

Garden Route birding

Situated between the Outeniqua mountains and the Indian ocean lies the magnificent Garden Route. Named due to its beauty being compared to the "Garden of Eden", this diverse section of South Africa has much to offer both the resident and the visiting birder. Habitats can range from Pelagic to Afro-Montane forest, from Karroo to Alpine, from Estuarine lakes to Fynbos.

A few of my favourite birding routes in the area would be

1 Knysna Forest route- Starting at the Deep walls(Diepwalle) forest station, birding in and around the forest camping decks. Reliable birds here include White Starred Robin, Narina Trogon, Grey Cuckooshrike, Black Headed Oriole, Chorister Robin Chat and Yellow Throated Woodland Warbler. From here, drive along Kom se Pad, stopping frequently to look and listen for bird parties, often indicated by the cackling of the Green Woodhoopoes. Olive woodpecker is often seen here. Cleared Patches of bracken and Fynbos here are good for Victorin's Warbler. Look up while going through these cleared areas as Forest Buzzard is often seen soaring here. At Gouna head back towards Knysna. Large areas of mature Fynbos lie along the road, perfect for Cape Sugarbird, Orange Breasted Sunbird, Victorin's Warbler as well as Cape Grassbird.

Time +- 4 hours

2 Wilderness Lakes route- The area between the towns of Sedgfield and Wilderness offer spectacular birding that encompass Fynbos, Forest, Grassland and Estuarine lakes. Best started early, this route begins at the "Big Tree" forest walk at Woodville outside the hamlet of Hoekwil. This is great forest birding that includes species such as Scaly Throated Honeyguide, Knysna Turaco, Narina Trogon, White Starred Robin, Lemon Dove, Knysna Warbler and Buff-spotted Flufftail. It is an easy, circular forest walk that allows for easy access to tricky forest birds. As with all forest birding, knowledge of calls helps immeasurably. From here continue towards Knysna and then take the Rondevlei road that branches to the right. This area is reliable for Black winged lapwing as well as Denhams Bustard, especially around the "Baboons Rest" junction. Continue down the pass to Rondevlei village and turn left at the Sedgfield junction. You will shortly cross a channel that links to 2 sections of the IBA and Ramsar site. This channel is a very good photographic spot as well as being good for Little Bittern, Malachite Kingfisher, Purple Heron and Hottentot Teal. Continue along and then take the left fork to the SAN Parks offices and the Rondevlei hide. The car park area is good for Olive Bush Shrike as well as Knysna Woodpecker. The hide is very good for Kingfishers, Purple Swamphen, general waterbirds, African Fish-Eagle as well as African Rail.

Time +-4 Hours

Woodbourne marsh- Follow the N2 through Knysna, as you come through the town look for George Rex drive. Turn here and the pans are about 3 km along the road on the Eastern side(left if coming from Knysna). Great for Ducks and Waders.

There are a couple of very good full day trips from the Knysna area. My 2 favourite are

Voelvllei Mossel Bay- A fantastic spot outside Mossel bay for waterbirds. Highlights here is having both Lesser and Greater Flamingo together as well as large numbers of ducks and coots. Best visited at the end of Winter. Fynbos thicket birding is also very good and is one of the more reliable spots for Southern Tchagra as well as Grey Necked Francolin. The surrounding fields are very good for Agulhas Long Billed Lark, Large Billed Lark, Blue Crane and Secretary Bird

Time +-8 Hours

Swartberg Pass- Definetly some of the area's best birding as well as most scenic drives and offering a mix of Fynbos, Alpine and Karoo birding. Highlights are Protea Seed eater, Cape Siskin, Orange Breasted Sunbird, Ground Woodpecker, Cape Rockjumper, Sentinel and Cape Rock Thrushes, Pririt Batis, Faery

Flycatcher, Layards and Rufouse Vented Titbabblers, Vereauxs Eagle, Victorins Warbler and Cape Sgarbird

Time +-10 Hours