

South Africa - Kruger National Park

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Birdwatching Tour

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Depart London.

Day 2/3 Dullstroom.

Day 4 Blyde River Canyon.

Day 5/8 Kruger National Park

Day 9 Depart Johannesburg

Day 10 Arrive London



Departs

February, March and November

Focus

Birds and other wildlife

Grading

Grade A - vehicular safaris and short walks

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code ZAF03) or see the current Naturetrek brochure



Highlights:

- 4 nights in the world famous Kruger National Park
- View the Blyde River Canyon, third largest canyon in the world
- Explore the upland grasslands of Dullstroom
- Open vehicles in Kruger National Park
- Around 300 species of birds typically recorded
- Up to 40 species of mammal
- Night Drives in Kruger National Park
- Expertly guided by our local South African ornithologists



From top: Pin-tailed Whydah, Lion and, White-crowned Lapwings.
Images courtesy of Mr R Foukes and Shutterstock Images



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

In flight

We leave London Heathrow this evening on board a South African Airways or British Airways scheduled flight bound for Johannesburg.

Day 2

Dullstroom

After meeting up at the airport in Johannesburg we will drive northwards a short distance to Rietvlei Nature Reserve. This small reserve conserves some Highveld grassland habitat and holds a few bird species which we will not have a chance of seeing on the rest of the itinerary. These include South African Shelduck, Northern Black Korhaan, Greater Kestrel and Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, among others. We will then continue eastwards through Mpumalanga Province, with a stop at a roadside pan if time allows, where we will hope to see a range of waterfowl such as Yellow-billed and Maccua Ducks, Southern Pochard, Cape Shoveler, Red-billed, Cape and Hottentot Teals, Black-winged Stilt, Avocet and a range of other waders. Moving on, the eastern reaches of the province are dominated by extensive beef and maize farming, with coal mining taking place here and there. The scenery is not too spectacular for the first two hours or so, but will improve as we leave the highway at Belfast and head north-east into the highlands to arrive in Dullstroom in the afternoon. The altitudes around Dullstroom vary from 2,000 – 2,250 metres (6,500 feet) above sea level, and the habitat comprises open grasslands and rocky hillsides, while here and there stands of alien trees provide an additional habitat. We should arrive in the late afternoon, with time to settle in and freshen up before dinner in one of the town's fine restaurants (Dullstroom is also something of a culinary Mecca). We will go through the day's checklist during dinner as well.

Day 3

Dullstroom

On our full day in Dullstroom we will head out early on a morning excursion into the Veloren Valei (Lost Valley) Nature Reserve and Ramsar Site high up in the Steenkampsberg Range. Here the altitudes reach the 2,250 metres (7,380 feet) mark, and birds we will be on the lookout for include Denham's Bustard, Secretarybird, Gurney's Sugarbird, Eastern Long-billed Lark, Yellow-breasted Pipit, Grey-winged Francolin, Sentinel Rock-Thrush and Jackal Buzzard. After birding the high plateau will head back down to town for breakfast, after which we will have an afternoon excursion, during which we will search for species such as Grey Crowned Crane, Southern Bald Ibis, Cape Longclaw, Ant-eating Chat, Mountain Wheatear, Pied Starling, Steppe Buzzard, Cape Crow, Malachite Sunbird, Long-tailed Widowbird, Cape Robin-Chat, African Wattled Lapwing, Common Fiscal, Bokmakierie and many others. The Dullstroom area does not hold too many large mammals, though Black Wildebeest, Blesbok, Springbok and other antelope can be seen on farms, having been re-introduced by many landowners. Grey Rhebok, Mountain Reedbuck, Yellow Mongoose, Oribi, Black-backed Jackal and Red Rock Rabbit live under free-ranging conditions and can be seen in the area, while the lucky few might spot a Bushpig or Serval. We will return to town in the late afternoon and in the evening we will once again dine at one of the restaurants in town.

Day 4

Blyde River Canyon

We will make an early start this morning for our next destination, the Blydepoort Nature Reserve, which encompasses the spectacular Blyde River Canyon, the third largest canyon in the world. En route we will take a short detour to the Mount Sheba Nature Reserve, which has some of the finest Afro-montane forest in Mpumalanga Province. Here we will walk in the forest to look for forest species such as Chorister Robin-Chat, White-Starred Robin, Orange Ground Thrush, Narina Trogon, Southern Double-collared Sunbird, Cape Batis, Yellow-throated Woodland-Warbler and Yellow-streaked Greenbul. After a session of forest birding we will have breakfast and then have another birding session, hoping to rack up a handful of the forest specials in the process.

The Blyde River Canyon itself is a beautiful area of deep canyons, rocky escarpments and montane grassland dotted with patches of woodland and indigenous scrub. It is home to a wide range of birds, as dictated by the habitat convergence here on the edge of the escarpment. After arriving and checking in at the resort we will have an afternoon walk up to the canyon view site, hoping to see birds such as Greater Double-collared Sunbird, White-throated Robin-Chat, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Lazy Cisticola, Neddicky, African Black and Alpine Swifts, Rock Kestrel and others. After heading back down to the lodge we will have time to freshen up before dining at the resort's restaurant. We overnight at the Aventura Resort, spectacularly positioned on the very lip of the Blyde River Canyon.

Day 5 - 8

Kruger National Park

In the morning we will have another birding walk before breakfast, which will hopefully produce species such as Brown-hooded Kingfisher, Spectacled Weaver, Red-capped Robin-Chat, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Black-collared Barbet, Striped Pipit, Black Cuckoo-Shrike, Collared Sunbird and others. After breakfast we will depart for our next destination, the world famous Kruger National Park. Almost two million hectares in extent, and roughly the size of Wales, Kruger holds one of the greatest diversities of animal life of all of Africa! Our drive takes us through some spectacular scenery as we wind our way through the Drakensberg Mountains. At first we pass through high grasslands and as we drop in altitude, the habitat changes first to broad-leaved woodland and later to Acacia veld. We climb up over the spectacular Abel Erasmus Pass and pass through the Strydom Tunnel before levelling out in the 'lowveld', the flat plain between the Drakensberg Escarpment and the Lebombo Mountains. After crossing the Blyde River, where we will have a last look for Half-collared Kingfisher and Mountain Wagtail, we will continue eastwards and enter Kruger via Orpen Gate or one of the other southern gates. The Kruger National Park is 380 kilometres or so long and averages 60 kilometres wide. The habitat varies considerably, changing subtly all the time as the underlying geology changes. The south-central regions are characterised by thornveld and open grassy plains on fine basaltic soils. This region, with Satara as the main rest camp, sits on the watershed between the Olifants / Limpopo system to the north and the Sabie / Komati system to the south. The open plains attract grazers such as Burchell's Zebra, Blue Wildebeest, Waterbuck and Cape Buffalo, which in turn support a healthy population of Lions and Spotted Hyenas, the park's two top predator species. Leopard and Cheetah also occur in the area, preying mainly on Impala, which are common throughout the park. Birds are abundant, especially in the wet season, and include spectacular species such as Martial Eagle, Lappet-faced Vulture, Verreaux's Eagle-Owl, Saddle-billed Stork, Southern Ground Hornbill, Marabou Stork, Kori Bustard, Common Ostrich and others. When the grasses begin seeding in late summer the area sometimes teems with hundreds of thousands of Red-billed Quealeas, interspersed with Wattled Starlings and White-winged

Widows. Insects abound at this time of the year (November to April) and an array of bee-eaters, rollers, shrikes, starlings and raptors join in the mêlée, making for some truly awesome birding.

Moving southwards the habitat becomes bushier as the geology changes to coarse granitic soils, with broadleaved Bushwillows and other tree species predominating. Here and there large granite outcrops stick up and the terrain becomes more undulating. Riverine forest occurs in places along the major rivers such as the Sabie and Sand Rivers, and in the east some open plains occur in the Lower Sabie region. The permanent water to be found in these rivers attracts large numbers of Impala, which crowd the banks in places during the dry season and provide ample food for Leopard and Lion. Birds to be seen in this area include the sought after African Finfoot, White-crowned Lapwing, Goliath Heron, African Green Pigeon, Purple-crested Turaco, White-browed Robin-Chat, Giant Kingfisher, African Fish Eagle and many others. The main camp in this area is Skukuza, the park's administrative headquarters and flag-ship camp. It was named after the first warden of the park, Col. James Stevenson-Hamilton, who was nick-named 'Skukuza' by the local staff, a name which means 'he who sweeps clean' and referred to his rather brash way of doing things!

In the south-western corner of the park, in the Pretoriuskop Rest Camp region, the vegetation is slightly different again and supports some species of birds that are not as common elsewhere in the park. The higher elevations and rainfall here have created a habitat dominated by broadleaf woodland, thick thatching grasses, seep lines and damp areas, with large granite domes rising up here and there. Due to the coarse nature of the grasses here it is not the best area for large mammals, though White Rhino are quite common and occasionally rare antelope such as Lichtenstein's Hartebeest and Sable Antelope turn up. Birds to look out for here include Grey Penduline Tit, Green-capped and Yellow-bellied Eremomelas, Dark Chanting Goshawk, Lizard Buzzard, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Yellow-throated Petronia, Bushveld Pipit and others. Pretoriuskop Rest Camp is one of the oldest in the park, dating back to the 1930's. It is a small camp, with a population of Helmeted Guineafowl and Dwarf Mongoose that have taken up semi-permanent residence in the camp grounds.

An optional extra activity while in the Kruger is a sunset drive with a Park guide in a 21-seater open-sided safari vehicle (around 250 Rand per person but subject to change) on which nocturnal birds and animals can be spotted with a powerful spotlight. Birds include Fiery-necked, Square-tailed and Freckled Nightjars, Spotted Eagle Owl and Bronze-winged Courser. Mammals could include Small Spotted and Large Spotted Genets, Thick-tailed Bushbaby and African Porcupine. Large predators such as Lion, Leopard and Hyena are also more active after dark and thus this activity offers good chances of seeing one or more of these exciting species.

NB – Our 4 nights in Kruger National Park will be split between three of the Park's rest camps. Then camps are all located in excellent areas for birds and mammals, but each has its own character and wildlife highlights nearby. We typically stay in a combination of either Satara, Skukuza, Pretoriuskop, Berg-en-Dal and Lower Sabie Rest Camps, the choice of which three dictated by the focus of the tour, time of year and availability of rooms.

Day 9

Depart Johannesburg

On our last morning in Kruger we will have the usual early morning excursion, followed by breakfast and a last drive as we make our way out of the park. Depending on flight times we should have until late morning to make our exit before getting back onto the main highway back to Johannesburg and the airport. There may be a chance

for one or two birding stops en-route, as well as a short lunch break. Around mid-evening we will board our British Airways aircraft for the flight back to London

Day 10

Arrive London

We will arrive back at London Heathrow early this morning.

NB. The use of the word endemic in this text applies to southern African, rather than South African, endemic species.

Tour grading

Grade A. This is a traditional birding tour with no strenuous walking involved. However, do be prepared for some lengthy drives; apart from within camp compounds, where we will enjoy plenty of bird walks, walking is not permitted within the park and our safaris will be by vehicle. We regard the tour as suitable for all ages and for all degrees of fitness. However, you must be prepared for a dawn to dusk programme of action-packed birding and mammal-viewing (though there is nothing to stop you taking a day, or part of the day, off to relax at camp!).

Weather

Mid-summer months are December and January, while mid-winter occurs between June and August. Our November and February safaris take place during the early and late rainy season respectively. It will be hot during the day (up to 35°C), with regular short and sharp afternoon rainstorms that are unlikely to interrupt our schedule to any great extent. This season is, however, the best for birds, with resident populations are supplemented by summer visitors from both central Africa and the northern hemisphere. Indeed, the rains can keep the otherwise high temperatures down, and will allow you to see South Africa during the green season, when it is most beautiful. Visitor numbers are also lower at this time.

March/April marks the end of the South African summer when the heat has subsided, and the summer storms have mostly died away. This is a very pleasant time of the year to visit with temperatures rising to the mid 20s°C during the day and dropping to around 15°C at night. The drier months run from June through to October with the heat gradually building again during this period. September and October are excellent months for mammals in Kruger National Park, at a time when the water levels are at their lowest and game is most concentrated. It should be remembered, however, that mammals and birds are so abundant in Kruger that a visit at any time of year will be rewarding!

Food & accommodation included in the price

All accommodation in South Africa is included, together with breakfasts. **Lunches and dinners are not included**, and will be taken at the varied restaurants, shops and bars of Dullstroom and the Kruger rest camps. You are likely to spend £150-£200 on the tour on these meals, depending on your appetite! Our accommodation will consist of simple, but comfortable, twin bedded chalets, known locally as rondavels. All rooms have private

facilities and single occupation may be reserved on payment of the supplement outlined on the first page of this itinerary.

Your transport

We use 10-seater Toyota Quantum minibuses for our time exploring Dullstroom and the Blyde River Canyon. In these we can carry up to 6 passengers, plus your birding guide who is also your driver. On arrival into Kruger National Park we will switch to open safari vehicles which have three rows of stepped seats, great visibility and a sunshade/roof to protect the group from the worst of the midday sun.

We will use these open vehicle to explore Kruger National Park before switching back to the 'closed' Toyota Quantums for the long journey back to Johannesburg Airport at the end of the holiday.

Bird & Mammal lists

Where available these are automatically provided on booking, and will gladly be sent to you before, if you wish for a more detailed preview.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to South Africa. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/south-africa or telephone 0870 6060290 prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read the Naturetrek terms and conditions in the back of our brochure or on our website, and then book either online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, by calling us on 01962 733051, or by completing and returning the booking form in the brochure together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us on 01962 733051.

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