

BIRDWATCHING IN OUR AREA

If you see a line of people, wearing floppy hats, and staring into the distance through binoculars, you can be sure that they are a group of birdwatchers enjoying this fascinating pastime. It is one of those fortunate pastimes that can be done as a group, or individually, and all you need is a pair of binoculars and a field guide (and perhaps a floppy hat in summer!!).

We are fortunate, in this area, to have many of the South African habitats represented close by. **Buildings and gardens** are the first places to start for a beginner, and even a seasoned birder can derive an enormous amount of pleasure studying the habits and idiosyncrasies of our local feathered friends. You soon learn to pick out the pecking order and see which birds are timid, and which are aggressive. The Pintailed Wydah is the terror, despite his size, and frequently chases away birds much bigger than himself.

Roadside birds may often be perched on telephone wires, poles or fences and these include raptors like the Blackshouldered Kite, Steppe and Jackal Buzzard which are all frequently seen when travelling between St Francis, Humansdorp and Jeffreys Bay area. The small but colourful Mr Stonechat and his less colourful wife are often seen on fence wires.

As you drive along you pass **farmland and grassveld** which provide yet another group of birds. At this time of the year, the male Longtailed Widow, with its tail feathers flying about in the wind, can be seen flapping valiantly as he tries to attract female attention. Canaries, weavers, yellowrumped widows, Doves, Helmeted Guinea Fowl, Larks and Pipits all fall into this category too. If you stop alongside a gravel road, like the one from St Francis Bay to Paradise, and look into farmland, you will be amazed at the variety you can see running around on the ground. Blue Cranes are often seen along this particular road too, up to about forty at a time on occasions.

For up country visitors, **fynbos** provides an unusual group of birds, depending on what plants are flowering at the time. The brilliantly coloured Orangebreasted Sunbird, the Malachite Sunbird with its striking metallic green plumage, and Doublecollared Sunbirds all fall into this category. On the old gravel road to Oyster Bay you pass patches of proteas and ericas, and this is the best place to see these colourful gems.

Evergreen forests down in the Tsitsikamma, and even in kloofs on the way there, provide another wonderful variety of feathered treasures. To catch the brilliant flash of red from the wing of a Knysna Lourie, or see its painted face, is a pleasure indeed. The shy Narina Trogon provides any birder with a great thrill as they are usually difficult to find in the thick forest foliage. Emerald Cuckoos, with the repetitive call of "Pretty Georgie", and the "Piet-My-Vrou" of the Redchested Cuckoo, echo through the trees for hours on end sometimes. A variety of Robins occur here too and are far easier to find.

Riverine and Coastal Bush, being thick and often covered in creepers, provide a safe haven for shy species like the Olive Bush Shrike, with its cinnamon breast, and dark line through the eye. Busy little birds like the Cape Batis and Barthroated Apalis hop around the bush, gleaning insects from the leaves, and are hardly still for a second, yet manage to keep up a constant chatter. Southern Boubou are very musical and sing a duets to each other, their notes penetrating the thick vegetation. Bulbuls, Cape and Terrestrial, occur, the former being very visible, and the latter being very invisible as they scratch around the leaves in the thickest undergrowth in search of food. This type of habitat is often in danger of human development, and should be protected as a haven for birds and other wildlife.

Waders galore flock in, during the summer months, to feed on the **mudflats** of river estuaries such as the Kromme and Kabeljous. They can be seen busily probing for tasty morsels with their differently shaped bills. Curlews and Greenshanks have long bills which penetrate deeper to extract their fare, while the Sandpipers and Plovers have shorter bills as their food source lies closer to the surface.

Reeds host flocks of brilliantly coloured Red Bishops (males that is) noisily displaying and puffing out their plumage to attract females. In contrast, Reed Warblers are dull coloured and skulk low down on the reeds, but have quite a melodious song (especially the Cape Reed Warbler). Purple Gallinule and Black crane both have distinctive plumage, as their names indicate, and the best time of day to see them is early morning or late evening when they cautiously come out to feed. Cattle Egrets nest in reeds and groups of them can be seen flying homeward every evening after a days foraging in farmlands.

Fresh waters have a wonderful variety of birds such as duck with their webbed feet, Coots and Cormorants, Darters and Dabchicks, Hamerkop and Herons, Ibis and Spoonbill, Avocets and Stilts, Kingfishers and Martins. The beautifully coloured flamingo can most often be seen at the Seekoei or Kabeljous lagoons, but the most spectacular of all, is the African Fish Eagle, with its call so evocative of Africa. These magnificent raptors can be seen at the Gamtoos, Kabeljous, Seekoei, and Kromme River estuaries.

For the holiday maker from up country, the **seashores** provide some birds not usually seen inland. The endangered Black Oyster Catcher is striking with its bright reddish bill, eye and legs, contrasting with its jet black plumage. We are fortunate indeed to have some of these birds along the coast in this area, and should do all in our power to protect them. It is imperative that these birds are disturbed as little as possible, especially during the breeding season, which is now. They lay their eggs in a shallow scrape on an exposed beach, or rocky area, and as the eggs are difficult to see because of their cryptic colouring, they can easily be squashed. Also, avoid going near them as the incubating bird leaves the nest, and the eggs then become exposed while humans are in the vicinity.

Jackass Penguins can sometimes be seen off the rocks at Cape St Francis, and to watch their swimming ability is pure pleasure. What is not a pleasure, is when they become fouled with oil, or tangled up in fishing line. Fortunately, a penguin rehabilitation centre has been established at the Seekoei Nature Reserve and you should take any penguin, found in difficulty on the beach, to the centre. It is worth visiting, and even more worth supporting, as the Jackass is classed as a “vulnerable” species. It costs a lot to feed and care for the penguins, and the centre depends on the public for funding.

Cape Cormorant, can also be seen out on the rocks at Cape St Francis, and further out, you can see Cape Gannets flying in formation, parallel with the shore line. When they feed, many white splashes mark the spot as they hit the water in search of a tasty fish. Terns are prevalent at this time of the year, and the largest, the Caspian Tern, with its red bill, can easily be recognized at all four river estuaries.

As you can see from the list of habitats, there is tremendous variety in the area, so head off into wide open spaces and see what you can find. Sometimes it is possible to see quite a lot when on a trail, or walking, but it is also quite remarkable what you can see when sitting quietly in one spot for a while. The birds become accustomed to your presence, then carry on with their normal activity so you can enjoy them at your leisure. Pack a picnic lunch, find a suitable spot, and enjoy your birding!!!