



South Africa Winchester College NHS expedition

March/April 2009, in conjunction with



20th March

We got away with just a very few hitches (George's glasses, Barney's money, Andrew's bins...) shortly after 1500. The motorway was diabolical, and it took us well over two hours to reach Heathrow – though we did see Egyptian Goose and Ring-necked Parakeet from the minibus.

Virgin check-in was very smooth, and before long we were passing what time we had left doing last-minute shopping – just as well Simon noticed the unique South African converter plug required, leading a last-minute shopping blast among the boys.

All aboard and seated together on our plane, and off into the night....

21st March

After variable amounts of sleep (ranging from none to ten hours!), and not a few feature films, we finally reached Cape Town at about 1010 local time – the sky was blue, and the temperature was high! Awesome. Formalities completed, we met up with the admirable Rainer, and headed off for the hotel (via Hartlaub's Gull, Hadada and Black-winged Stilt) – very downtown, very central, entirely suitable!

After a quick wash and brush-up, it was straight off to Kirstenbosch Botanic Gardens – plush, very organised and extremely pleasant, as well as being full of endemic plants and not a few endemic birds. Either side of a tasty lunch (various Ostrich and Springbok recipes appeared popular), we scored with a whole raft of endemics and near endemics, plus a few more widespread African species.

Highlights included Spotted Eagle-owl (found by Sam – on a roll already!), Cape Sugarbird, Cape Francolin, Cape Batis, Cape White-eye, Cape Bulbul, Cape Robin-chat, Cape & Forest Canaries, Jackal Buzzard, Gymnogene, Black Sparrowhawk, Red-winged Starling, Greater Striped Swallow, Black Saw-wing, Southern Boubou and various others! Not too overwhelming for the birders, and not too bad for the beginners – nearly everyone saw all the important species really well in the end.

We were flagging by shortly after 1700, and it was back to the hotel for a meal and an early night. A successful and hassle-free Day 1!

22nd March

Up at a trademark Rockjumper early hour, and straight off on the highway south-east to Rooiels Bay. In the lovely cool morning, with the sun still behind the mountains to the north-east, we soon started to see special things – Cape Rock-thrush, Cape Bunting, White-necked Raven and lots of Sunbirds of three species. Offshore, we picked up Sooty Shearwaters, Swift Terns, Cape Gannets, Cape Cormorants, and even Subantarctic and Arctic Skuas. Better still, we had brief views of blowing Bryde's Whales in the bay.

But the main event at Rooiels was still to come, and within seconds of starting our search, Rainer found the target – Cape Rockjumper! Within a few minutes we'd seen

two stunning males, and one of them proceeded to approach within about three metres – awesome views were had by all.

We explored the low *fynbos* a little further, and soon located both Cape Grassbird and a highly, highly elusive Victorin's Warbler – which only a few of us managed to see well! It was now getting hot, and while we did add a spectacular Verreaux's Eagle high over the cliffs, we couldn't find Ground Woodpecker before lunchtime called. Vast T-bone steaks and pizzas were eaten by all, and most proceeded then to sleep on the way back towards Cape Town – although we did stop for another whale and some Cape Fur Seals.

The afternoon we spent at Strandfontein sewage works (huge) and added hatsful of new birds – South African Shelduck, Levillant's Cisticola, White-throated Swallow, Little Rush Warbler, African Marsh Harrier, Maccoa and White-backed Ducks (oh yes!), Cape Shoveler, Cape Teal and Southern Pochard. Awesome stuff – add in Ruff, Avocet, Caspian Tern, White-winged Black Tern, Peregrine, African Darter, Black-necked Grebe and even Red-necked Phalarope (a lifer for Rainer!) and it should be clear that we were deluged with great birds.

Tired and effectively birded out, it was at last time to head back into town, where yet more food and evening banter awaited us back at the Diamond Hotel.

23rd March

Up for 0600 once again, and this time off towards the Cape Peninsula. We stopped off at Scarborough to have a look at whatever was along the seashore – it was mostly familiar stuff (Cape Cormorants, Kelp and Hartlaub's Gulls and Swift Terns), but a bit of diligent searching turned up Pied Kingfisher, Cape Wagtail and the two very desirable (but in truth not terribly exciting) local endemic Cormorants, Bank and Crowned. Offshore, a few Sooty Shearwaters and Cape Gannets scudded by, but the adrenaline then surged when, once again, there was a call of a cetacean blow just offshore. And this time the blow was unmistakable: big, persistent and V-shaped – Southern Right Whale!

These placid, slow creatures are not supposed to be off the Cape at this time of the year, but here we had at least three and perhaps four massive whales right beyond the kelp forest in the bay! They rolled about, spy-hopping, fin-waving and fluking to

everyone's absolute delight. A fantastic surprise, and the first ever "great whale" sighting for the NHS – a red letter day!

Onwards next to the Cape of Good Hope NP – the saw a very few game animals in the *fynbos* here – Bontebok, Red Hartebeest and Eland, plus a few apparently legitimate Ostriches! But the real highlight came on a roundabout near the Cape itself, where we screeched to a halt to watch a metre-long (and very deadly) Puff Adder crossing the road, in a very odd fashion – dead straight, with no sinuous snaky movements. The braver souls approached as close as they dared for photos, and we all gulped as it vanished into the *fynbos* – it was totally invisible in the bushes, and how many had we walked right past yesterday at Rooiels?

After an inevitable hot at the Cape of Good Hope, we trundled the short distance round to Cape Point, where we took a stroll up to the lighthouse and looked for birds and reptiles around the bushes and buildings. A single Chacma Baboon greeted us, but perhaps more exciting were a pair of Cape Siskins, plus Cape Bunting, African Rock Martin, Southern Boubou, Bokmakierie, Three-striped Mouse and the über-endemic Black Girdled Lizard, found only on the Peninsula.

While it was very blowy and felt cool, the sun was beating down, so we retreated to the restaurant for another slap-up feed – accompanied by the local tame Red-winged Starlings. Post ice-cream (hardly a tough trip, this one....), we hit the road once more, and headed back to Cape Town for our next date with tourism – Table Mountain! The ride up on the cablecar was very cool – a rotating cabin, no less – and the weather 1000m up was distinctly cold, with quite a lot of cloud blowing over the top of the hill and cascading down the sides – stunning.

The *fynbos* is in quite good shape up there (no alien species), and while it wasn't by any means as colourful as it could have been, it was great to get a feel for the Cape floral kingdom. Birdwise, it was a bit quiet, but we scored with African Black Swift, another couple of Cape Siskins and Familiar Chat. But birds weren't the main issue – just the amazing views down onto Cape Town and north up the coast towards Namibia (well, not that far....). Fantastic, and another global landmark ticked off!

24th March

Up early for us all (except Freddie T, who wasn't very well, and Barney, who is a bit of a lightweight), and up onto the lower slopes of Table Mountain for spectacular dawn views over Cape Town and a nice selection of birds – only Neddicky and Rock Kestrel were actually new, but we had much better views of Cape Bunting, Cape Grassbird, Karoo Prinia, Verreaux's Eagle, Cape Siskin and various others. Also, we finally pinned down Rock Hyrax for everyone!

Back to pick up the others (Freddie much improved), and then the short drive down to the Victoria & Alfred (sic) docks to catch the catamaran ferry to Robben Island. This was quick and comfortable, and by 1130 we were on the Island. It's a pretty bleak place – hot, sandy and knackered ecologically by European Rabbits. We did the obligatory bus tour around the perimeter road, having a look at the various historically important ruins – and seeing a handful of African Penguins, a couple of African Black Oystercatchers, and even two Angulate Tortoises!

The prison itself was sobering but oddly anodyne – as these sorts of places often are – and simply too covered in tourists (such as ourselves) to be terribly meaningful. Still, it's one of those things you do. "Dark tourism", indeed...

Once back on the mainland some four hours later, we had an excellent pancake lunch right by the docks, and then headed off to Simon's Town, and the Boulder Beach penguin colony. Excellent, easy and very entertaining birding! The boardwalk was surrounded by hundreds of African Penguins – displaying, nesting, swimming in to the beach and out to sea – great fun, and a really good experience.

Pretty shattered after a not-very-birdy, but very busy and memorable day, we returned to the Cape Diamond Hotel for one last night – this time the place was full of French people, so dinner was a bit more a scrum than usual!

25th March

An even earlier start – *departure* at 0600. Quite a severe panic first thing – Julia had lost her bins! They HAD to be either packed or still on the bus – but we couldn't find them....but we had to go. Calum very gallantly offered his NHS pair to a grateful Julia.

We got to Simon's Town on time, and soon got loaded up on our two boats – but another mishap struck! This time it was Theo's bins – but this time we knew where they were: at the bottom of the harbour! Ooops...

Still, nothing for it but to head out to sea, and within minutes it was clear our luck was in – we saw a couple of Bryde's Whales blowing, and were soon surrounded by literally hundreds of Common Dolphins, and probably over a thousand Sooty Shearwaters, with lots of Common Terns and several attendant Arctic Skuas hunting. We reached Seal Island after about 30 minutes, and began our shark trawl with a dummy seal – made of carpet! No bites....

Then after a tour round the island (many 1000s of Cape Fur Seals, and a few African Penguins), we chucked a tethered Tuna head over the side, and started chumming. And we waited....and waited. A distressed young seal turned up – plainly unwell and thrashing about in the water – a good sign? More waiting... "SHARK!!!!" – the shout went up and we all had brief but good views of a scary Great White Shark (estimated at 3.7m long) alongside the boat, just nuzzling the seal! The fin, the huge gun-grey flanks – wow! It was brief, but we'd seen it – awesome!

We waited some more, but it didn't resurface – until one boat had left! The others had further brief views on this occasion – when the seal reportedly met its (quiet and unspectacular) doom...

The journey back gave us more dolphins and another Bryde's Whale, and some fun for the chaps up front who wanted to get wet!

Lunch at the harbourside was enlightened by the remarkable sight of a scuba diver emerging from the harbour – with Theo's bins! Success! And they lived up to their waterproof billing – they still worked. And Julia's bins turned up as well – they'd been on the bus after all, and were in the Cape Town office – so we could pick them up. Relief all round.

The rest of the day was spent largely making the long journey north to Lambert's Bay – some four hours plus. We did see a few goodies on the way – a pair of Blue Cranes, Black Harrier (for Simon only...), Cape Sparrow, Cape Weaver, Yellow

Canary, Pied Starling, Capped Wheatear, Karoo Scrub-robin, and a host of roadside birds, such as Black-shouldered Kite, Jackal Buzzard, Common Fiscal and so on.

Finally, we reached Lambert's Bay as night fell – slap up meal, bed!

26th March

Up and out into the field (actually, along the roadside) in search of larks. Sadly, we didn't see any, but there was quite a bit of song to listen to in the distance... But we did score with Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler, White-throated Canary, Fairy Flycatcher, Long-billed Crombec and a few other assorted bits and pieces!

Soon it was time to take our boat trip out into Lambert's Bay, and an hour's gentle chug round the still waters produced the required result – half a dozen excellent Haviside's Dolphins, including a young calf. Nice! After that, the two halves of the group swapped, and while Group B went to see the dolphins, Group A took in the enormous Cape Gannet colony, along with White-fronted Plover, and a good selection of gulls, terns and cormorants.

Pre-lunch, we took a trip to the local salt pans down by the railway – lots of good wading bird list-padders railway, summer-plumage Curlew Sandpipers, Capped Wheatear, Three-banded and Kittlitz's Plovers and so on. We had lunch back at the sea front, and for the afternoon session took a trip up to Krantzvleiport Valley, about an hour inland. The dusty hills here produced a few nice species – Layard's Tit-babbler, Mountain Wheatear and most sought-after of them all, Protea Canary.

Rainer had a special treat for us for dinner tonight – a seafood BBQ at Muisbosskerm, a famous beach restaurant just south of Lambert's Bay. Delicious and extremely atmospheric – plus local Afrikaans folk music....more enjoyed by all was James' guided tour of the southern hemisphere night sky, including Saturn, the Magellanic Clouds and the Coal Sack. Look 'em up!

27th March

It was an early but sadly foggy start – so we abandoned our attempt to see larks along the coast road! We drove straight south towards West Coast NP – but made a couple of emergency stops, for Black Harrier (Simon's top target species), Lanner

Falcon, and what turned out to be a good lark field – Karoo, Red-capped, Cape Long-billed and Large-billed. But the top bird of the journey was a Southern Black Korhaan (female) at the service station!

We arrived at Langebaan mid-morning – it's a sadly overdeveloped seaside resort. Into the National Park – too many snakeskins for comfort, two more Black Harriers and brief views of Grey-winged Francolin in flight. We took lunch at a really nice old Dutch colonial house by the lagoon – a stunning Cape Longspur, African Hoopoe, Spotted Flycatcher, Cape Weaver etc. Most of us (lightweights excluded) took a walk out to a hide at the end of a boardwalk – while we only heard African Rail, we saw Levaillant's Cisticola, African Fish Eagle, and lots of waders (Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Whimbrel and just a single Chestnut-banded Plover).

Post lunch, a couple of short walks in the strandveld produced more of the same plus Cape Penduline-tit – and better views of Grey-winged Francolin (8) plus Bar-breasted Apalis and a superb male Korhaan in flight.

We made a final stop at a second hide by the lagoon – more great waders, including five Terek Sandpipers, several summer plumage Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit and more besides, including Little Tern.

Finally, we drove to a Windstone backpacker hostel for an overnight – and a meal at a pretty ghastly Wild West themed restaurant in town....we got home late and very tired. Double log tonight....and rather brief diary style....

28th March

Up at 0515, a quick breakfast in the communal dining room, and away into the fog – and it was pretty thick! Almost everyone slept most of the way to Cape Town, and so few of us got to say goodbye to the city, except for the airport! We checked in for our Mango Airways 0940 flight, and relaxed...

Flight on time, and an easy two hours to Johannesburg. We partook of a delicious lunch at a local restaurant serving traditional South African fayre – it was called (interestingly) "Subway". And then onto the road for the long (very long!) drive east to Kruger. Our bus was excellent, as was our driver, John, and we cracked on for just

over five hours (!) – highlights en route included Long-crested Eagle, Palm Swift, and Calum playing Pokemon in his sleep.

We missed the 1800 curfew for the park gate, but not to worry – Rainer rustled up an escort to get us to Skukuza by about 1930, and we settled in to our very roomy, AC cabins. Happy days indeed!

29th March

Up and at 'em at 0600, and away into the field with our two local drivers, Jan and Paul. We did a total of three game drives, interspersed by breakfast and a pretty chaotic lunch back at the camp.

We scored really heavily – mammalian highlights were a single sleepy but gorgeous Cheetah, Spotted Hyena, Giraffe, Burchell's Zebra, Waterbuck, Grey Duiker, Bushbuck, lots of Impala, Vervet Monkey and Baboons. Birdwise, things were even busier – with scores of new species, including crippers like Southern Ground Hornbill, Lilac-breasted and European Rollers, White-throated Scrub-robin, Common Scimitarbill, Green Wood-hoopoe, Red-backed, Magpie and Southern White-crowned Shrikes, White-bellied, Marico and Collared Sunbirds, Natal Francolin, five species of Kingfisher, including Brown-headed, Grey Go-away Bird, Bearded Woodpecker, Brown-headed Parrot, Burchell's Starling, Lappet-faced, White-backed and White-headed Vultures, Ashy Flycatcher, Chinspot Batis and various eagles and other raptors – awesome stuff! Add on Nile Monitor Lizard, Nile Crocodile and all sorts of insect, plant and other odds and ends, and it was a fantastic day!

Back at camp, a brief walk turned up African Goshawk, a calling but unseen White-browed Robin-chat, lots of fascinating trees (*Acacia* and various others), three superb Elephants right by the riverside deck, Water Thick-knee, Fruit Bats and so on.

30th March

Julia and seven of the boys were up stupidly early for their walking safari departure at 0445. Would we ever see them again? Yes – we did – and they had a great time, seeing Hyena, Lion, White Rhino, lots of Zebra, Giraffe, Wildebeest and plenty of birds. The other half will have to wait a day or two for their foot safari...

Team X, on the other hand, had a luxuriously late start of 0545, and had a thoroughly good time – the highlights being a pride of 12 Lions (plus a single male in the long grass elsewhere), Wildebeest, and above all a brief but good sighting of a young male Leopard! We'd just missed a female with a cub at a fresh kill, and our heads were hanging, but the radio crackled and we made it to the site in time to see this fantastic predator emerge and cross the road. Group disharmony threatens.... (and proved to persist – no Leopard for Team Y...)

On our return, Team Y took the jeep out for another decent drive, while Team X slept or swam – lazy gits! Team Y did score with another Lion, plus Spotted Thick-knee and some more good birds – including Saddle-billed, Black and Woolly-necked Storks.

After lunch, we finally joined up again and took a paired drive along the river – White-fronted Bee-eater, Grey-headed Bush-shrike, Mosque Swallow, Yellow-breasted Apalis and Crested Barbet were all new.

And finally (finally!) we boarded the 20-seater charabanc for our long-awaited dusk/night drive. What a corker! We scored on the bird front with Bronze-winged Courser, Water Thick-knee, Verreaux's and Spotted Eagle Owls, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Cape Glossy Starling and Fiery-necked Nightjar – and assorted creepy crawlies included a couple of Flap-necked Chameleons, a Boomslang (deadly) and another Puff Adder (deadly). But the mammals were great too – in addition to all the obvious herbivores, we found a group of five White Rhinos in the darkness, and best of all, a superb Cheetah which approached the bus, crossed the road and posed for the cameras! What a night-drive – fantastic stuff, and smiles all round.

Back for dinner – and one last panic: yet *another* Puff Adder, this time on the restaurant deck overlooking the river! Gulps all round, photos from a safe distance, and a very ginger walk home to our comfy beds – torches much in evidence!

31st March

An early pack up and bags into Jan's trailer, and then away towards Pretoriuskop. The longish drive was fair to middling – no great crises *en route*, apart from a trio of lionesses by a watering hole and a very few new birds – including Red-breasted Swallow – plus a mating pair of Giraffes. That has to be seen to be believed!

We breakfasted at the camp (yum) and headed out pretty much straight away for a long drive in the heat of the day. We did see a few bits and bobs (the best being two distant White Rhinos, Kudu, Retz's Helmet-shrike and Kurrichane Thrush), but it was generally rather quiet – although the hilly, gabbro-dominated landscape made an interesting change from the plains of Skukuza.

We stopped for lunch at a bizarre little café-cum-picnic site in the middle of nowhere, where we were rewarded with a singing Marsh Warbler, Southern Boubou, White-throated Scrub-robin, Green-backed Camaroptera and best of all, a roosting African Scops Owl in full view!

The two vans headed off once more for the long drive back to Pretoriuskop – again things were largely quiet, though there was lots of photography to be done – and we did see another pair of Southern Ground Hornbills. Unfortunately we got split up, and while one van saw rather little (apart from a very large herd of Buffalo), the other saw things liven up, with Brubru, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, a pair of distant Secretary-birds, a female Black-bellied Bustard and a stunning, really hefty White Rhino right by the road, grazing a termite mound.

Back at base, we sorted out a room misallocation problem quickly enough, and then variously walked, chilled or swam until dinner time.

1st-3rd April

Our two nights at Pretoriuskop were by turns hectic, exhausting and wildlife-filled! The 'other half' of the group had their morning bush walk (roaring Lions in the distance, African Hoopoe, Yellow-throated Longclaw, Sabota Lark), and everyone saw several more White Rhinos (no Blacks, alas), plus new birds like Red-collared Widowbird, Broad-tailed Warbler, Didric Cuckoo, Lizard Buzzard, Stierling's Wren-warbler, Green-capped Eremomela and Grey Penduline Tit.

Our second night drive was not quite as spectacular as the first, but still turned up Spotted Thick-knee, Mozambique (=Square-tailed) and Fiery-necked Nightjars and an incredible 24 Spotted Eagle Owls (!), plus African Rock Python and a decent selection of mammals.

On our last morning, we took one final game drive, and then packed up for the long journey home. Jan and Paul drove us as far as Hazyview, where our coach picked us up for the final leg to Johannesburg. A few last birds on the journey livened up the six hour marathon – African Snipe, Pin-tailed Whydah and Whiskered Tern were the highlights.

Finally, at O.R.Tambo airport, we said our fond farewells to Rainer, and headed off for check-in – where we compared ourselves favourably to the returning Marlborough College cricket tour party checking in dressed in full sports uniform on the same flight!

We landed just half an hour late in dense fog, and finally emerged at about 0845 – minus Crispin's and Josh's suitcases, which had never made it onto the plane! We went our separate ways, with five boys and us successfully getting a minibus back to Winchester – shattered but very happy!