

# The long unwinding ROAD

TEXT BY CLAIRE SPOTTISWOODE  
& CALLAN COHEN

Just two southern African regions have the honour of being designated 'biodiversity hotspots' by Conservation International. One is, of course, the Cape Floral Kingdom, and the other the Succulent Karoo. For those whose idea of the south-western Karoo is a shimmering wasteland to be endured as briefly as possible en route to Cape Town or Johannesburg, this may come as a surprise. Though the remarkable endemism and diversity of the Succulent Karoo flora (at its spectacular best from August to October) is its most renowned aspect, the Karoo as a whole has a great deal to offer birders. With no fewer than 18 endemics almost wholly restricted to it, the region is an essential destination for any birder visiting southern Africa, as well as a potential source of exciting new species for hardened locals. >

*Stretching deep into the Tanqua Karoo, the P2250 bisects a landscape that, in spring, is alive with nesting birds.*



The Spike-heeled Lark is one of a number of lark species that may be encountered in the Tanqua Karoo.

The south-western corner of the Karoo – a low-lying, mountain-bound section of the Succulent Karoo biome known as the Tanqua Karoo after the river that bisects it – has received a great deal of birding attention. Here, in sparsely populated semi-desert just two-and-a-half hours' drive from Cape Town, the majority of the Karoo specials are easily accessible in a day's outing from the city.

The white, dusty R355 road that stretches from Karooport past Eierkop to Skitterykloof (the latter popularly but incorrectly known as 'Katbakkies' – the true Katbakkies Pass lies 15 kilometres to the west) has been intensively birded and well documented for birders. But the focus of this article is on some of the lesser-known areas north and east of the R355, which have also proved to supply superb birding. A number of sought-after species, usually associated with the less-accessible Bushmanland region to the north and absent from or difficult to find at the traditional Tanqua Karoo sites, appear to reach the south-western limit of their regular range here.

### Larks, eremomelas and the P2250

For those unfamiliar with the Tanqua Karoo, the R355 regional road linking Karooport (at the south-westernmost corner of the Tanqua Karoo) to Eierkop and Skitterykloof provides access to a

good selection of Karoo endemics. Beyond the Skitterykloof turn-off, the R355 continues northwards to Calvinia through a lonely and very beautiful stretch of semi-desert, bounded on the west by the dramatic skyline of the Cedarberg mountains. Conveniently, however, even day-trippers can add an attractive extra few Karoo specials and enjoy some great landscapes by continuing a more manageable distance north. Twenty-five kilometres north of the Skitterykloof turn-off, a minor road, the P2250 (1 on map), heads north-eastwards towards the distant towns of Middelpos and Sutherland.

This regional road is perhaps one of the finest for birding in the south-western Karoo, particularly during the spring months when the scrub is alive with displaying, nest-building and chick-provisioning birds. The initial stretches are relatively heavily vegetated and resemble the familiar R355; however, before long the bushes become spaced progressively further apart. Stretches of gleaming gravel appear, punctuated by the occasional clump of spiny *Hoodia*, a fly-pollinated succulent decorated in spring with droopy, malodorous pink flowers. As you approach the junction marked 2 on the map, you will cross two watercourses *en route* to

the larger Tanqua River, which break the monotony with their dense *Acacia karroo* thickets.

Perhaps the most conspicuous species along these arid stretches is the Tractrac Chat, a gravel-plains specialist with a short-tailed, dumpy jizz. The most common bird of the adjacent scrub is usually the Rufous-eared Warbler, a noisy, beautifully marked endemic of southern Africa's arid west. Spike-heeled Larks are also often seen in these parts, as are Thick-billed, Karoo and Red-capped larks. Karoo Lark is particularly easy to find in spring, when its rattling call is heard everywhere.

The most common seedeater here is usually the Yellow Canary, but nomadic species like the Black-headed Canary and Lark-like Bunting periodically invade the area. The latter can be particularly abundant at times, and is generally present much more regularly than further south in the Tanqua Karoo. Coveys of Namaqua Sandgrouse, another erratic visitor further south, flush up at intervals from the roadside. Especially in winter and spring, Ludwig's Bustard may be present in some numbers and is best spotted in flight, while the Karoo Korhaan occurs year-round. Pairs or small parties of the latter are occasionally seen within sight of the road, although their true density is only revealed at dawn when their atmospheric, frog-like duets drift across the scrub. Greater Kestrel, scarce further south in the Tanqua Karoo, is fairly regularly seen along the

P2250, as are the more common Pale Chanting Goshawk and Rock Kestrel, and the occasional Black-breasted Snake Eagle and Martial Eagle.

The Karoo Eremomela, a curiously localised and sometimes tricky Karoo endemic, is remarkably common along this road. Look especially along the shallow drainage lines four to seven kilometres from the R355 junction, and listen for its two calls (a high-pitched, pulsating whine, somewhat like the tightening of a rusty bolt, and a Spike-heeled Lark-like 'krrr-krrr'). Small groups of this social and co-operative-breeding species follow each other through the scrub, popping up at intervals to let forth a volley of whines.

The highly nomadic Black-eared Finchlark, usually considered a Bushmanland special, may well be a regular visitor to this region. In 1996, it bred in the Tanqua Karoo National Park (see *Africa – Birds & Birding* 2(1): 74), and in spring 2001 it invaded the Tanqua Karoo once again. In this exceptional season, it occurred and probably bred right down to Eierkop at the Tanqua's southern edge; however, it was present at highest densities along the P2250, and patchily in the Tanqua Karoo National Park (see page 57).

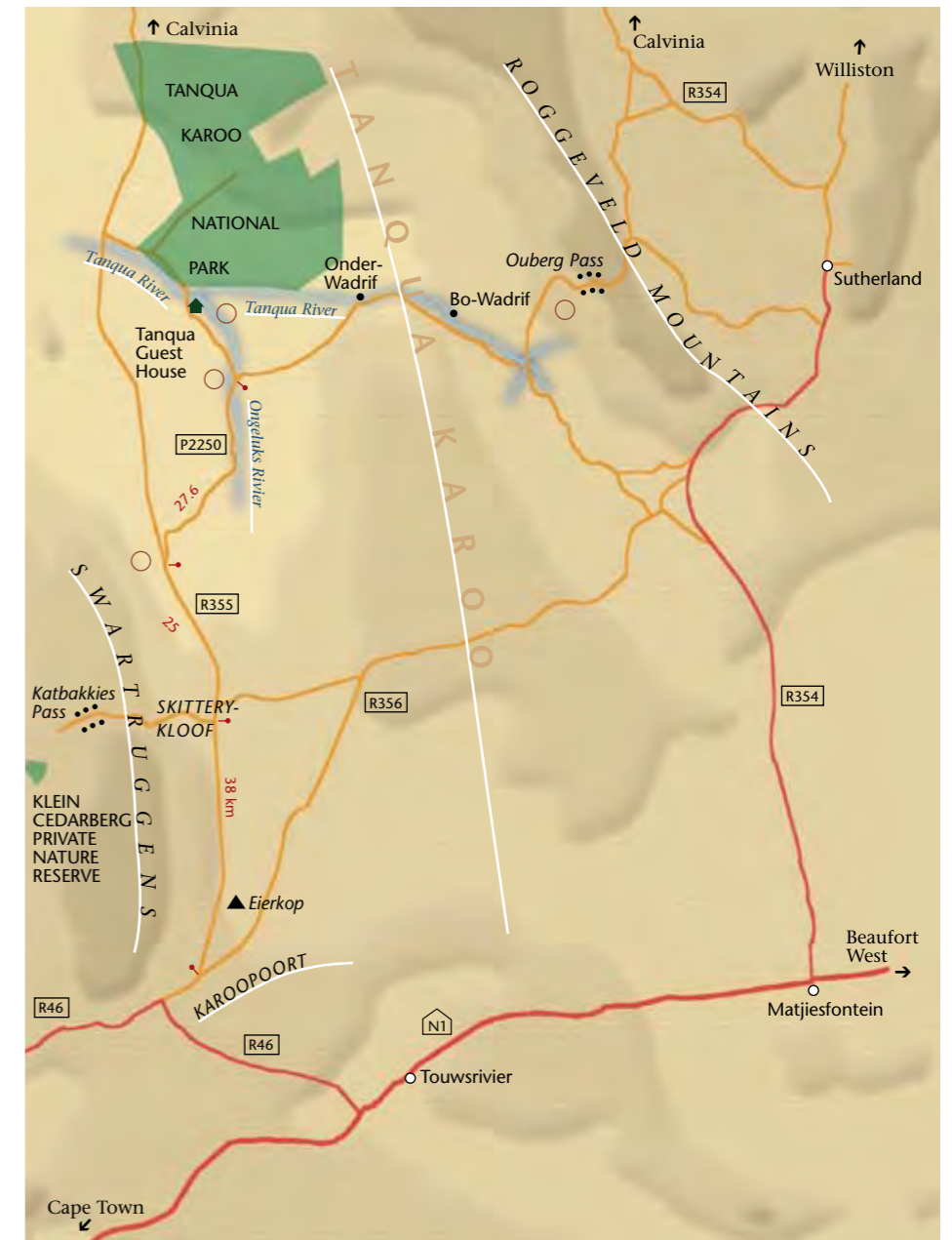
When the finchlarks are breeding, aerially displaying males are easy to locate – they look more like giant, floppy black butterflies than birds. In flight, only their dangling white legs break the pure black of their underwings and bodies. Small groups tend to land frustratingly concealed in the scrub; the best technique is to walk slowly up to the spot, and wait quietly until a foraging



Pale Chanting Goshawks are common along the P2250.

bird potters into view in a gap between the bushes.

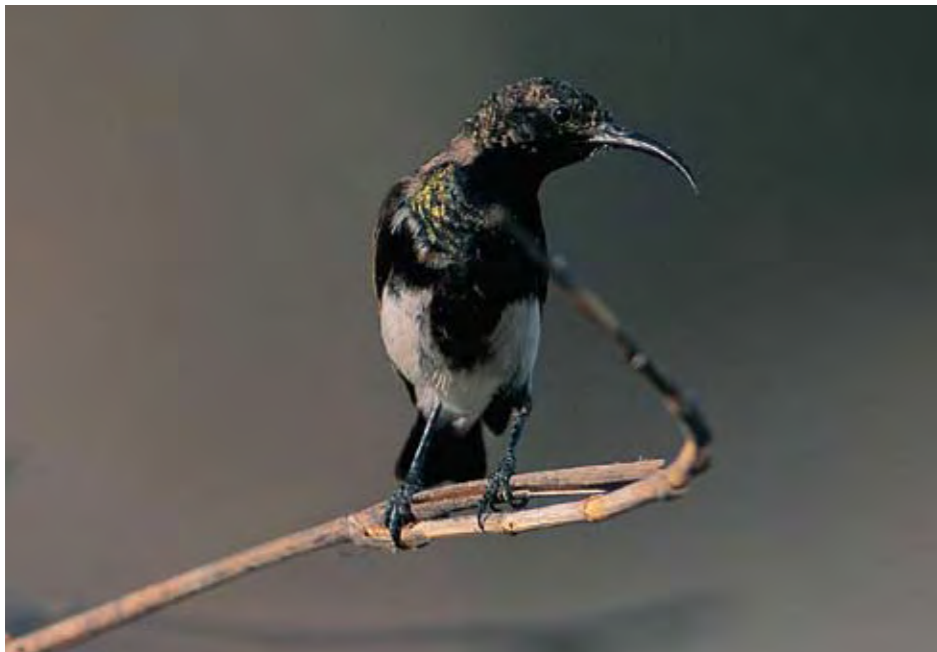
As the day heats up, or once you have exhausted the possibilities of the gravel plains and scrub, you may wish to make a stop at the first or especially the second *Acacia*-lined watercourse, the latter crossing the P2250 27.6 kilometres from the R355. Here you have a good chance of find- ▶





PETER STEYN

*Traditionally regarded as a Bushmanland species, the nomadic Black-eared Finchlark appears to be venturing south into the Tanqua Karoo on a regular basis.*



ALBERT FRONEMAN

*The Dusky Sunbird, another nomadic species, may be seen in riparian vegetation.*

ing all the expected Karoo thicket species, such as Pririt Batis, Cape Penduline Tit (also in the adjacent lower scrub), Titbabbler and White-backed Mousebird. Just beyond the second watercourse a turn-off to the left, signposted 'Tanqua' and marked 2 on the map, takes you 12 kilometres further to the Tanqua River and to the Tanqua Guest House nearby (3 on map; see box, page 59).

The Tanqua Guest House makes an excellent base for exploring this area and the adjacent national park; however, the river does lie on private land, so if you wish to visit for the day please obtain prior permission from the landowners, Alewyn and Esther Burger.

The Namaqua Warbler, which in this region occasionally also occurs in acacia thickets far from water, is very common and fairly easily seen in the mixture of reeds and acacia thicket that densely lines the Tanqua River. This riparian strip is also one of the more reliable sites in the area to look for the Dusky Sunbird, a highly nomadic desert sunbird that only occasionally ventures south to the Eierkop-Skitteryklus region. The Tanqua River is dammed just beyond the guest house, rather startlingly creating a substantial waterbody that hosts varying numbers of waterfowl and waders, perhaps most characteristically South African Shelduck and Avocet.



CLAIRE SPOTTISWOODE

*A sense of enormous space is a prime attraction of the Tanqua Karoo National Park.*

### **Tanqua Karoo National Park**

The Tanqua Karoo National Park is designated a Scientific National Park and as such offers no visitor facilities. As a rule it is not open to the public, but through direct contact with the park management special entry permission can be requested. The park protects one of the most starkly beautiful tracts of the Tanqua Karoo and is well worth visiting for several reasons, among them its koppie-studded, moon-like landscape, its diversity of succulent plants, its fine Karoo birding and, perhaps most notably for hardened birders, the above-average chance of finding the enigmatic Burchell's Courser.

The park is criss-crossed by a number of vehicle tracks, most of which are easily negotiated by two-wheel-drive. The park's management currently welcomes visitors, on the understanding that no facilities are provided and that prior permission is obtained (see box on page 59 for contact details). However, don't let courser-ambition get the better of you, because should the presence of any birders result in any potentially negative impact on the park, such access may become restricted in the future.

Birders will probably want to concentrate their efforts along the track that runs parallel to the park's southern boundary and is easily accessible from the Tanqua Guest House. Burchell's ▾



CALLAN COHEN

The Tanqua Karoo National Park offers a reasonable chance of seeing the elusive Burchell's Courser.

Courser is seen fairly regularly on the patches of bare gravel along this road, and was even observed with chicks in spring 2001. This courser is a poorly known and notoriously tricky bird: it may be absent altogether in some years, and even when present requires considerable effort to spot. The best techniques are to drive along slowly, stopping now and then to scan promising-looking expanses of gravel, and to keep a very sharp eye

out for odd-shaped birds flying overhead. We have picked up most of the coursers we have seen in the park this way.

Double-banded Courser also occurs here. A bird that appears to reach the southern limit of its regular range in this part of the Tanqua Karoo

is the Karoo Long-billed Lark, which becomes very much more common as one enters Bushmanland to the north.

### Ouberg Pass and on to Sutherland

Heading eastwards from the Tanqua Karoo National Park, a potentially confusing network of roads works its way over the Roggeveld escarpment and on to the town of Sutherland, whose one-horse appearance belies its astronomical fame. The new Southern African Large Telescope is presently under construction here, and when complete will be the largest single telescope in the southern hemisphere.

These are beautiful, remote roads, worth driving for their solitude and landscapes alone. However, if a birding objective is more important, then Ouberg Pass (4 on map) also fits the bill admirably. Ouberg is a truly spectacular pass, rising precipitously through 600 metres of Roggeveld escarpment in a series of dramatic switchbacks that may not appeal to the particularly faint-hearted. The rewards are superb views of the great, hazy basin of the Tanqua Karoo below, and excellent birding.

Ouberg Pass is possibly the most reliable place within striking distance of Cape Town to see Rock Pipit (knowledge of its call is essential), and is also a good site for other Karoo escarpment birds such as Sickle-winged Chat, Pale-winged Starling and, together with the plateau beyond, Cape Eagle Owl. The latter can be looked for at any time from dusk onwards, simply by scanning the roadside telephone poles. Cape Eagle Owls can be unexpectedly common in many mountainous Karoo regions (see also Klein Cedarberg Private Nature Reserve, in box opposite), although do be aware of the occasional Spotted Eagle Owl that may venture out of a copse of exotic trees. □



Lark-like Buntings are more common in the northern Tanqua Karoo than in the south.

ALBERT FRONEMAN



CLAIRE SPOTTISWOODE

## OFF YOU GO...

Superb views of the Roggeveld Mountains – and good birding – are to be had along the Ouberg Pass.

### WHEN TO VISIT

Spring is best: birding is at its peak from August to October, when the region may also unpredictably burst into flower. However, with a little effort the majority of the specials (with the possible exception of Black-headed Canary, Ludwig's Bustard and Black-eared Finchlark) are accessible year-round.

### ITINERARIES & APPROACHES

If you are approaching the Tanqua Karoo from Cape Town, you will find that although it is certainly possible to visit the areas described here in a (long) day trip, this really requires a desperately early start. Making a weekend of it is far preferable!

The R355/P2250 junction is 103 kilometres from Ceres, and takes more than three hours to reach from Cape Town. Coming from the east, an attractive option is to work your way down into the Tanqua Karoo over the Ouberg Pass, having first turned off the N1 on to the tarred R354 towards Sutherland.

The Tanqua Karoo also makes an excellent start to a Bushmanland trip: the R355 can be followed north all the way to Calvinia. The road surface is generally excellent and the scenery superb, but make sure that you're adequately prepared for the lonely drive...

### ROADS

Take care when driving in this region – the road gravel is sharp and often loose, and a great deal of caution needs to be taken with corners and sudden stops. Furthermore, give some thought to your fuel and water requirements, bearing in mind that there are no towns in the Tanqua Karoo proper, and the closest refuelling points are Ceres, Sutherland and Calvinia. Those with thirsty engines may consider packing a (full) jerrycan to guard against potential concerns over birding detours.

### WHERE TO STAY

*Klein Cedarberg Private Nature Reserve*

A visit to Klein Cedarberg is an experience in itself, quite apart from its beautiful location in the Koue Bokkeveld region, west of Skitterykloof and not far from the true Katbakkies Pass. Karoo cuisine, Cedarberg architecture and the hospitality of the Wullschleger family combine with nearby Bushman rock art, excellent potential for night drives (notably for Cape Eagle Owl, but don't ignore Smith's red rock rabbit, rhebok and maybe even a leopard) and ideal proximity to birding at Skitterykloof. Tel. (023) 317 0783 or see [www.capebirdingroute.org](http://www.capebirdingroute.org)

*Tanqua Guest House*

The Tanqua Guest House is very conveniently situated in good birding habitat on the southern bank of the Tanqua River, no more than a stone's throw from the Tanqua Karoo National Park. Built somewhat like a desert fort and catering primarily to small-plane enthusiasts, the Tanqua Guest House is run by Esther and Alewyn Burger and offers a range of accommodation, from fully catered to self-catering to a rustic 'hunting lodge'. The Burgers are also able to arrange access to the national park for their guests. Tel. (027) 341 2366 or see [www.capebirdingroute.org](http://www.capebirdingroute.org)

### TANQUA KAROO NATIONAL PARK

In order to gain permission to enter the park, contact park management on tel. (027) 341 2352.

### FURTHER READING

For a more detailed description of birding in the southerly reaches of the Tanqua, visit [www.capebirdingroute.org](http://www.capebirdingroute.org) or obtain a copy of the authors' book *Essential Birding in Western South Africa: Key Routes from Cape Town to the Kalahari* (Struik, 2000).