

# Birding Ecotours



## SOUTH AFRICA: 1-DAY ZAAGKUILSDRIFT/DINOKENG BIRDING TOUR REPORT

By Dylan Vasapolli



*Crimson-breasted Shrike is one of the incomparable species occurring in the area!*

### Overview

This Johannesburg/Pretoria-based, South Africa, birding day tour takes us to one of the most exciting and well-known birding roads in the country – the mighty Zaagkuilsdrift Road, located in the rich bushveld north of Pretoria.

This trip was carried out for a single client, Alma, and saw us concentrate on getting photos of the many birds we saw. We had a superb South African winter's day, with calm and sunny weather throughout the day. The birding was excellent, and a testament to this was the fact that it was incredibly hard to do a full birding circuit along the road – simply as there was always so many birds to see! We ended the day off with just over 100 species for the day.

### Detailed Report

After collecting Alma from her accommodation, we made the journey northwards to the small village of Pienaarsrivier, where the famous Zaagkuilsdrift Road begins. Our initial progress was slow, as we became familiar with the many bushveld species that can be found here. Open grassy areas on the first part of the road held **Desert** and **Rattling Cisticolas** and **Magpie Shrikes**, before we ran into a large group of the prized **Cape Penduline Tit** – which showed well for us.



*The tiny Cape Penduline Tit is a target species along the road.*

We slowly transferred into some of the mixed acacia thornveld woodland where we added species such as **Grey Go-away-bird**, **Cardinal Woodpecker**, **White-browed Scrub Robin**, **Marico Flycatcher**, **Southern Pied Babbler** and **Brown-crowned Tchagra**, before we got lucky and

found a stunning **Pearl-spotted Owlet**. It wasn't long before the tiny owl was spotted by some of the birds in the area, and before long, there was a mobbing party dancing around the owl. Although a little bit distant, some of the species that were present included **Southern Masked Weaver**, **Blue** and **Black-faced Waxbills**, **Green-winged Pytilia**, **Jameson's** and **Red-billed Firefinches** and **Golden-breasted Bunting**. Soon enough the owl disappeared, and the mob of birds also seemingly melted back into the surrounds.



*The tiny **Pearl-spotted Owlet** was seen early on in the day.*

We spent a bit of time around the MCPA Dam area next, where we enjoyed our breakfast in between bouts of birding. The dam itself held species such as **Grey Heron**, **Spur-winged Goose**, **Knob-billed Duck**, **Red-billed Teal**, **White-breasted Cormorant**, **African Jacana** and a few stunning **Malachite Kingfishers**, which were flitting about the reedy edges. A large **African Fish Eagle** kept a vigil over the dam, and the denser stands of woodland held species such as **Southern Boubou**, **Grey-backed Camaroptera**, **Burnt-necked Eremomela**, **White-throated Robin-Chat** and masses of both **Red-billed** and **Jameson's Firefinches** and **Blue Waxbills**. Indeed, it seemed every time we stopped for some birding, there were masses of both **Red-billed** and **Jameson's Firefinches** and **Blue Waxbills** – with birds exploding from the ground en-masse, and seemingly present in almost every bush. We slowly continued our way along the road, adding further specials such as **Crested Francolin**, **Natal Spurfowl**, **Black-chested Snake Eagle**, **Gabar Goshawk**, **Southern Red-billed** and **Southern Yellow-billed Hornbills**, **Lilac-breasted Roller**, **Bearded Woodpecker**, **Crimson-breasted Shrike**, **Chin-spot Batis**, **Kalahari Scrub Robin**, **Burchell's Starling**, **Violet-eared Waxbill**, **Shaft-tailed Whydah** and **Golden-breasted Bunting**. We eventually arrived at our lunch stop, overlooking the Moretele River, where we took a short break in the shade of some trees. A delightful pair of **Quailfinches**, along with a **Brown-hooded Kingfisher** were the highlight of our stop here.



*The stunning **Lilac-breasted Roller** was seen a few times throughout the day.*



*A variety of colorful seedeaters, such as this **Green-winged Pytilia** were seen during the day.*

Our afternoon was spent birding around the open plains and remnant patches of water (lingering from the vast floodplain that forms in the summer months) surrounding the Kgomo-Kgomo village. The patches of water held species such as **White-faced Whistling Duck**, **Black-winged**

**Stilt, Pied Avocet** (a rare bird here), **African Jacana, Yellow-billed Stork, Glossy Ibis** and **Great Egret**. The open plains gave us **Kittlitz's Plover, Red-capped Lark, African Pipit, Scaly-feathered Weaver** and small groups of the scarce **Cut-throat Finch**. While the patches of thornveld around the village edges yielded further looks at species such as **Lilac-breasted Roller, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Burchell's Starling, Marico Flycatcher, Cape Sparrow, Blue Waxbill, Green-winged Pytilia** and **Yellow Canary**. We were also able to add a few aerial feeders to our list here – namely, **Pearl-breasted** and **Lesser Striped Swallows** and **African Palm** and **Little Swifts**.

With the day winding down, we started working our way back, and struck gold with sightings of two separate **Marsh Owls** quartering over some fields, and a stunning pair of **Spotted Eagle Owls** perched next to the road.



*A pair of Spotted Eagle Owls capped off a wonderful day!*