



SOUTH AFRICA: 1-DAY MABUSA NATURE RESERVE AND MKHOMBO DAM BIRDING TOUR REPORT

By Dylan Vasapoli



*The grassy hills surrounding Mabusa Nature Reserve are an excellent area to find **White-bellied Bustard**, and we enjoyed good views of these scarce birds on this day trip.*

Overview

This Johannesburg/Pretoria-based, South Africa, birding day tour takes one to an almost-forgotten corner of the Mpumalanga province. Here lie the mega birding sites of Mabusa Nature Reserve, the Verena grasslands and the Mkhombo Dam Nature Reserve – all of which are frequently overlooked sites, though deserve to be included on the main birding routes around South Africa. Verdant rolling grassy hills line the outside of Mabusa Nature Reserve, and play host to some incredibly sought-after species and are arguably the best areas in the country for the likes of **Melodious Lark** and **White-bellied Bustard**, and in the summer months a handful of other species such as **Short-tailed Pipit**. Mabusa Nature Reserve itself hosts a broad spectrum of birds with diverse broad-leafed woodlands on rocky ground dominating the area, producing scarce species such as **Fawn-coloured Lark** and **Green-capped Eremomela**. Mkhombo Dam Nature Reserve, as its name suggests, is based around the large Mkhombo Dam, and while water levels fluctuate widely, it generally hosts a large number of waterbirds, while additionally supporting an excellent suite of acacia thornveld species.



Fawn-colored Lark is one of many LBJs that can be seen here.

This trip was carried out for a single client. A more detailed account of the day trip is given below, and a total list of species can be seen following this.

Detailed Report:

We departed Pretoria early in the morning, and found ourselves in the Verena Grasslands shortly after sunrise. We had a bit of weather to contend with, though thankfully the light rain soon abated, but cool, overcast and windy conditions persisted. We started off at a wetland where we enjoyed flocks of **Orange-breasted Waxbill** as they left to forage, along with others such as **Purple Heron**, **Cape Grassbird**, **Little Bee-eater**, **Cape Weaver** and **Red-collared Widowbird**. We also enjoyed a variety of warblers with **African Reed**, **Lesser Swamp** and **Little Rush Warblers** all showing. **Red-chested Flufftail** and **African Rail** were vocal but remained unseen. We eventually carried on, stopping for a close pair of **Coqui Francolins** next to the road, along with a brief **Melodious Lark** sighting, a **Buffy Pipit** next to the road, a **Greater Kestrel**, and a mixed flock of hirundines that included **Banded** and **Brown-throated Martins** and **Greater Striped**, **South African Cliff** and **White-throated Swallows**. Further stops yielded a lovely family of three **Blue Cranes**, South Africa's national bird, **Fawn-coloured Lark**, **Cloud** and **Desert Cisticolas**, and a pair of **White-bellied Bustards**. This must surely rank as the best location within South Africa to view the latter species!



Coqui Francolin was a highlight in the grasslands.

We eventually pressed onwards to Mabusa Nature Reserve, where we concentrated on more woodland-based birding. With the sun now out, things were on the quiet side, but our patience paid off as we enjoyed a bustling bird party filled with the likes of **Green-capped Eremomela**, **Brubru**, **Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird**, **Southern Black Tit**, **Lazy Cisticola** and **Southern Black Flycatcher**, amongst others. Nearby, a confiding pair of **Short-toed Rock Thrushes** showed well, as did **Mocking Cliff Chat** and **Familiar Chat**. We carried on birding, searching for various other species such as Bushveld Pipit and Red-headed Weaver that we were still missing, but things were

awfully quiet and we only added various widespread species, and our last notable sighting before leaving the area was of a large flock of nesting **White-fronted Bee-eaters**.



Green-capped Eremomela is a special of Mabusa Nature Reserve.



Short-toed Rock Thrush is a localized special that we did well to find.

We then transited to the Mkhombo Dam Nature Reserve where we spent the remainder of the day. The water level had risen substantially in the recent days/weeks, as the waterline now infringed on the treeline and grasslands that once dotted the edge. This made navigating the dam's edge tricky as it was not clear where the water actually ended, and also meant that the overall waterbird numbers were low as many waterbirds and shorebirds had probably sought out more attractive areas. Aside from **Blacksmith Lapwings** and **Black-winged Stilts**, there were no shorebirds to speak of, however eventually we were able to track down some waterbirds congregating in a specific area, which included **White-faced Whistling Duck**, **Red-billed Teal**, **Yellow-billed Stork**, **Great Egret**, **Black Heron**, **African Spoonbill** and **African Swamphen**, amongst others.

With virtually all of the waterbirds exhausted, we made our way into the acacia thornveld that surrounds the dam, where we spent some time working the area. A short and sharp rain shower brought things to life, and we enjoyed a supremely productive end to our day. Small, colorful seedeaters were present in large numbers, with **Blue Waxbill** and both **Jameson's** and **Red-billed Firefinches** dominating the numbers, though we also managed to find **Green-winged Pytilia**, **Violet-eared Waxbill** and **Cut-throat Finch**. We did well to pick up a scarce **Great Sparrow** amongst a group of more common **Southern Grey-headed Sparrows**. A lively group of **Cape Penduline Tits** played hide and seek with us for a bit, eventually showing well, and we were also pleased to find both **Burnt-necked Eremomela** and the regionally rare **Yellow-bellied Eremomela**. **Marico Flycatchers** perched on the tops of the trees, as did an **Acacia Pied Barbet** and **Kalahari Scrub Robin**, before a **Gabar Goshawk** dashed through the area. A surprise **Double-banded Sandgrouse** was seen on our way out, and brought to a close a fun and successful day out.



Great Sparrow was a highlight of our time in the thornveld surrounding the dam.



A dainty female *Violet-eared Waxbill* was another highlight during our time at Mkhombo Dam.

Bird List – Following IOC (12.1)

Birds ‘heard only’ are marked with (H) after the common name, all other species were seen.

Common Name	Scientific Name
Ducks, Geese, Swans (Anatidae)	
White-faced Whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>
Spur-winged Goose	<i>Plectropterus gambensis</i>
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>
Red-billed Teal	<i>Anas erythrorhyncha</i>
Guineafowl (Numididae)	
Helmeted Guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>
Pheasants & Allies (Phasianidae)	
Crested Francolin	<i>Ortygornis sephaena</i>
Coqui Francolin	<i>Campocolinus coqui</i>
Natal Spurfowl	<i>Pternistis natalensis</i>
Swainson's Spurfowl	<i>Pternistis swainsonii</i>
Swifts (Apodidae)	
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
African Black Swift	<i>Apus barbatus</i>
Turacos (Musophagidae)	
Grey Go-away-bird	<i>Crinifer concolor</i>
Bustards (Otididae)	
White-bellied Bustard	<i>Eupodotis senegalensis</i>
Cuckoos (Cuculidae)	
Burchell's Coucal	<i>Centropus burchellii</i>
Sandgrouse (Pteroclididae)	
Double-banded Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles bicinctus</i>
Pigeons, Doves (Columbidae)	
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Speckled Pigeon	<i>Columba guinea</i>
Red-eyed Dove	<i>Streptopelia semitorquata</i>
Ring-necked Dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>
Laughing Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>
Namaqua Dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>
Flufftails (Sarothruridae)	
Red-chested Flufftail (H)	<i>Sarothrura rufa</i>
Rails, Crakes & Coots (Rallidae)	
African Rail (H)	<i>Rallus caerulescens</i>
African Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio madagascariensis</i>
Black Crake	<i>Zapornia flavirostra</i>
Cranes (Gruidae)	
Blue Crane - VU	<i>Grus paradisea</i>
Grebes (Podicipedidae)	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Stilts, Avocets (Recurvirostridae)	
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Plovers (Charadriidae)	
Blacksmith Lapwing	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>
Crowned Lapwing	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>
African Wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus senegallus</i>
Jacanas (Jacanidae)	
African Jacana	<i>Actophilornis africanus</i>
Gulls, Terns, Skimmers (Laridae)	
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>
White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>
Storks (Ciconiidae)	
Yellow-billed Stork	<i>Mycteria ibis</i>
Anhingas, Darters (Anhingidae)	
African Darter	<i>Anhinga rufa</i>
Cormorants, Shags (Phalacrocoracidae)	
Reed Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo africanus</i>
White-breasted Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax lucidus</i>
Ibises, Spoonbills (Threskiornithidae)	
African Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>
Hadada Ibis	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
African Spoonbill	<i>Platalea alba</i>
Hérons, Bitterns (Ardeidae)	
Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Black-headed Heron	<i>Ardea melanocephala</i>
Goliath Heron	<i>Ardea goliath</i>
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Black Heron	<i>Egretta ardesiaca</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Kites, Hawks, Eagles (Accipitridae)	
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>
Black-chested Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus pectoralis</i>
Gabar Goshawk	<i>Micronisus gabar</i>
African Fish Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus vocifer</i>
Owls (Strigidae)	
Pearl-spotted Owlet (H)	<i>Glaucidium perlatum</i>
Mousebirds (Coliidae)	
Speckled Mousebird	<i>Colius striatus</i>
Red-faced Mousebird	<i>Urocolius indicus</i>
Hoopoes (Upupidae)	
African Hoopoe	<i>Upupa africana</i>
Hornbills (Bucerotidae)	
Southern Red-billed Hornbill	<i>Tockus rufirostris</i>
Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill	<i>Tockus leucomelas</i>
African Grey Hornbill (H)	<i>Lophoceros nasutus</i>
Rollers (Coraciidae)	
Lilac-breasted Roller	<i>Coracias caudatus</i>
Kingfishers (Alcedinidae)	
Brown-hooded Kingfisher (H)	<i>Halcyon albiventris</i>
Striped Kingfisher (H)	<i>Halcyon chelicuti</i>
Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
Bee-eaters (Meropidae)	
Little Bee-eater	<i>Merops pusillus</i>
White-fronted Bee-eater	<i>Merops bullockoides</i>
African Barbets (Lybiidae)	
Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird	<i>Pogoniulus chrysoconus</i>
Acacia Pied Barbet	<i>Tricholaema leucomelas</i>
Woodpeckers (Picidae)	
Cardinal Woodpecker	<i>Dendropicos fuscescens</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Caracaras, Falcons (Falconidae)	
Greater Kestrel	<i>Falco rupicoloides</i>
Amur Falcon	<i>Falco amurensis</i>
Wattle-eyes, Batises (Platysteiridae)	
Chinspot Batis	<i>Batis molitor</i>
Bushshrikes (Malaconotidae)	
Black-crowned Tchagra (H)	<i>Tchagra senegalus</i>
Black-backed Puffback	<i>Dryoscopus cubla</i>
Southern Boubou (H)	<i>Laniarius ferrugineus</i>
Crimson-breasted Shrike (H)	<i>Laniarius atrococcineus</i>
Brubru	<i>Nilaus afer</i>
Shrikes (Laniidae)	
Magpie Shrike	<i>Urolestes melanoleucus</i>
Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>
Southern Fiscal	<i>Lanius collaris</i>
Drongos (Dicruridae)	
Fork-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>
Crows, Jays (Corvidae)	
Cape Crow	<i>Corvus capensis</i>
Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>
Tits, Chickadees (Paridae)	
Southern Black Tit	<i>Melaniparus niger</i>
Penduline Tits (Remizidae)	
Cape Penduline Tit	<i>Anthoscopus minutus</i>
Larks (Alaudidae)	
Sabota Lark	<i>Calendulauda sabota</i>
Fawn-colored Lark	<i>Calendulauda africanoides</i>
Rufous-naped Lark	<i>Mirafraga africana</i>
Melodious Lark	<i>Mirafraga cheniana</i>
Red-capped Lark	<i>Calandrella cinerea</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Bulbuls (Pycnonotidae)	
Dark-capped Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus tricolor</i>
Swallows, Martins (Hirundinidae)	
Banded Martin	<i>Neophedina cincta</i>
Brown-throated Martin	<i>Riparia paludicola</i>
White-throated Swallow	<i>Hirundo albigularis</i>
Lesser Striped Swallow	<i>Cecropis abyssinica</i>
Greater Striped Swallow	<i>Cecropis cucullata</i>
South African Cliff Swallow	<i>Petrochelidon spilodera</i>
Crombecs, African Warblers (Macrosphenidae)	
Cape Grassbird	<i>Sphenoeacus afer</i>
Long-billed Crombec	<i>Sylvietta rufescens</i>
Reed Warblers & Allies (Acrocephalidae)	
Lesser Swamp Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus gracilirostris</i>
African Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus baeticatus</i>
Grassbirds & Allies (Locustellidae)	
Little Rush Warbler	<i>Bradypterus baboecala</i>
Cisticolas & Allies (Cisticolidae)	
Lazy Cisticola	<i>Cisticola aberrans</i>
Rattling Cisticola	<i>Cisticola chiniana</i>
Levaillant's Cisticola	<i>Cisticola tinniens</i>
Neddicky	<i>Cisticola fulvicapilla</i>
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
Desert Cisticola	<i>Cisticola aridulus</i>
Cloud Cisticola	<i>Cisticola textrix</i>
Tawny-flanked Prinia	<i>Prinia subflava</i>
Black-chested Prinia	<i>Prinia flavicans</i>
Grey-backed Camaroptera	<i>Camaroptera brevicaudata</i>
Yellow-bellied Eremomela	<i>Eremomela icteropygialis</i>
Green-capped Eremomela	<i>Eremomela scotops</i>
Burnt-necked Eremomela	<i>Eremomela usticollis</i>
Sylviid Babblers (Sylviidae)	

Common Name	Scientific Name
Chestnut-vented Warbler	<i>Curruca subcoerulea</i>
Laughingthrushes & Allies (Leiothrichidae)	
Arrow-marked Babbler	<i>Turdoides jardineii</i>
Starlings, Rhabdornis (Sturnidae)	
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
Cape Starling	<i>Lamprotornis nitens</i>
Burchell's Starling	<i>Lamprotornis australis</i>
Thrushes (Turdidae)	
Kurrichane Thrush (H)	<i>Turdus libonyana</i>
Chats, Old World Flycatchers (Muscicapidae)	
Kalahari Scrub Robin	<i>Cercotrichas paena</i>
White-browed Scrub Robin	<i>Cercotrichas leucophrys</i>
Southern Black Flycatcher	<i>Melaenornis pammelaina</i>
Marico Flycatcher	<i>Melaenornis mariquensis</i>
Cape Robin-Chat	<i>Cossypha caffra</i>
White-throated Robin-Chat	<i>Cossypha humeralis</i>
Short-toed Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola brevipes</i>
African Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>
Mocking Cliff Chat	<i>Thamnolaea cinnamomeiventris</i>
Familiar Chat	<i>Oenanthe familiaris</i>
Sunbirds (Nectariniidae)	
White-bellied Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris talatala</i>
Old World Sparrows, Snowfinches (Passeridae)	
Yellow-throated Bush Sparrow	<i>Gymnoris superciliaris</i>
Great Sparrow	<i>Passer motitensis</i>
Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Weavers, Widowbirds (Ploceidae)	
White-browed Sparrow-Weaver	<i>Plocepasser mahali</i>
Scaly-feathered Weaver	<i>Sporopipes squamifrons</i>
Cape Weaver	<i>Ploceus capensis</i>
Lesser Masked Weaver	<i>Ploceus intermedius</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Southern Masked Weaver	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>
Red-billed Quelea	<i>Quelea quelea</i>
Southern Red Bishop	<i>Euplectes orix</i>
Fan-tailed Widowbird	<i>Euplectes axillaris</i>
Red-collared Widowbird	<i>Euplectes ardens</i>
Long-tailed Widowbird	<i>Euplectes progne</i>
Waxbills, Munias & Allies (Estrildidae)	
Bronze Mannikin	<i>Spermestes cucullata</i>
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>
Quailfinch	<i>Ortygospiza atricollis</i>
Cut-throat Finch	<i>Amadina fasciata</i>
Orange-breasted Waxbill	<i>Amandava subflava</i>
Violet-eared Waxbill	<i>Granatina granatina</i>
Blue Waxbill	<i>Uraeginthus angolensis</i>
Green-winged Pytilia	<i>Pytilia melba</i>
Red-billed Firefinch	<i>Lagonosticta senegala</i>
Jameson's Firefinch	<i>Lagonosticta rhodopareia</i>
Indigobirds, Whydahs (Viduidae)	
Pin-tailed Whydah	<i>Vidua macroura</i>
Wagtails, Pipits (Motacillidae)	
Cape Wagtail	<i>Motacilla capensis</i>
Cape Longclaw	<i>Macronyx capensis</i>
African Pipit	<i>Anthus cinnamomeus</i>
Buffy Pipit	<i>Anthus vaalensis</i>
Finches, Euphonias (Fringillidae)	
Yellow-fronted Canary	<i>Crithagra mozambica</i>
Buntings (Emberizidae)	
Cinnamon-breasted Bunting	<i>Emberiza tahapisi</i>
Golden-breasted Bunting (H)	<i>Emberiza flaviventris</i>
Species seen:	155
Species heard:	11
Total species:	166