

South Africa

The Western Cape and Kwazulu-Natal

The joy of the bird tour

As the thrust of the South African Airlines 747's engines pushes me back in to the seat which will be my uncomfortable companion for the next 11 hours and their noise consumes all else it is in those moments before fit full sleep takes over that you realise that it's all now out of your control. All those months of saving and incomplete preparation are at an end. How you chastise yourself for less than studious study of the field guides, how you wished you had found time in that other world to prepare. All you can do now is go with the flow.....

Your mind plays games.....images of global desecration, loss of habitat, mass extinctions, lack of time to visit all those wonderful places one read about in one's youth, or of slideshows at the bay.....too long ago, now all gone.....could I be on a rocket ship for some far distant place due to man's stupidity?

Well perhaps not yet because thankfully there really just are too many places to go. Recent reading of 'Birding on borrowed time' has expanded the wish list. However I am no longer as keen to sleep under the stars as I once was and I now know that even if I had the financial backing to allow me to follow Phoebe's travel I no longer would wish to sleep in a muddy bivouac half way to somewhere. But I am willing to struggle a little and if that means travelling in an air conditioned coach, sleeping in Colonial accommodation with high ceilings, country farmhouses to tree houses with beds that make 'king size' seem small, and food that is out of this world and new species of bird coming thick and fast then I'm on the right trip and thoroughly amazing it was. So much so my wife is contemplating Costa Rica with much the same group next August.

It is not fair of me to even contemplate matching the prose that Ian Hodgson has so kindly provided to our report of South Africa – the Western Cape and Kwazulu-Natal. You will have to ask John van der Dol to copy that for you!

All I will say is out the groups 419 species I managed well over 400. Of course there are some I would have liked to have seen better and some I would just have liked to have seen, but even I will not blame our local tour leader for a very early foggy morning in the Drakensberg where we saw less than one species of bird well. But then again I would not have wished to have missed 'London calling' (ask John).

Back to my point.....today it is not difficult to get much anywhere. A study of the monthly bird watching magazines provides a plethora of companies, organisations and individuals willing to take you most anywhere to see birds. Many are very well known and it is not difficult to find someone who has travelled with a major tour company and I am one. All of these and many others take stands at the August Bird Fair where they are happy to spend time with you in selling their concept.

I have nothing but praise for those who go it alone, but the rest of us mortals have to choose somewhere in between and that will always be a compromise. However I can do nothing but highly commend John for his endeavours in Goa, Nepal and now South Africa.

Brian Short December 2003