

## Will this become the Freestate's first official birding route?

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Friday, 15 January 2010

Ask any birder for a good spot to go birding, and they mostly would ramble of a number of spots in Mpumalanga and Kwa Zulu Natal. Ask them for their favourite places in each province and most provinces would be named, but somehow the one right in the middle of it gets left out. It still really seems as if the Freestate is just good for the road to somewhere else. People do not think of the major park in the province, Golden Gate, as a birding destination, and only recently has the Memel wetlands become popular. Well remarkably for the province with the lowest species count I can attribute 10% of my lifers here! And this is not just birding one spot, but spread across the province. Some of the more remarkable ones are Southern Bald Ibis, Bearded Vulture, Grass Owl, both African Black and Common Swifts and Ground Woodpecker. In recent years I have focused my birding more and more to a single area and that is the South Eastern Freestate. I do regard the area within the triangle of the towns of Ladybrand, Marquard and Excelsior to be better birding than Golden Gate. The reason for this is that there is much more diversity in habitat. Golden Gate is already nestled well within the lower parts of the Maluti mountains, where this area is slightly more in the foothills affording both mountainous habitat as well as open grassland. The foothills of the Maluti Mountains and varies high freestanding sandstone ridge to big open plateaus on the ridges providing interesting birding on the rocky slopes, adding interesting species such as Redwing Francolin and higher altitude species such as Horus and Alpine swifts. It is of course a very intensive farming area, but as most farmers here practice mixed farming there is a good balance between grassland for sheep and cattle as well as cultured lands for wheat, mealies and sunflower. The farmers also plant smaller crops such as soy beans, beetroot and green feed (mostly Lucerne). From about this time of the year many of the pastures are cut and baled for winter feed which provides further diversity in tall grassland and short grassland. The area is quite water rich, with many small farm dams, and some larger dams scattered all over the landscape. Climate easily varies from one extreme to another and it is not uncommon to one day have 34C to 10 C or below if there is a wind that blows in from Lesotho. Winter time can become bitterly cold, with occasional snowfalls. Temperatures of below 0C are not uncommon, and wind chill can drop to below -10C. During my frequent visits to the area I have found some routes more rewarding than others, and have started viewing these routes as the future Freestate Birding route. Accommodation is quite plentiful especially in Ladybrand, which is the main centre for the region. I would however recommend finding accommodation out on the farms and one can find luxury chalets at farms such as Umpukane and Evening star, to more rustic but well appointed rooms at Karba. Staying on the farms allows for your birding day to start at the front door and I have recorded species such as Secretary Bird, Rock Kestrel, Northern Black Korhaan and White Stork, from the rondavels front door on the family farm. The best route that I have at this stage I tend to keep driving again and again, and each visits still provides me with new species added to the list. The drive ambles along provincial gravel roads with either commercial farms or game farms alongside. It is very safe to get out and take walks along the road. The route will take about 4 hours one way at a very leisurely pace, but it is well worth it not to rush as I have also found many animals on the route including, Lion, Rhino, Roan and Sable Antelope. Follow the route on google maps From the town of Clocolan one would travel about 20km down Excelsior, to the well signposted turn off to the Bornmansdrift farm. (1) At the t-junction to the farm about 500 m down there is a resident pair of Spotted Thick-knee (2), which is challenging to find resting between the loose rocks. In the area around the windmill (3) to your left look for good sightings of Zitting and Cloud Cisticolas.. This is also a good area for Anteater Chat, Cape Canary, and on occasion Eastern Clapper Lark. If the grass is tall in late summer, Common Quail and Grey Winged Francolins are readily flushed. At the old farm house (4), keep an eye open for Ground woodpecker on the old silo and the occasional visit from Mocking Cliff Chat. Continue on this road up to where it joins a larger well used gravel road (the S606) and turn right (5). Just be warned that this road up to this point is quite rough and should preferably not be driven in a sedan, and during wet spells a 4x4 is advised. Approximately 2.7KM there is another t-junction (6), where you should turn right again. The road from here to a smallish dam right next to the road, will again provide most of the above grassland species. The little dam (7) is quite often a gem with breeding whiskered terns, little grebe, Yellowbilled, Little and greater Egrets. A few meters further a little stream (8) is crossed and this is a good place to look out for Red-chested and Diderick Cuckoo in summer. I have also found European Roller, Red Breasted Swallows and Common Swift in this spot. Between the stream and the point where the road cuts through and around a hill often provides sightings of Secretary Bird and Spurwinged Goose. Where the road cuts through the hill (9) the habitat becomes wooded and rocky and there is a resident Cinnamon Breasted Bunting that can often be seen sitting on the telephone wire, often joined by Yellow Canary. At the T-junction turn left (10). Keep an eye open for both Grey-wing and Red-winged Francolin here, but the latter is more often heard than seen. On the right hand side there is the entrance gate to Moketsi Game Ranch (11) and the rest of the route will continue along its fence, so keep an eye open for various game species. Just around the bend once the entrance gate can no longer be seen, I usually stop and spend quite a bit of time walking up and down the road (12). The left hand side of the road is the well wooded slope of a high ridge with a large variety of swifts and swallows flying overhead and up to the cliff face. Look out for African Black, White Rumped and little swift, but keep a keen eye open for Alpine and Horus as well. The lower slopes hold an interesting number species with my personal special for the spot being Layards Titbabbler, but I have also found Chestnut Vented Tit-babbler, so you need to carefully check each sighting. Other good additions to your list in this section would be Acacia Pied Barbet, Black-Chested Prinia, and Karoo Scrub Robin. Where the road makes a sharp right hand turn, approach the dam wall on your left hand side, carefully as Giant Kingfishers can often be found here. (13) On the next stretch keep an eye open for Rufous-naped Lark and Banded Martin on the game fence (14). Once you reach the large dam, you will cross the river on a cement bridge, where the reed bed (15) is a good spot for Southern Red Bishop and Common Waxbill, but also look out for African Reed-warbler, Lesser Swamp Warbler and in the adjoining area Neddicky. I usually

just drive around the bend to where I get a full view over the dam (16), and quite often flush a Goliath Heron. Usually my time has run out at this point and I follow the route back, but don't stop looking as I have often added a few more species on the way back. After turning right just after the Moketsi main gate, follow this road back as you came to where it ends in the T-junction. At this junction turn left as you came, but at the road that leads off left to the old farmhouse continue straight back to the Clocolan Excelsior Tar road (17). During a wet period, or if you drive a sedan car, you can bypass the Bornmansdrift section by starting the rest of the route from here.