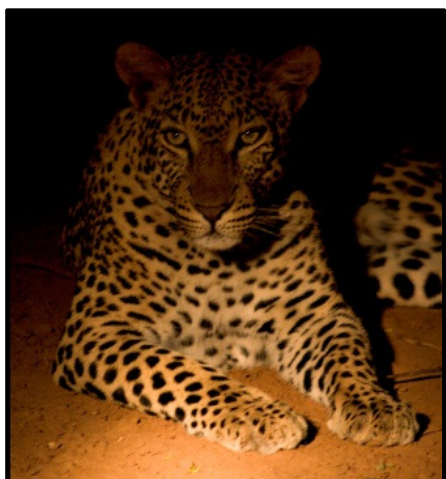


TRIP REPORT – BIRDING WEEKEND: PAFURI CAMP 15 -18 NOVEMBER 2012

It is becoming a tradition that each November, Diverse Africa leads a specialist 3-night birding safari to Pafuri Camp in the northern Kruger National Park. This year, the trip was conducted from 15 – 18 November, with Saturday 17 November being set aside as the day on which we would do a “Birding Big Day” and see how many species we could record in a day.

15 NOVEMBER 2012

On our first afternoon safari, we decided to head towards Mapimbi Pan, a seepage pan in the Limpopo Riverine forest. With the Limpopo River being almost dry, pans like Mapimbi become good stake outs for the elusive Pel’s Fishing-Owl. After a brief stop at an impressive baobab tree, we continued to Mapimbi Pan where we took a walk around the pan, but unfortunately dipped on the rare Fishing-Owl. We proceeded a short distance through a grove of Fever Trees to the banks of the Limpopo River where we enjoyed a sundowner stop.



The evening drive did not produce too much in the way of birds, but just because our main focus was birding, we still took time out to view the other spectacular creatures of Pafuri. Our night drive back to the camp produced sightings of a lone lioness, a group of spotted hyenas and a solitary African Wild Cat. The highlight of the drive was seeing a female leopard right next to the road. We watched her for about 30-minutes as she proclaimed her presence in the area with her sawing-like call right next to our vehicle. All in all a pretty successful night drive.

16 NOVEMBER 2012

After enjoying a cup of coffee on the Pafuri Camp deck, we headed off on our morning drive. Our plan was to seek out some of the Pafuri ‘specials’ and also target some potential stake-outs which we could visit on our Birding Big Day. Pafuri is renowned for the diversity of habitats that occur there and we planned to visit a few of these on our morning drive including Acacia thornveld, Mopane woodland, riparian forest as well as some of the seasonal pans on the Limpopo floodplain.

Our group consisted of Nic and Clare who were out from the UK, Johan who was taking a ‘break’ from his 23-night stay at Pafuri Camp to join us for some birding and Allon who had some pretty challenging species on his target list such as Three-banded Courser, Racket-tailed Roller and Arnott’s Chat.

Not long after leaving camp, we spotted 3 giraffe, a species that is very rare at Pafuri. After enjoying this sighting for a while we continued on towards the Mopane woodland. I had informed the guests to keep an eye out in this area as this was the habitat that the Three-banded Coursers were most prevalent in. (*We had seen a nesting pair of Three-banded Coursers in Mopane woodland on the Diverse Africa Birding Big Day weekend to Pafuri in 2011*). Not long after we entered the Mopane woodland, Allon, screamed that he had seen a **Three-banded Courser**. Clare and Nic, who were new to the world of birding, realised from Allon’s response that this was something special.

I reversed the vehicle to where Allon said he had had seen the bird. Right next to the road was a Three-banded Courser sitting on a nest. I moved the vehicle away to a distance which would not place too much stress on the bird. We all grabbed our binoculars and shortly thereafter the bird stood up and we were treated to the sight of a tiny Three-banded Courser chick. Could this sighting get any better? As we were discussing the rarity of this sighting, Johan, the guest at the back of the vehicle said that he had seen - an egg remaining on the nest. Again, we fixed our binoculars on the bird and as she stood up again, we all got to see the egg. This time though, Johan commented that he had seen something popping out the egg. Could it be that the chick was hatching while we were there?



We continued to watch things unfold and to our amazement, when the bird stood up again, there was a newly hatched chick lying on the ground. We continue to watch as the male bird soon arrived. The adults carried the egg shell away from the nest and proceeded to eat it. After all of this, we decided to leave the birds in privacy and when we left, the 2 chicks were right next to each other with the mother back at the nest. We would return the following day to check on the progress of the chicks. *(In the picture above, you can see an adult bird carrying a piece of the egg away. The newly hatched chick can be seen lying on the ground just in front of the chick that is standing).*

After a sighting like this, it was hard to stay focused as we continued in a westerly direction through the Mopane towards the Limpopo floodplain. Our drive along this stretch produced some good views of a **Shikra**, **Gabar Goshawk** and **Great-spotted Cuckoo** to name a few. I decided to head back to camp along a road which heads through some tall stands of Mopane in the hope of finding a Racket-tailed Roller. We had not been on the road for long when Allon spotted a female **Arnott's Chat**. We stopped to watch the bird and soon spotted the male bird. We then noticed that he had some food in his mouth. As we watched him, he approached a hole in a tree and all of a sudden disappeared into a nest. This was proving to be a great morning.



Allon's excitement was clear for all to see and we joked that all he needed to spot for us now was a Racket-tailed Roller. We had barely finished this conversation when Allon called out "**Racket-tailed Roller.**" To our right was a pair of Racket-tailed Rollers. We had outstanding views of them as they flew through the leafless Mopane woodland. One of the birds gave us outstanding views as it perched on a branch directly over the road.

We made our way back to the main road and headed back to camp. Along the way, we saw another two **Racket-tailed Rollers**. What a great morning!

In the afternoon, we decided to head up the Luvuvhu River to see what birds we could find there. The highlight of the afternoon was a sighting of a pair of **Verreaux's Eagles** perched on the sandstone cliffs of Hutwini Mountain. We decided to stop for drinks on the bridge overlooking the Luvuvhu River as we were still searching for **Pel's Fishing-Owl**. Just as it was starting to get dark, Dereck spotted a pair of birds as they flew from their roost down to the river. We all had excellent views of these birds as one perched in an Ana Tree tree and what looked like a juvenile bird quenched its thirst in a small pool in the Luvuvhu River. We decided that a pair of Pel's was probably a great way to end the day and we headed back to camp.

17 NOVEMBER 2012 – THE BIRDING BIG DAY

We agreed to meet on the main deck at Pafuri Camp at 4 am to catch the dawn chorus. Here we managed to record **Southern Ground Hornbill**, **Water Thick-knee**, **White-browed Robin-chat** and **African Goshawk** to name a few. We had decided to follow the same routing as yesterday as it had been really productive. It did not take us long to record **Meves' Starling**, **Little Swift**, **Burchell's Coucal**, **Pied Kingfisher** and **Lesser-masked Weaver**. We eagerly headed towards the spot where we had seen the **Three-banded Coursers** the day before. There was no sign of them on the nest and after scanning the area carefully, we managed to locate the birds about 70 metres from the nest - two adults and two tiny chicks.

We continued through the Mopane with sightings of **Grey Penduline-Tit**, **African Hoopoe**, **Arrow-marked Babblers** as well as our first **Woodland Kingfisher** of the weekend. We took a short walk to Jachacha pan which produced **Yellow-billed Stork** and **African Spoonbill**. We drove on a bit further before taking a short walk to Hlangaluwe Pan which produced **Little Stint**, **Three-banded Plover**, **Wood Sandpiper** and **Black-winged Stilt**. We returned to the vehicle and continued through the Mopane woodland where we recorded **Wahlberg's Eagle** and **Crowned Lapwing**.

We knew we would be in for a tough day as not only was the concession very dry, but it was incredibly hot and the birds were not nearly as vocal as they usually are. We entered the Limpopo Riverine forest which produced **Sombre Greenbul** and **Spotted Flycatcher**. We also managed to locate the **Racket-tailed Rollers** where we had seen them the previous day. We headed back to camp to enjoy a well-deserved brunch. Our tally after the morning was 123 birds and it was only getting warmer. A tough afternoon beckoned.



After brunch, we spent a short time birding in the camp with the highlight being a pair of **African Wood-Owls** roosting in a Jackalberry tree, **Saddle-billed Storks** and a flock of **Green-capped Eremomelas**. There were plenty of **White-fronted Bee-eaters** in front of the camp as well as **Speckled Mousebird**, **Yellow-bellied Greenbul** and **Dark-capped Bulbul** which were mobbing a boomslang.

We left camp shortly before midday with the plan of visiting a number of lookouts on the Luvuvhu River hoping to record some water-birds. This drive produced **Bennett's Woodpecker**, **Black Crake**, **Spur-winged Goose**, **African Openbill**, **Woolly-necked Stork** and **Green-backed Heron**. One of the highlights of this drive was seeing a young male leopard in a baobab tree during the hottest part of the day. We returned to camp and enjoyed some afternoon tea before heading out again.

The afternoon drive produced **Mottled Spinetail**, **Trumpeter Hornbill**, **Purple-crested Turaco** and **Black-collared Barbet**. As it got darker, we recorded **Fiery-necked Nightjar**, **Freckled Nightjar** and **Square-tailed Nightjar**. We also recorded a **Spotted Eagle-Owl**. We decided to head back to the bridge to look for **Pel's Fishing-Owl** and were rewarded with a great sighting. After a long, hot day, we decided that this was a perfect way to end and we returned to camp with a tally of 160 species for the day. A great day had been had by all. Although our total was less than we had originally hoped for, the hot and dry conditions had made it a tough day for birding. As with any Birding Big Day, we also missed out on a number of common species, but at the same time had great views of some specials such as Pel's Fishing-Owl, Mottled Spinetail and Racket-tailed Roller.



18 NOVEMBER 2012

We were up before first light as we had hoped to find Bat Hawk which has been seen a number of times at the Luvuvhu Bridge at dawn. We spent some time looking for this bird, but unfortunately dipped. The plan for the morning was to head to Lanner Gorge, arguably the most beautiful spot in all of the Kruger National Park. As we had left camp very early, I decided to visit Tshikuyu Spring, one of the many springs at Pafuri. Birding was

tough this morning as the wind was howling, but it did not take us long to record a number of really common species such as **Crested Barbet** and **Red-billed Buffalo Weaver** that we had not seen the day before. Lanner Gorge produced **African Black Swifts**. We were also fortunate to see white rhino on the morning drive.

On our return to camp, we spotted a **Marabou Stork** close to the road. We stopped to look at it and noticed two Spotted Hyaenas squabbling over a fresh Nyala kill. As we watched the hyaenas, we heard the alarm call of some Vervet Monkeys and on further investigation we had a brief view of a female leopard – probably slightly unhappy at having her meal stolen by these hyaenas.

After this, we headed back to camp for brunch before heading our separate ways.

The trip was a great success. Although the Birding Big Day had been pretty tough due to the dryness of the area and the heat on the day, we still had some great sightings and got to see some of the area 'specials'. From a game-viewing perspective, the trip was superb with sightings of all the big 5 including 3 separate leopard sightings.

For information on birding trips to Pafuri, please contact Simon Stobbs at simon@diverseafrica.co.za