

Text by Peter Ryan

With its famous beaches, spectacular scenery, wine routes and a host of other attractions, the Western Cape is one of South Africa's top tourist destinations. But if you choose to visit the Cape, don't leave your binoculars at home – there are also plenty of good birding opportunities.

Just beware the infamous Cape Town traffic, which can be horrendous in peak holiday season. In general, it's important to be out early, not only for the birds, but also to avoid the crowds.

THE CAPE PENINSULA

Most visitors to the Cape spend a considerable amount of time in Cape Town itself. With a vibrant beach culture, plus the Waterfront, Table Mountain, Robben Island and Cape Point, there's plenty to interest the general tourist. Fortunately the Cape Peninsula also offers great value for birders too. By rising early you can grab a handful of lifers and still be on Clifton Beach with the family by 10 o'clock. And if you get bored with the birds on the beach, you can always scope the Bank Cormorant colony at Bakoven. ▶



Kirstenbosch

PETER STEYN

TABLE MOUNTAIN

There are not a lot of birds on the main table of Table Mountain, but keep an eye out for Peregrine Falcon, Orange-breasted Sunbird and Cape Siskin. An early-morning stroll across to Maclear's Beacon might produce Grey-wing Francolin. If you're forced to queue to go up the cable car, kill some time by looking for Cape Sugarbird in the tall proteas below the lower cable station. The more energetic can walk down Smuts's Track from Maclear's Beacon; listen for Striped Flufftail on the right of the path below the aqueduct en route to Skeleton Gorge.

KIRSTENBOSCH

The botanic gardens are well worth a visit by the whole family. From a bird perspective, there are very tame Cape Francolins on the lawns and Cape Sugarbirds in the protea section, but the best birding is found higher up in the unplanted section of the gardens. The Afromontane forest patches support Cape Batis, Dusky and Paradise flycatchers, Forest Canary and Rameron Pigeon, while Cinnamon Dove is scarce on the forest floor. Keep an eye out overhead for a variety of raptors, including the local Red-breasted Sparrowhawk. But the real attraction is the skulking Knysna Warbler, which frequents dense tangles in gulleys. It's best located by its song, and is easiest to see high up in Skeleton Gorge, where the vegetation is less dense. If you fail here, the warbler also can be found by following the so-called Contour Path from Kirstenbosch into Newlands Forest. The pine plantations in the lower areas of this forest are one of the better sites, together with Tokai forest further south, for the small introduced population of Chaffinch (the birds are generally located by their song or 'chink' call from high in a pine tree). Kirstenbosch charges an entrance fee (R10 for adults), but access to other forests on the mountain is free. ▶



Rondevlei Nature Reserve

PETER STEYN



Orange-breasted Sunbird

FIREFLY IMAGES/GEOFF MCILLERON



Cape Sugarbird

ALBERT FRONEMAN

STRANDFONTEIN AND RONDEVLEI

Both these sites on the southern Cape Flats offer a wide range of waterbirds. Strandfontein is a series of sewage settlement ponds on the northern shore of False Bay. It's a good place to take people with a passing interest in birds, in part because you can birdwatch from the comfort of your car. Entrance is from the south end of Zeekoevlei, off Strandfontein Road, and requires a waiver issued by the Cape Bird Club (tel. 021-686-8795) on behalf of the Cape Metropolitan Council.

Rondevlei is a nature reserve on the northern border of Strandfontein, and has a number of tranquil bird hides which are good for spotting Little Bittern. Access is signposted from Victoria Road off the M5 near Retreat; entrance is R3, and the reserve is open from 08h00 to 17h00.

BOULDERS, CAPE POINT AND KOMMETJIE

These sites are deceptively far from central Cape Town, so unless you're staying in the southern suburbs, it's worth taking a full day if you plan to visit all three. Boulders, south of Simon's Town, is rightly famous for its Jackass Penguin colony, and is a must to visit – but go early. The main beach is sheltered from the south-easter, and offers the unique opportunity to swim with penguins. If you're tired of driving, take the southern suburbs train to Simon's Town and then walk or take an open taxi to the colony. Entrance and parking fees are charged (approximately R10 per person for adults); enter from the Seaforth (north) end of the beach.

Cape Point is another popular site, so visit the Point itself as early as possible (the reserve opens around sunrise). The cliffs at the Point have breeding Cape and White-breasted cormorants as well as a pair of Peregrine Falcons. Cape Siskin is common, and the Red-winged Starlings are positively cheeky. Strong onshore winds produce good seabirds, but a 'scope is essential. The rest of the reserve has some excellent walks in lovely vegetation. Hottentot Buttonquail (probably a separate species to the Black-rumped Buttonquail found further north) have been seen fairly regularly in areas of short restios, and there are also isolated populations of Cloud Cisticolas and Clapper Larks. Olifantsbos is worth a look for shorebirds. Entrance R10 (minimum R20 per vehicle).



Chukar Partridge

BRENDAN RYAN

Kommetjie, on the west coast of the Peninsula, is a good spot to get to know the four marine cormorants. Famous for its large population of Antarctic Terns in winter (chiefly May–October), it also supports an interesting selection of northern hemisphere birds in summer. Walk around the point from the boat-launching ramp.

Nearby Wildevoëllei, on the left of the road to Fish Hoek, can have interesting waterbirds.



Cape Rockjumper

PETER STEYN

ROBBEN ISLAND

This is a must for the serious southern African lister, because the only 'tickable' Chukar Partridge and Peacock are found here. Access to the island is fairly straightforward on one of the Robben Island ferries from the Waterfront (R100 for adults, including an island tour, but you are unlikely to see many birds on the prison tours). Tel. 021-419-1300 to find out about the availability of specific bird-watching tours, and try >



Victorin's Warbler

PETER STEYN

to get on the first ferry in the morning (08h00). The partridge is fairly common in dense scrub and can be found around the Jackass Penguin colony north of the harbour. The Peacock is more elusive, and is best searched for among the houses south of the harbour. The island also hosts large breeding colonies of cormorants, herons, egrets and gulls. The ferry trip across Table Bay may produce Sabine's Gulls and Arctic Skuas in summer, as well as the odd Sooty Shearwater, White-chinned Petrel or giant petrel.

PELAGIC BIRDING

Arguably South Africa's best seabirding is off Cape Town. Midsummer is not the best time, but you should still see three species of albatross (Shy, Yellow-nosed and Black-browed), as well as several shearwaters (such as Cory's, Manx and Sooty), and petrels and storm-petrels if you get out into deep water (300 metres). The problem is to find a suitable boat. Anne Gray arranges day-trips roughly once a month out of Simon's Town (approx. R280). For details fax 021-885-3959, e-mail gray-ad@mweb.co.za

FARTHER AFIELD

Away from Cape Town there's an even broader array of birding sites, mostly without the crowds. A plethora of B&Bs and camping sites provide reasonable accommodation.

PAARL BIRD SANCTUARY

Situated at the municipal sewage works in the Boland town of Paarl, the sanctuary offers similar birds to those which are found at Strandfontein and Rondevlei (see *Africa – Birds & Birding* 1(5): 60–63). The reserve is open from 07h00 to 18h00 daily, and access is from Drommedaris Street, with signposts to the sanctuary from the Wellington/Wemmershoek exit on the N1.

SIR LOWRY'S PASS & HELDERBERG

Three fynbos endemics are absent from the Cape Peninsula, but two of these can be fairly easily seen on the Hottentots Holland Mountains: Cape Rockjumper and Victorin's Warbler. The rockjumper occurs on rocky outcrops and boulder-strewn slopes, and is common along the mountain crest between the viewpoints at the summit of Sir Lowry's Pass and the cannons at the old pass.

Victorin's Warbler, probably the best-looking *Bradypterus*, is found in taller fynbos in damp areas, and is best located by its song. Also found on the lower slopes are Hottentot Buttonquail and Striped Flufftail, although they are seldom seen. Other birds include Ground Woodpecker, rock thrushes and Cape Siskin. The Helderberg Nature Reserve, on the mountain slope north of Somerset West, supports similar birds, although you have a long climb to reach the elevations where rockjumpers occur. It has the

advantage of having a greater diversity of habitats and many more birds, including the third 'missing' fynbos endemic, the Protea Canary, although this is scarce.

BETTY'S BAY AND ROOIELS

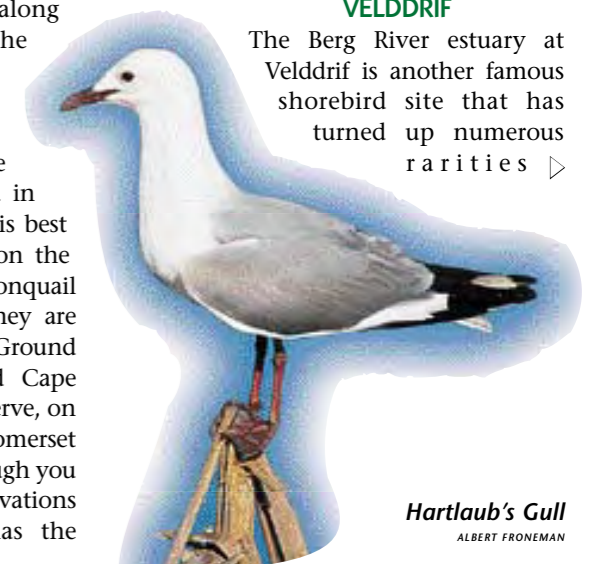
These sites offer similar fynbos birds to Sir Lowry's Pass and Helderberg. Rockjumpers descend to sea level immediately south of Rooiels. The Harold Porter Botanic Garden in Betty's Bay has forest species such as Olive Woodpecker and Blue-mantled Flycatcher as well as fynbos birds. Jackass Penguins and Bank, Crowned and White-breasted cormorants breed at Stony Point, Betty's Bay.

WEST COAST NATIONAL PARK

Langebaan Lagoon hosts the largest number of migrant shorebirds in South Africa, many of which can be studied at leisure from the excellent hides. Key species include Red Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit, Terek Sandpiper, Greater Sandplover (on the western shore) and perhaps rarities such as Redshank and Mongolian Plover. Seeberg (on the eastern shore) is best visited around high tide, whereas the main hide at Geelbek (at the southern end of the lagoon) works best at mid-tides. At very high tide, the smaller hides on the salt-marsh west of Geelbek are best, and this is the only place where Chestnut-banded Plovers are common. Black and African Marsh harriers are frequent over the marshes, and African Rails often feed along the marsh edge at Geelbek. The Park also supports a host of strandveld birds, including Karoo Lark, Cape Penduline Tit and White-backed Mousebird. Access is from the R27 or Langebaan village.

VELDDRIF

The Berg River estuary at Velddrif is another famous shorebird site that has turned up numerous rarities >

Hartlaub's Gull
ALBERT FRONEMAN

over the years, including several firsts for the region. The best birding is on the salt-pans south of the river, where birds can be observed from your car (tel. 02288-31133 for permission to drive around the pans). High tide is best, when birds aggregate on the pans, but any time can be good. The mudflats on the north bank in front of the Riviera Hotel are best at mid-tide. The strandveld around the river mouth supports similar species to those found in the West Coast National Park.

LAMBERT'S BAY

Bird Island, which shelters the picturesque harbour at Lambert's Bay, is one of only six Cape Gannet colonies in the world. It's an amazing spectacle that enthralled not only birders, and is well worth a visit. The new visitors' centre allows you to observe the colony at close quarters and also teaches you about the birds' biology. The island also supports three species of breeding cormorant and small numbers of Jackass Penguins.

While in the area, visit Jakkalsrivierlei, on the northern edge of town, for a variety of waterbirds and good strandveld birding around the hide. The bay north of the harbour is a good bet for the endemic Heaviside's dolphin.

While in the area, check the rocky outcrops towards Clanwilliam for Cinnamon-breasted Warbler and other arid-country birds. Protea Canaries are most common in the dense vegetation along watercourses in the arid mountain fynbos of the Cedarberg area.

DE MOND AND DE HOOP

These reserves lie on the coast east of Cape Agulhas. De Mond, 20 kilometres south of Bredasdorp, is a narrow dune strip which includes the mouth of the Heuningnesrivier. This attracts a diversity of shorebirds, but most people visit to see the Damara Terns that feed and roost in the estuary and breed in the dunes east of Struisbaai. De Hoop, lying 40 kilometres east of Bredasdorp, is a much larger reserve with a variety of habitats.



Cape Gannet colony, Lambert's Bay

Cape Gannet
ALBERT FRONEMAN

The De Hoop Vlei can be excellent for waterbirds, and the surrounding milkwood thickets support Southern Tchagra and Knysna Woodpecker. Potberg, in the eastern part of the reserve, has the last Cape Vulture colony in the Western Cape. Both reserves are administered by Cape Nature Conservation (tel. 021-483-4098).

BONTEBOK PARK AND THE OVERBERG

The Bontebok National Park, south-east of Swellendam, has a variety of open-country birds including Stanley's Bustard, Hottentot Buttonquail, Cloud Cisticola and Agulhas Long-billed Lark. Knysna Woodpeckers occur in riparian woodlands along the Breede River. Blue Cranes are common in the Overberg wheatfields, with Karoo Korhaans in the eastern part of the area.

Accommodation is available in the Park (book through SA National Parks; tel. 012-343-1991 or 021-422-2810) and the reserve is open from 07h00 to 19h00 in summer. Forest patches above Swellendam (Marloth Nature Reserve) and beyond Suurbraak (Grootvadersbosch Nature Reserve) have a greater diversity of forest birds than is found farther west.

WORCESTER-ROBERTSON VALLEY AND TANKWA KAROO

Many of the Karoo specials can be found in these areas. Vrolijkheid Nature Reserve, between McGregor and Robertson, is a good site for Pale Chanting Goshawk, Karoo Chat, Namaqua and Rufous-eared warblers, Fairy Flycatcher and Rock Pipit. There is good accommodation in McGregor.

The Tankwa Karoo, beyond Ceres on the road to Calvinia, offers these species plus Karoo Eremomela, Spike-heeled Lark, Tractrac Chat and Cinnamon-breasted Warbler. Ceres is the nearest accommodation, but you can camp at the Katbakkies picnic site on the Op-die-Berg road, about 70 kilometres from Ceres.

OTHER RESOURCES

Wally Petersen and Mel Tripp's excellent *Birds of the Southwestern Cape and Where to Watch Them* (Mondi Southern Birds 20) gives checklists and site guides, including user-friendly maps, for 40 top birding sites (available from BirdLife South Africa, the Cape Bird Club and the Kirstenbosch bookshop).

The Cape Bird Club (tel. 021-686-8795) offers advice on birding in the area, and has regular outings and meetings.

Peter Ryan is a lecturer at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town. Aside from running the MSc course in conservation biology, he conducts research on lark systematics and seabird conservation. He is an avid birder, who has travelled to all seven continents in pursuit of birds.



Blue Crane

PETER STEYN

BE ON THE LOOK OUT FOR...

Fynbos endemics

Cape Sugarbird, Orange-breasted Sunbird, Cape Siskin, Cape Rockjumper, Hottentot Buttonquail, Victorin's Warbler, Protea Canary

Regional endemics

Cape Francolin, Cape Bulbul, Cape and Agulhas long-billed larks

Benguela endemics

Jackass Penguin, Bank, Crowned and Cape

cormorants, Cape Gannet, African Black Oystercatcher, Hartlaub's Gull, Damara Tern

Locally-restricted introduced species

Chaffinch, Chukar Partridge, Peacock

Other key species

Black Harrier, Blue Crane, Knysna Woodpecker, Knysna Warbler, Southern Tchagra, plus shorebirds, pelagic seabirds and Karoo endemics



Potberg Cape Vulture over De Hoop

PETER STEYN