

Northern KwaZulu-Natal Voyager

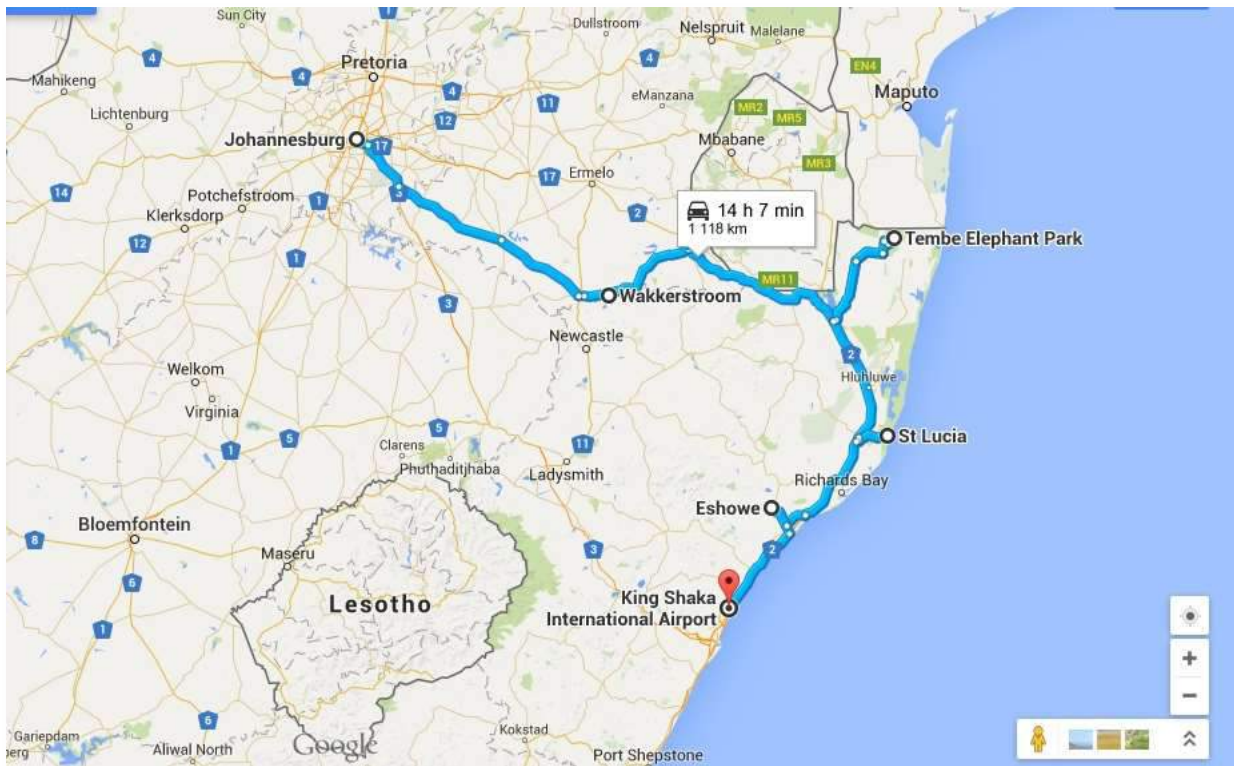
From the Drakensberg foothills the Elephant
Coast: a birding and wildlife journey
through the Zulu Nation



Introduction

Take a line from Johannesburg and extend it eastwards to any point on the east coast and you will find along that line a great change in habitat as you begin at 1500 meters above sea level, climb over the escarpment and then drop down to sea level where the warm Indian Ocean meets the land. This remarkable change in altitude and associated habitats makes for a wonderful diversity of fauna and flora and our itinerary is designed to make the most of this. The starting point is Wakkerstroom, a birding gem in the grassy highlands along the Mpumalanga / KwaZulu-Natal border. From here we move on to Tembe Elephant Park, a wonderful community partnership lodge and reserve on the border with Mozambique, where the Sand Forest habitat holds a number of significant birds as well as big game in the form of Elephant, White Rhino, Lion, Giraffe and the like. From Tembe we head south to St Lucia and the newly re-named iSimangaliso Wetland Park, a World Heritage Site. Here the flavour is distinctly tropical, with wonderful birding opportunities in the park and the St Lucia lagoon on the edge of town. Leaving the coast we head to our final destination, Eshowe, a small town in the hills inland from the coast. Here we will spend some time birding in Dlinza Forest, concentrating on finding the two specials, namely Spotted Ground Thrush and Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon. This tour covers a wide range of habitats, should produce a substantial bird and mammal list and is altogether a wonderful introduction to South Africa's eastern regions. Unforgettable scenery is part of the appeal, as is a rich historical component, with battle sites from the Anglo Boer and Zulu Wars scattered throughout the rolling hills of Zululand and the interior. This medium-paced itinerary will suit both novices and more experienced birders and naturalists, and overall promises to deliver a truly memorable experience.

Map Reference



Itinerary

Days 1 - 2: Wakkerstroom

After meeting up at O. R. Tambo International Airport (or other point) we'll leave Johannesburg and make our way towards Wakkerstroom, with a stop at the Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve if time allows. We should arrive in the small country town in the afternoon, and if time allows we might take a short drive down to the large wetland on the edge of the town, where we'll look for species such as South African Shelduck, Maccoa Duck, Southern Pochard, Cape Shoveler, Red-billed, Hottentot and Cape Teals on the open water, and Squacco Heron, Purple Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron and Purple Swamphen in the reeds and Grey Crowned Cranes in the grasslands beyond the marsh. On our full day we'll leave the inn early we'll head off into the countryside on an extended morning excursion, perhaps taking a packed breakfast and coffee basket with us. There are various loops in the area, and special birds we'll be looking out for include Blue Crane, Secretarybird, Blue Korhaan, Ground Woodpecker, Quail Finch, Marsh Owl, Red-throated Wryneck and Rudd's and Botha's Larks, the two specials for the area. Mammals we may see include Yellow Mongoose and the endearing Meerkat / Suricate. We'll return for lunch and a siesta, and will have the afternoon open for either another drive or a stroll down to the wetlands once again before returning to freshen up before dinner.

Days 3 - 4: Tembe Elephant Park

After a last morning activity in the Wakkerstroom area we'll have breakfast, pack and depart for Tembe Elephant Park in far northern KwaZulu-Natal Province. Tembe Elephant Park is a large reserve on the border of South Africa and Mozambique, and is co-owned by the people of the local Tembe tribe. Much of Tembe comprises pristine sand forest habitat, which is where we'll look for special birds such as Pink-throated Twinspot, Plain-backed Sunbird, Woodward's Batis, Grey Waxbill, Rudd's Apalis, African Broadbill and many others. Other habitats include grassy vleis (marshes) where we may see Black Coucal, Saddle-billed Stork, Purple Heron and Rosy-throated Longclaw, with a bit of luck. As its name implies Tembe is also home to a large number of African Elephants, many of which carry some impressive ivory (unfortunately Isilo, their biggest tusker, died of natural causes early in 2014). In addition to some wonderful Elephant encounters we'll hope to see Lion, and will no doubt see antelope species such as Impala, Nyala, Kudu, Suni and Red Duiker. Other species to see include Red Squirrel, Thick-tailed Bushbaby, Bushpig and Warthog. We should

arrive at Tembe in the mid-afternoon in time for our afternoon game and birding drive in open-sided Land-Cruise game viewers. We'll return to camp for dinner and drinks under the African night sky. The following morning we'll have a morning drive, followed by breakfast and a chance to relax in the camp through the heat of the day. We'll then have another afternoon drive followed by dinner once again.

Days 5 - 7: St Lucia

After a last activity and breakfast we'll depart for the coastal village of St Lucia on the edge of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. The park was listed in 1999 as South Africa's first World Heritage Site. Comprising three major lake systems, eight interlinking ecosystems, 700-year-old fishing traditions, most of South Africa's remaining swamp forests, Africa's largest estuarine system, 526 bird species and 25 000-year-old coastal sand dunes, which are among the highest in the world, this is an extraordinary place indeed. We should arrive in the early afternoon and have time to settle in to our accommodation in town before embarking on a optional boat cruise on the estuary at 16h00, to look for birds such as African Fish Eagle, Purple Swamphen, Malachite, Pied and Giant Kingfishers, African Jacana, Great White and Pink-backed Pelicans, Woolly-necked Stork, Yellow Weaver, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater and others in addition to the resident Hippo's and Nile Crocodiles, some of which are true giants. We'll return in the evening and have dinner in one of the town's restaurants before turning in. On our first full day we'll depart early for the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, birding our way northwards towards Cape Vidal. En-route we'll stop for a packed breakfast at Mission Rocks before continuing. At Cape Vidal we'll have time to stretch our legs and dip our toes in the warm Indian Ocean before birding our way back to town. The region carries a substantial bird list including specials such as Rudd's Apalis, Green Malkoha, White-eared Barbet, Black-throated Wattle-eye, Woodward's Batis, Southern Banded Snake-Eagle, Crested Guineafowl, Livingstone's Turaco, Brown Scrub-Robin, Grey Waxbill, Green Twinspot, Purple-banded Sunbird and others. The iSimangaliso Wetland Park also has a substantial mammal list, many species having been recently re-introduced, including White Rhino, Cape Buffalo, Leopard, Common Waterbuck, Samango Monkey and Red Squirrel, among others. Interestingly enough, the Hippos resident in the estuary mouth become semi-urbanised after dark, frequenting the lawns and gardens of the suburbs! The metallic 'tink-tink' of large Fruit Bats and the occasional whooping of Wood Owl are the sounds of the night, while the nasal whining of the Trumpeter Hornbills is the dominant sound during the day.

On our second full day we'll have another day trip, this time into the nearby Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Game Reserve, the premier big game region of the province, where the Big Five and a range of general game can be seen. We'll also be looking out for a wide variety of savannah birds, such as Martial and Tawny Eagles, Bateleur, White-backed Vulture, Southern Ground Hornbill, Red-billed Oxpecker, White-eared Barbet, Cardinal and Golden-tailed Woodpeckers, Gorgeous Bush-Shrike and many others. We'll then return in the late afternoon for a rest before another wonderful dinner in one of the local restaurants.

Day 8: Eshowe

After a morning activity at St Lucia we'll head south, making a detour to Mtunzini to look for Palmnut Vulture and Mangrove Kingfisher (the latter is seasonal) before heading on to Eshowe in the foothills just inland from the coast. This area is rich in history as the seat of the famed Zulu Empire of the 1870's, when the British Colonial force came into contact with one of Southern Africa's most powerful tribes. We'll be staying on the fringe of Dlinza Forest, a relic patch of coastal scarp forest around which the town is built. The highlight of the forest is an aerial boardwalk which allows us to look for birds from high up in the canopy, and even from above on the twenty-metre high canopy tower. There's also a walking trail through the forest, and birds we'll be looking out for include Spotted Ground Thrush, Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon, Cape Batis, Narina Trogon, Grey Cuckooshrike, Green Malkoha, Lemon Dove, Trumpeter Hornbill and others, while the tiny Blue Duiker, standing only 30 cm tall at the shoulder, is fairly common in the forest. After an afternoon walk in the forest we'll head back to the guest house to freshen up before dinner.

Day 9: Departure

Today we'll have an early start, with a quest to find the very localized Green Barbet in Ongoye Forest, where we'll also look out for a range of other forest species. We'll then head back to Eshowe for breakfast and departure for King Shaka International Airport near Durban, where the tour will come to an end.

Tour in brief

Best time to visit: September and early October are when things begin to 'hot up' as far as bird activity goes, and all migrants have arrived by mid-November. Birding is excellent through to March and April, but begins to quieten down in May. Winters are cooler and drier, and the birding can still be good, although not quite what it can be in summer.

Expected weather conditions: weather conditions in and around Wakkerstroom can vary considerably and can be cool to cold at any time of the year; warm to very hot in Zululand, thunderstorms possible in the afternoons.

Tour tempo: medium to medium-plus, optional mid-day breaks (advisable considering the heat), no serious walking.

Accommodation standards: medium; guest houses, country hotels and lodges.

Birding in brief: excellent high-altitude grassland birding around Wakkerstroom; superb Sand Forest birding in Tembe; some coastal birding at St Lucia and forest habitats in Eshowe.

Top birds: Rudd's Apalis, Rudd's Lark, Botha's Lark, Gorgeous Bush-shrike, Blue Crane, Pink-throated Twinspot, Green Malkoha, Woodward's Batis, Palmnut Vulture, Blue Korhaan, Southern Banded Snake-Eagle.

Mammal viewing: good general game in Zululand, elephants and white rhino occur in the reserves; Hluhluwe-iMfolozi and Tembe offer the best game viewing opportunities.

Other wildlife and attractions: Lebombo Mountains, iSimangaliso World Heritage Site, the Indian Ocean shoreline.

Add-ons: this tour can be combined with one of the other Voyager birding tours (Western Cape or Escarpment and Kruger National Park) or the Kruger Discoverer wildlife tour.

Note: *The exact itinerary will depend on availability, but will be as close to the original as possible.*

Tour Costs

(Please contact us for prices for groups larger than 6)

November 2018 - October 2019

2 participants	R 49 100 per person sharing
3 participants	R 38 130 per person sharing
4 participants	R 32 600 per person sharing
5 participants	R 29 450 per person sharing
6 participants	R 26 790 per person sharing
Single Supplement	R 2 100

Includes

- Accommodation
- All breakfasts and dinners
- Ground transport
- Bottled water in the Lawson's vehicle whilst travelling
- Entrance fees
- Personalised checklists
- Specialist guide fees

Excludes

- All airfares and associated airport costs
- Travel and medical insurance
- Lunches (these are included at Tembe)
- All drinks
- Optional excursions where applicable
- Gratuities
- Items of a personal nature

Notes

- This itinerary is subject to change due to weather conditions at the time and other factors beyond our control.
- Birds and mammals mentioned on this itinerary do not represent all that can be seen. A full list of possibilities appears on your checklist.

