great new short-cut on the way to their nest. The first time I saw the little face peering down at us through the mosquito netting, it was cute, by the 10th time, not so cute anymore. You know you've been pushed to your limits when you're contemplating hurling this cuddly into the distant bushes.



Top: Many new birds for my BirdLasser Life-list (Gold) and provincial list (Grey), as indicated by the colored points.
 Right: Mogwai or Gremlin?
 Below: Meves's Starling and African Hawk-Eagle

It was a bit of bleary-eyed start to our full day at Mapungubwe, so I appreciated the visits of the campsite guardians: Arrow-marked Babblers passed quickly through, while Meves's (Long-tailed to our family) Starling showed off their many hues of blues. Red-billed Hornbill and Natal Francolin both made a turn, while a Crested Barbet was certainly the most exciting for Mom and kids. After some morning ablutions and a bit of laundry, we hit the river road with its abandoned border fences and gates, through its herds of Impala, Blue Wildebeest and Waterbuck to the Maloutswa Bird Hide. We had eye-level views of Yellow-



bellied Bulbul, Tropical Boubou and Orange-breasted Bushshrike along the way. Low flying White-backed Vulture got Charlie out of his chair, while a pair of low flying African Hawk Eagle had me nearly falling out of my car window. Before we'd even reached the bird hide, the half century was up, this time to a semi-appreciative 'Oh' from Mom.

The bird hide was everything it should be for a family on holiday: free of other people. There were also an additional 10 waterbirds to be added to the list, including Wood Sandpiper, Common Greenshank and Hamerkop. Furry animals too provided a non-stop multitude of soap-operas to entertain all tastes: over 100 Chacma Baboons, as well as Impala, Kudu, Giraffe, Warthog. Thankfully for me the Elephants, which was what Mom really wanted to see drinking, dawdled their way to the water for over an hour, allowing me to disentangle distant columns of vultures, White-winged Widowbird among the swarms of Red-billed Quelea and Red-billed Buffalo-weaver. For those into a bit more gore, a Rock Monitor tortured a platanna to death beneath the blind for a protracted period of time. Eventually though, hints at the need to get to the swimming pool at the Limpopo Forest Tent Camp became too much, and we had to head on for family entertainment and pool-side gossip. I couldn't believe we'd managed to spend 2-hours at the blind, mostly without boredom induced family drama. Over 2 hours at the pool side had me semi-sympathetic to Charlie's bird-hide complaint of 'your idea of fun is not necessarily my idea of fun', and eventually I managed to coerce everyone into the vehicle for a quick drive around the Mopani Loop, which added a Sabota Lark and Black-chested Snake-eagle to the list before returning to a fully occupied campsite.

The following morning, we left 2210_2910 with a tally of 77 species, the highest species score so far, to head back to the main gate in the 'eastern' section of the park, skirting Elephant destroying mopane trees. The tree-top walk overlooking the not-very-great, not-very-green, but yet still rather greasy, Limpopo River needed to be ticked off, and is certainly an impressive structure, made all the more so by the views of the Brown Snake-eagle nesting not too far off. Despite the sad state of the river, it helped turn up some water species. Then it was on to the Confluence Lookout for views of Botswana and Zimbabwe. Grey Tit-Flycatcher and Marico Sunbird were further welcome golden points. This time when I mentioned we'd hit 50 species, mom's response was 'Already? With so many birds around I can see how one might actually get into birding around here'. Although it was only 10am, temperatures were clearly headed for the 30's again, so our final turn would be the interpretation centre. 10 school buses of various sorts did not bode well, and indeed the receptionist strongly recommended we come back another time, and since this was Eli's favourite park to date, maybe we'll do that. In the meantime, we needed to navigate Musina mall for provisions, and head eastwards to Pafuri River Camp. Red-crested Korhaan on the side of the road and a Purple Roller on a powerline brought the Mapungubwe species tally to satisfying century, almost certainly with many overlooked.

We'd booked **Pafuri River Camp** because I wanted to do some more northern Limpopo birding, with the many special species that can only be seen in the north-eastern corner of South Africa. A birthday present from parents-in-law meant I could employ the services of long-time resident, but rather reticent, Sam Baloyi for some early morning birding (2 hours for R300). He was very useful for carrying the bird book and pointing out where to find Black-throated Wattle-eye and Red-capped Robin-chat. A roll of other golden points included Meyer's and Brown-headed Parrots, Black and Woolly-necked Storks. As a cold front of sorts had blown in over the night, resulting in our first overcast skies of the trip, but pleasant temperatures, the family decided to do a post-breakfast walk up the Signal Hill and down the boundary fence and back along the river. A golden point for the first of many Greater Blue-eared Starling, Spectacled Weaver, African Yellow White-eye, White-browed Scrub Robin and White-throated Robin-chat making for a very colourful bird list, and the pentad tally was 69 by lunchtime, but wouldn't advance from that for the rest of the trip, despite time hunting for rumoured Eastern Nicator. Collared Sunbird would be the only bird I'd photograph, given the poor light conditions, although it was interesting to see that at least one of these was wearing a SAFRING ring. A post-dinner owl walk would provide good views of both bushbaby species, but nothing feathered.

The Pafuri River Camp is actually on the Mutale River, a tributary of the Luvuvhu/Limpopo. The river was shallow, and despite warning signs, we saw no crocodile. Unlike the SANParks camps, there were no



ridiculously habituated birds scuttling around our feet. Boys with catapults had been seen on the road leading up to the Pafuri gate, and goats, cattle and herders utilising the lands around the camp mean there are local people, and the woodland is very heavily grazed. This off-the-grid camp has been running for over 25 years, and is a very popular base for exploring the northern Kruger, especially given the high price of accommodation in the park. The elevated tented accommodation with donkey-boilers and gas fridges are well maintained and fairly private, as were the campsite facilities: we pretty much had an ablution block to ourselves. Kids enjoyed the pool on the warm day, and the boma-breakfast was a hit with Mom while I was out on my guided walk. Rustic, but everything you need, and we greatly appreciated the chance to roam: this our first no-drive day of the journey.



Evidence of citizen science of another kind on this Collared Sunbird

An early morning rain-shower provided a 5am wake up call, so we were packed up by 7am without much bother. A brisk breeze pushed us to the Pafuri gate, and eastwards towards the target pentad of the day: Crook's Corner at 2225_3115. The dusty gallery forest would wrack up the fastest 50 of the trip so far, in just over 2 hours. Golden points for Bateleur, White-crowned Lapwing, Trumpeter Hornbill, and Lesser Masked Weaver (bear in mind I've never atlassed a card in Gauteng either at this stage). No Bohm's Spinetail, Lemon-breasted Canary or Pel's Fishing Owl though. Scores of massive crocodiles lined the puddles of the Luvuvhu River. With no maps of any kind at the entrance gate, we felt robbed when we found out that Crook's Corner has no picnic facilities on getting to that viewing site. We back-tracked to the Pafuri picnic spot via the SAPs border post to Mozambique, where we added a Pearl-breasted Swallow to the list. Nyala and herds of Elephant heading to the river from their foraging grounds in the surrounding Mopane woodlands meant progress was frequently interrupted, although car-habituated Brown-hooded Kingfisher and Emerald-spotted Wood Dove also gave reason to pause and exercise the camera. At the very busy picnic site, we miserably realized that we'd packed the coffee right at the back of the bakkie: one of those terrible situations where one is already too tired to unpack all one's equipment, and that by not doing so one will continue to remain too tired for the rest of the afternoon. A Common



Greenshank was species 51 and the last for the card before wrapping up the Pafuri trip list (91 species for the 2 cards) for the long drive to Shingwedzi.

Coming up to one of the roadside waterholes past the turn off to Punda Maria, one of those long lines of cars suggested a Lion sighting. Suddenly I slammed on brakes. I couldn't believe my eyes. Not more than 15 meters from the road, beautifully out in the open and totally relaxed in a dead knob-wood tree was a Peregrine Falcon! I'd finally manage to get some shots of the bird normally only achievable by Andrew Jenkins! Sort of: none in flight.



A car stopped next to us to ask what we were looking at, as though it wasn't obvious. The driver asked: "Have you seen Lions yet?"

"No"

"Some Lions have killed a Zebra just outside Shingwedzi, you should hurry down and take a look!"

With the Peregrine gone we drove on past the first line of stopped cars, with occupants straining through binoculars for patches of fur in the yellow grass. Reaching Shingwedzi we passed the queue of cars looking at the ripped apart Zebra to admire an African Fish-Eagle at eye level, with Great Egret, Yellow-billed and Marabou Storks all along the banks of a Waterbuck, Giraffe, Kudu, Buffalo, Elephant, Crocodile and Hippo infested ponds. More golden points, yippee.

At the restaurant that evening, the children quickly made friends with the family at the adjacent table.

"What interesting animals did you see today?", they asked the children.

"A bug that looked like a leaf and a shongololo" responded Charlie.



Securing a marginal fence-side camp spot, I was relieved to finally get some caffeine into my system, and that I was back in the world of ridiculously habituated camp birds: African Mourning Dove tussling with the Greater Blue-eared Starling for the biscuit crumbs conveniently generated by the restless crew on the back seat during those long drives between destinations. A stretch of the legs around the campsite landed beautiful views of a woodpecker with a golden tail. Thanks to Mom's copy of 'Faansie's Bird Book' with its useful hints, I was able to correct my original shout to the correct one when learning it is Bennet's Woodpecker that is observed more frequently foraging on the ground. The reason I married this lady is because she reads the instructions.



Golden-tailed Woodpecker



Cardinal Woodpecker



Above: Bearded Woodpecker
Left: Bennet's Woodpecker

With Lion and Hippo noise-making through the night, it was great to add a Giant Eagle-Owl to the list to the sound of coffee brewing at 5:30am. Mom was actually surprisingly eager for the morning's game drive for some reason, but children more reluctant.



“Hey sleepy-heads, we want to go for a drive to see... “. I mentally scanned the list of South Africa’s birds to see what I could name in the area that would excite them enough to get up... “Lion”. That did the trick for Charlie. However, a heavy mist meant we couldn’t even see the dead Zebra in the riverbed, so I suggested we head to the Kanniedood bird hide.

“Why daddy? Because the Lion might go there to eat the birds?” asked Charlie. Pause similar to the one given by the desk clerk at Marakele. “Yes, Charlie”.

However, the Kanniedood bird hide was absolutely dead, with no views and no water: time to call it quits and head back to the camp. White-backed Vultures were picking at what was the day before associated with the animal crossing roads. At the camp I received a stern warning and threats of fines from the camp guard for leaning out the window to take photos of squabbling Yellow-billed Storks.

Mom had been looking forward to Shingwedzi for more than a week: finally there would be a washing machine. However, back at the camp she quickly realized that finding an unused one was harder than finding a Lion. I was sent to baby-sit children at the pool, while Mom lurked vulture-like at the ablution facilities. At the pool I soon realized that the back-wash pipe was a mini-forest eco-system, with tame Brown-crowned Tchagra, Blue Waxbill, Puffback, Spectacled Weaver, and a Dwarf Mongoose, so it all worked out for everyone in the end.



Still no Lion to satisfy Mom’s urge to game drive as we left Shingwedzi. Instead, what we encountered was a VW van with a double puncture, the front wheel completely shredded, with only one spare tyre. It looked like a helpless situation, with no cell phone reception. I realised that we might be able to come right if the back wheel was not shredded as I had a small car-battery operated pump and a puncture repair kit for a tubeless tyre. There was some searching to find the anti-theft wheel nut, and some passing rangers provided a more useful jack. After an hour and a half the vehicle was on the road, and we were pressed for time to get to Satara. Certainly, a mixed flock of vultures including a magnificent Lappet-faced Vulture would be a highlight of the day, but that could only be appreciated for a few minutes. With the dry, winter conditions but temperatures knocking on 38 C, every waterhole and dam provided spectacles of thirsty, drinking Elephant.





Towards the end of the day, towards the Satara pentad we picked up the first Chestnut-backed Sparrowlarks of the trip. Burchell's Starling had replaced the Long-tailed (Meves's) Starling, and Cape Glossy mixed with the Greater Blue-eared Starlings. With over 200 roofed accommodation options plus the vast campsite, Satara is a metropolis compared to Shingwedzi, and it was one of those camps we'd chosen mostly because preferred campsite locations were full.

On the brochure it says the area is popular due to the large quantities of game and numbers of Lion, which I put down to marketing. One of the warning signs says beware of Vervet Monkeys and Honeybadgers, which I put down to someone being amusing. But then our evening owl walk was completely hijacked by a Honeybadger bathing in a washing up tub and having an extended grooming session, which we watched from only meters away. A procession of 3 would walk through our camp the following night too, while an African Wildcat watched us cooking dinner.

Allowing family to sleep in, I went on a short early morning drive to get some coverage of the pentad. Arriving at the gate at opening time at 6am, I was the 7th car in the queue out. We all flowed out south, more like a funeral procession than a wedding. A tree full of Mosque Swallows was the highlight, duly on request not spotting any exciting furry animals to ensure no camp jealousy. I was not sad to return to the camp for a photography walk of the campsite birds with Eli and Charlie. Eventually one will always find someone ignoring the 'don't feed the animal' signs, resulting in the spectacular colourful mixed flocks of starlings, hornbills, sparrows and other species e.g. Grey Go-away-birds. Acacia Pied Barbet and Brubru were picking insects off some *Aloe* inflorescences. Brown-headed Parrots were feeding off the long pods of what could be a *Cassia*. Being only meters away from Common Scimitarbill and watching a Bearded Woodpecker catch a gecko was also special.





Family agreed to go on a short-ish pre-lunch drive to a nearby dam to round off the pentad. We were somewhat surprised that Mom would finally get her big cat fix with two Lion sightings: a scrawny female stalking Nyala, and a bloated male at a waterhole. I had a glimpse of the trip's first of two Hooded Vulture heading south. Children enjoyed their camp highlight in the afternoon: the pool, while I had a satisfactory siesta to make up for night walks, early starts and long drives.

A few more ad-hoc encounters on the drive to Pretoriuskop the following day, including the first palearctic migrant: a Common Sandpiper, would bring the Satara list to an acceptable 95. We drew the line under the list as we hit Skukuza for lunch-time. Here I had a brief moment of hope that Charlie was finally really getting into feathered creatures when he called out excitedly: "There is something flying over there!" In the distance a plane had just taken off from Skukuza airport.

We'd chosen Pretoriuskop because it was closest to the Numbi Gate to rendezvous with Mom's sister and family, who were staying in accommodation in Hazyview (mostly due to SANParks high prices: the day entrance fees for the international group of 6 alone was R1600). For me the 2-child birding handicap would now be extended to 5 plus. Setting off for our first drive in our 2-vehicle convoy with my brother-in-law in the passenger seat, with kids in the van behind, I was initially hopeful when he pointed out a bird, a Groundscraper Thrush, on the side of the road. "A bird" he announced into 2-way radio to let the other vehicle know why we had stopped.

Not deterred, I stopped excitedly when a flock of waxbills and firefinches flushed from the road verge into the bushes next to the vehicle. A Blue Waxbill glittered gorgeously only arm's length away, but I knew my birding would be restricted to scanning bushes while Impala were being admired when the announcement to the tailing vehicle was "A small bird". I would have to indulge in a private viewing session of a Lizard Buzzard though, and would try to point out the African Jacana at one of the hippo pools of the Sabi River



a bit later, since Mom had asked if she'd seen them before while going through the bird book at some stage. Rumours of Cheetah also allowed me time to admire a lonely Hooded Vulture on the remains of a kill. At the end of the long day out, further highlights included both oxpecker species on some nearby Buffalo, while extended family were happy with Lion, Elephant, a Spotted Hyaena family in a roadside culvert, and lots of general game.

The next day the destination for the entourage would be the Afsaal picnic spot. Yellow-billed Hornbill foraged through old rhino dung on the side of the road. An African Harrier-Hawk (Gymnogone) exploring the crevasses of an old tree provided some entertainment as it dangled and flapped among the tree branches. Mom got her first African Wild-dog beneath dancing Bateleurs, while an Impala hung in a tree was causing a traffic jam of badly behaving game-drive vehicles urgently looking for the associated Leopard. At the Afsaal picnic spot I had distant childhood memories of an area cordoned off for a resident Pearl-spotted Owl, but the place resembles a mall now with Vervet Monkeys skulking around to launch snatch and grab attacks. I had a proud dad moment when Eli stood her ground to an aggressive monkey that had its yoghurt tub pinched by a rival monkey, and which then needed to work out its aggression by charging at the audience of intrigued children.

With rapidly rising temperatures, I decided to abandon a full protocol card when after 2 hours I had only 10 picnic-spot species, and time at some waterholes was called for. The weir on the Biyamiti river proved an excellent spot, with a suitable golden point earned for Yellow-throated Longclaw, and entertainment for everyone, from eye-level views with Crocodile, Hippo and African Jacana, to bathing Elephant.



Yellow-throated Longclaw



Lizard Buzzard bum



Red-billed Oxpeckers



Yellow-billed Oxpeckers



We were disappointed when returning to Afsaal we found the place closed at 4pm on the dot, so ice-cream rewards for good behaviour could not be delivered on. A compromise was a White Rhino grazing nearby, which we could view in peace with the crowds gone. By-passing the Impala-in-a-tree, a few game vehicles still hovered mournfully, a lack of excitement from guests suggesting no-one was seeing anything except some over-ripe venison. As we waited our turn in the car, Mom said: "I think I see the leopard". Sure enough, a line of spots in the grass and a flick of a tail indicated a sleeping leopard 20 meters off. I was wondering if I should charge the game ranger who stopped next to us clearly about to head out for the information, but we decided to be nice.

Our last evening in the Kruger would be rounded off nicely with Square-tailed Nightjar churring away at the camp, while an African Civet patrolled the fence-line. Our extra day in Pretoriuskop had overcome the 5-child handicap to round off the longest species site-list with 103 species, coming from 1 decent full protocol card and 2 abandoned full protocol card attempts. A Pied Crow would be the fitting last species to the list, heralding our return to the messy world of humans. In all, a very satisfactory and action-packed week, but with some notable missing species: no Tawny Eagle, with the big brown jobs featuring only Brown Snake-eagle and an immature Bateleur; and no Secretarybird.

It was a sad good bye to the lowveld, as we unpacked our jerseys and fleeces for our return to the highveld, and more pointedly, **Golden Gate National Park**, where we'd booked one night to break up our journey back south. Despite our limited time at the foothills of the Drakensberg, I managed to squeeze in a minimum effort full protocol card. We'd bagged Southern Bald Ibis the evening of our arrival, as well as Ground Woodpecker and Cape Rock Thrush. Our visit the following morning to the Vulture Hide was way too early to catch any scavenger action: so, no Bearded Vulture this time. We still had a long drive to Mountain Zebra National Park to endure.



Slowly the highveld grasslands gave way to arid Nama Karoo, and familiar birding territory. No gold or even grey points to be found in the bird list of 76 species, with the core Mountain Zebra pentad getting 68 species. Campsite White-browed Sparrow-weavers provided most of the action as the local human habituated birds, with Pied Starling a close second. Certainly, Lion were a major distraction: there were none on our last visit here in March 2013, with them introduced a month later. Now they were roaring past the camp, mating on the mountain and generally seducing the camera lens away from their primary targets.

All in all, an excellent atlasing adventure.





Top Hint: When birding with non-birders, save finding these to the end.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Mom for many things, but specifically here for typing birds into BirdLasser while I was driving. Thanks to Chris Lee for loan of the vehicle that made it all so easy.

Links

We booked most our accommodation directly through SANParks official website: <https://www.sanparks.org/>

Pafuri River Camp: a good base for the north: <http://pafuri.co.za/>

Blue Hill Escape (new slogan: 'cheaper than SANParks with fewer furry distractions'): www.bluehillescape.co.za

References

Potgieter E (2018) No small matter: birdwatching with children. *African Birdlife* 7(1), 26.

