

Phinda



South Africa



28th April to 1st May, 2004



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| Thursday, 28 th | Phinda airstrip to Forest Lodge Evening game drive | 13:30 – 15:00 17:00 – 20:30 |
| Friday, 29 th | Rhino tracking Walk around Forest Lodge grounds River cruise | 6:30 – 10:30 11:00 – 15:00 15:30 – 20:00 |
| Saturday, 30 th | Jeep transfer to Phinda airstrip Flight of the Sea Eagle Beach Game drive | 6:45 – 7:30 7:30 – 8:20 9:00 – 13:00 16:00 – 19:20 |
| Sunday, 1 st | Game drive Transfer to Phinda airstrip | 6:30 – 10:15 11:00 – 11:40 |

PHINDA GAME RESERVE, SOUTH AFRICA

28th April to 1st May, 2004

Introduction

Phinda is a private game reserve in the Zululand region of South Africa, situated to the North-east of Durban. It is owned by CCAfrica (www.ccafrica.com), whose ethos is the development of ecosensitive reserves throughout the southern part of Africa. We spent what was essentially a long weekend at the reserve, comprising 3 nights stay at Forest Lodge. We flew to Johannesburg direct from the UK, and then the remaining 2 hour flight was made on a 60 year old twin prop plane to the private airstrip of Phinda. Although this seems a very short time in relation to the long journey we made to arrive at Phinda, so much was packed into the time there that it was a very worthwhile exercise.



Early morning calls were made at 5:30 to ensure that the most was made of early game drives, and evening drives continued until after dark for nocturnal species. Time spent between these was either on more activities organised by the Lodge, or walking and animal / bird watching around the lodge grounds.

The Phinda reserve comprises a 14000 hectare area, with a vast array of biohabitats in a small area, including the rare dry sand forest, in which our accommodation was situated. Of the four accommodation groupings within the reserve, we stayed at Forest Lodge – 16 superb stilted suites spaced out within the forest, containing a luxurious ambience, but with all round windows to soak in the tranquillity of surrounding habitat. The paths interlinking the main outbuildings were quite safe to walk through by the light of day, but a security guard had to be hailed after dark, since the lack of fences meant any animal could be present at that time.

Included in the accommodation package for Phinda are morning and evening game drives, when the animal activity is at its peak. These are made in open topped Land Rovers, driven by experienced and highly in-house trained rangers, with an expert Zulu tracker sitting at the front of the vehicle. The skill of both of these people is phenomenal. Since a lot of the reserve is wooded, broken by both small and large open plains, many of the animals need to be tracked down, and it is a pleasure being part of this process. I was also fortunate enough to be in the Land Rover driven by the head ranger, Mike, from the airstrip, since his particular passion is birding. While he paid more attention to the birds knowing that I was in the jeep (the other 5 were non birders), there were still limits to the amount of time devoted to these, since the interests (or boredom thresholds) of all had to be taken into account. This is probably true of all safaris taken by birders where there are mixed groups and full Land Rovers, however, although the reserve does offer specific birding safaris.

In addition to the game drives, other activities which we undertook were:

- **River cruise.** This is very relaxing and can be taken for no extra cost in the place of a game drive. It is made on a small covered boat, which can seat around 8-10 people, and is comfortable as well as productive for animals and birds. Be careful though - a bar is also included on the slow journey along the river;
- **Flight of the Fish Eagle.** For an extra cost, this 45 minute flight takes you over the whole of the reserve and its surroundings, in a small plane which can often be only metres off the ground. Not only are the diverse habitats more obvious and spectacularly seen from the air, but many animals, and even some birds, can be spotted easily;
- **Beach.** Another extra, which we combined with the flight above, since there is a grass airstrip a short drive from Maputuland beach. While there is a small selection of birds here, the main excitement is from the swimming – snorkelling at the top of the beach revealed many varied and colourful fish, including a large and sinister looking Leopard Eel at close quarters.

Getting around and precautions

All of our transport had been arranged by Phinda. However, this is in addition to the accommodation and meals packages that they do, but it is a lot more convenient being flown in from Johannesburg straight to a private airstrip than hiring a car which would be redundant while at the reserve. The timing of our visit was in the dry season, and the local microclimate is even drier than the surrounds, so the almost constant sunshine wasn't a surprise, although there was a short burst of rain during one of the nights. However, early morning and late evening on the back of an open-topped vehicle does get cold! Temperatures through the middle of the day were comfortably hot – April is at the end of the southern hemisphere winter – but sun block was advisable. The timing, and possibly the latitude we were at, may have explained the lack of mosquitoes and low risk of malaria. Antimalarials are still recommended, and this means a prescription tablet for this part of the world.



SITES

Transfer from Phinda airstrip to Forest Lodge

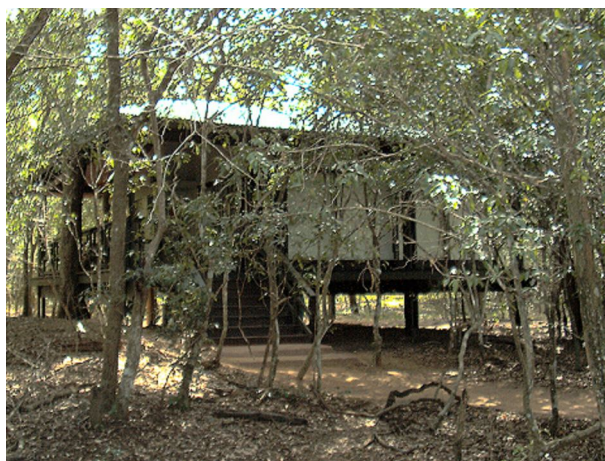
(Day 1)



The whole journey took 24 hours, from leaving the doorstep to arriving at Phinda airstrip, but didn't seem as exhausting as would have been expected. The last part of the journey was a bit of an adventure, since the 1½ hour flight from Johannesburg to Phinda airstrip was made on a 60 year old prop plane. We commandeered the seat to the rear of the plane, which meant unimpeded views out of the window, and saw the landscape change from quite agricultural around the capital for the first half to one hour, to more open and wilder areas towards Phinda. As we descended towards the airstrip, a couple of Giraffe could be made out, as well as what were either Buffalo or Wildebeest, and Warthogs as we landed.

The airstrip is set in the centre of the reserve, and while we alighted from the steps of the plane and watched some local Zulus playing music and dancing, it was also a chance to see a small accipiter flying overhead – either a Shikra or Goshawk – this being the first bird of the trip. The aim of the jeep ride from here was mainly to get us from the airstrip to our accommodation at Forest Lodge, and not particularly to stop on the way to see animals. However, we did have close encounters with 3 Zebra and a variety of antelope. The first birds seen close to were on the airstrip itself, with a pair of Crowned Lapwings not far from our landing point, and a further group of 6 or 7 alongside a family of Warthogs. Small birds flitted to and fro and sang with little possibility of identification, but a stop at one location found 3-4 White-backed Vultures soaring overhead. We did spend a few minutes at an open, large water hole, which contained Water Buffalo at the rear. Birds here included a couple of Spur-winged Goose, Egyptian Goose, White-faced Duck, African Spoonbill, and some Black-winged Stilts. Just behind this water hole was a small group of what were evidently Lemon-breasted Canaries, identified by Mike, the head ranger who was also a birder, but I couldn't see the identifying marks needed for my own satisfaction. A Brown-hooded Kingfisher picked out of the branches a little further on was ample compensation. Square-tailed Drongo, which is apparently the more forest dwelling of the 2 drongos found here, screeched overhead – its brief views were overtaken by a much closer bird later on at the lodge.

Once we arrived at Forest Lodge, which is collection of 16 individual luxury suites set in the sand forest, we were taken straight to the restaurant area for a meal. This incorporates a viewing deck, and while we chomped on a delicious meal of ostrich and calamari, a group of 10 or so Crested Guineafowl mingled with Vervet Monkeys outside, with Impala constantly plying to and fro in the background. We were subsequently shown to our own private suites, which are all set out peacefully in a dense part of the sand forest. It was just after arriving that the call of the Square-tailed Drongo was picked up and located, right next to our own accommodation. Perhaps even more surprising was a single Red Duiker foraging slowly through the under story just in front of our panoramic window.



Evening game drive

This was due to leave at 4 o'clock, but was a little late following a first day orientation, so we didn't actually leave until after 5. This meant that we made speedy headway to look for some of the more nocturnal wildlife, in particular Leopard and Lion. On the way, we made a few short stops, mainly to watch gazelle and antelope, but there were also sightings of a couple of Trumpeter Hornbills flying across a clearing in the forest, and, as the light started to fade, we heard increasing numbers of Fiery-necked Nightjars. Well on the way to one of the first locations for the big cats, it was now becoming quite dark, and we began to see as well as hear the Fiery-necked Nightjars, usually taking off from the track in front of us. Many were also seen in flight, with the

odd one on branch perches. In amongst these, a Crested Francolin ran over the track and straight into cover.

The first main stop was through a thick copse, where only a robust 4 wheel drive vehicle could progress, and into a corner of the dense forest, where we eventually found a Leopard in the dense undergrowth. On leaving here, we passed yet more Fiery-necked Nightjars, eventually reaching the more open grasslands to the North of the reserve. Here we were driven right up to a huge male Lion with its pair of concubines, healthily demonstrating how more progeny may be seen in the reserve in the near future, and another pair nearby, which had been feeding on a recently killed Wildebeest. Some Natal Nightjars were also occasionally calling in this more open environment.

On the return, yet more Fiery-necked Nightjars were seen on the track, and perched on branches, and a few Spotted Thick-knees were also provoked into flight as we passed. By now, with the speed we were making, and the cooling air of the night, it had become quite cold in the open jeep, but we had had an excellent introduction to the wildlife of the open plains and mixed forest.

Morning game drive

(Day 2)

The early morning call to the room came at 5:20, leaving plenty of time for juice on the restaurant veranda before our morning safari. Of the five groups jumping into the Land Rovers, 3 were destined for a Rhino track on foot, which was the choice I plumped for. Sat at the rear of the jeep, the plan was for the ranger and tracker (perched on the bonnet at the front) to drive and look for fresh Rhino tracks. As we drove around the tracks through the reserve, not only did we not pick up Rhino tracks, which included one false alarm reported by another vehicle, but many of the birds were tantalisingly calling out of view. This included Red-fronted Tinkerbird, with its characteristic repeated bubbly barbet call being heard regularly, but unfortunately not seen. After about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour, the tracker found some fresh tracks which looked promising, which led into the surrounding forest. It was impressive that they could not only tell that they were Rhino tracks, but also that there were two animals, one of which was a sub adult. After receiving thorough instructions concerning how to proceed, we progressed snake like through the forest. We were warned of a possible two hour long trek in front of us, and so were amazed when we stumbled on a Rhino, fortunately with its back to us, and only about 30 metres distant, within the thick bush. This wasn't at all what I expected, having pictured a long march through open grassland and bushes to spot a Rhino in the distance. This was all the more exciting, yet quite unnerving, when such a large and potentially dangerous creature was only a short charge away from us. We feasted briefly on this apparently smaller sub adult for a short time, before carefully retracing our steps, and then attempting to circle around with the wind in the right direction for better and safer views. While the guides were deciding on the best strategy, a couple of Red-fronted Tinkerbirds started calling and showing well close by. After a nervy 20 minutes or so trying to circle around the Rhino, the guides decided it had become too risky, due to the thickening foliage, so we headed back to the Land Rover. More Rhino, and Lion, tracks were found on the way, as well as a close White-browed Scrub-Robin.



After a short break, Mike drove the Land Rover round to a spot further on next to a water hole, leaving us to walk the few hundred metres through the bush to it. There were some excellent birding opportunities here - a much longed for Batis came in the form of male Chinspot, while trying to get a better look at a Fork-tailed Drongo. After watching a dung beetle moving its prized meal, near to the water hole (which was surprisingly quiet), we were served coffee. A short look around and a little patience led to White-throated Robin-Chat. The bush was easily located by its constant calling, which included a mimicking of other birds, but finding it took some time, since it was skulking deep in the bush. Returning again to the group next to the water hole, Dusky Flycatcher was found in a tree previously occupied by a Red-eyed Dove and Glossy-Starling. To the rear of the water hole, on the muddy margins, a pair of Three-banded Plovers was located on the shoreline.

On the return to the lodge, Mike was very helpful in stopping to look at any interesting birds. Not only were these the obvious, such as White-backed Vultures, and a superb Bateleur straight over our heads, but we also saw small parties of passerines, including Rattling Cisticola, which was mainly identified on call, Southern Black Tit, Green Woodhoopoe, and plenty of Common Bulbuls.

Around the Forest Lodge

Back at the lodge, a female Collared Sunbird was seen in front of the restaurant deck – this was the only bird seen well from here around breakfast time. However, it did follow a pair of Bearded Scrub-Robins which I stalked in the undergrowth on approaching the restaurant. It was fairly quiet by now and almost midday, yet on the short walk from the restaurant to the accommodation suite, a small party of birds was seen, feeding through the trees. These included 2-3 Terrestrial Bulbuls, Puffback Shrike, Yellow-breasted Apalis, and female Blue-mantled Flycatcher. Despite the heat of the day now at its maximum, it certainly showed potential for further birding within the slightly cooler shade of the forest.



The afternoon was spent on a leisurely walk around the tracks that cross the grounds of the Forest Lodge, and on larger vehicular tracks just outside of the boundaries. The earlier location of the small party of passerines was now quiet, and I wondered if I had been lucky to stumble on the only party passing through. However, a little further on, in the corner where the Bearded Scrub-Robins had been found, a pair of Red-capped Robin-Chats had now replaced them, and this turned out to be a regular spot for them throughout the day. It was also at this point that the video camera decided to die – bad timing with not only posing Red-capped Robin-Chats, but also equally obliging Blue-mantled Flycatchers and Terrestrial Bulbuls. However, after returning the camera to the room, I ambled around carrying only binoculars and basic digital camera. Just outside of the Forest Lodge boundary were a few Square-tailed Drongos and Puffback Shrikes. On the other side of the road, under the watchful eye of a Vervet Monkey, a stunning little Green-backed Cameroptera was steadily hunting around in a single dense thicket. It came out and showed well at times, behaving a lot like a European Wren, in shape as well as behaviour. On the walk back past reception, I stumbled across a family of

Collared Sunbirds feeding fledged young. A couple of bulbuls popped into sight here, which proved to be Yellow-bellied Bulbuls. One was pristine with new growths in the tail feathers, the other a ragged affair, with parts of its tail feathers missing and barely off-cream breast.

River Cruise

The evening was spent on a small motor powered boat cruising along one of the nearby rivers. A one hour jeep ride got us there, and it was on this initial journey that we came across a mother and calf White Rhinoceros in the open grassland, surrounded by the open type of savannah that thoughts of Africa usually provoke. It allowed us to get quite close, and on approach about half a dozen Red-billed Oxpeckers could be detected on the back of one of the animals. A small party of Black Sawwings flew overhead. A water hole was passed a little further on, with the expected pair of Egyptian Geese rubbing feathers with a couple of African Pied Wagtails. Another, marsh-fringed, water hole held African Jacana and a small family of Little Grebes.



The boats included a bar along with the beautiful and rewarding views of the river, and we chugged our way slowly along, stopping off whenever something interesting was spotted. Amongst the birdlife was a perched and very confident Anhinga, joined by African Pied Wagtail. Perched overhead was Pied Kingfisher. Along the edges of the river were birds such as Purple Swamphe, Wattled Plover, and Striated Heron. One of the most impressive sights of the whole stay was towards the apex of the journey, where a large herd of Giraffe, accompanied by Zebra and Impala, suddenly started to run for some reason – their motion is like a dinosaur running through water. Hadedda Ibis were constantly overhead, but pride of place on the river was taken by the mammals, with 3 huge Hippos just sharing their snouts and profiles with us. They are reputed to leave the water to graze just after dusk.

The Flight of the Sea Eagle

(Day 3)

We had an extra 15 minutes sleep in this morning, with a wake up call at 5:45. This was in order to catch "The Flight of the Sea Eagle", which is small single propeller aeroplane, after being driven again in Land Rovers to the airstrip, followed by a half day at the beach. There was predictably plenty to see on the initial drive before the flight. Particularly impressive was a scattered yet reasonably sized herd of Giraffe, which insisted on taking their time in leaving the track in front of us, one towering over the jeep as we approached it. When they move, Giraffe are a supremely graceful animal. Small groups of Zebra were quite naturally in attendance. One or two new birds were also seen on this short trip, with a couple of Zitting Cisticolas in song flight and calling, and Malachite Kingfisher perched on a lone twig in the centre of the small water hole passed yesterday. The drive along the length of the airstrip was equally as good, with numerous birds flying up as we progressed. The Crowned Lapwings seen on the first day contained smaller numbers of Lesser Black-winged Plovers. Smaller birds included groups of Yellow-fronted Canaries – all that could be seen of these was the yellow rump, until we were about to board the aircraft, when 3-4 were perched on a bush alongside. Plenty of

pipits also here, which apparently were Bushveld Pipits – they looked very similar to Meadow Pipits.

The Flight of the Sea Eagle is an excellent experience – certainly much better than expected, being more than just another plane journey. We flew over the whole of the Phinda Reserve and surrounds for just over ¼ of an hour. While observing the varied habitats was interesting, spotting the larger mammals from not too great a height was even better. Probably most stunning, and surprising, were quite a few small groups of Rhinos, some with calves, and also about 12-15 pods of Hippos in the river and lake. The latter are huge animals even from the air, yet apparently very few are seen on the same flight at other times. Also from the air were one or two herds of Giraffe, plenty of Impala, Nyala, and scattered groups of Wildebeest.

Alongside the airstrip at the coast, which is basically just a field of grass where we had to avoid a wheelbarrow and several cattle on landing, were one or two White-necked Ravens. The short drive to the beach found ideal habitat for Fiscal Shrikes, with at least 4-5 birds perched in the open. We spent a few hours on the beach, which is generally fairly devoid of wildlife. The only birds of note were a constant passage of Grey-headed Gulls, most of which were in non-breeding plumage. Sanderling were also in small numbers along the shoreline, with up to 6 White-fronted Plovers, again all in non-breeding plumage.

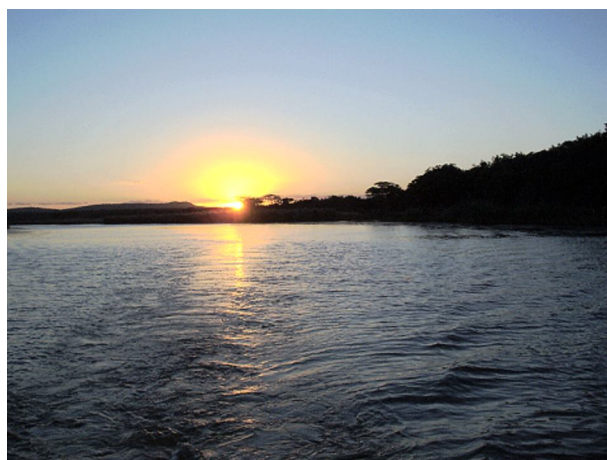


On the return journey in the minibus to Phinda, a Trumpeter Hornbill flew across the road a short distance from the beach, and as we approached the perimeter of the reserve, a Lilac-breasted Roller was perched on a telegraph pole, and flew off as we passed.

Evening Game Drive

Just before the evening game drive, we collected on the viewing deck for cold coffee and the most delicious carrot cake. While sat here, and after a Square-tailed Drongo had appeared in the distance, another flitting bird nearby proved to be a Black-collared Barbet, with stunning red throat showing well even at that distance. While watching it, the bird decided to fly towards us, and landed in a bush in the canopy over the viewing deck. Unfortunately, in the few minutes of its presence, leaves mainly hid it from view.

The evening sortie was mainly to look for some Cheetahs which had been seen earlier, and despite the fact that we didn't find any, we still had a good time with some of the common species already seen. This included a herd of Wildebeest, very close to us on the open plains, a male Impala with a harem coming to terms with a young pretender trying to muscle its way in, and young Nyala being breast fed by its mother. After dark, and drinks al fresco next to a small water hole, a Bush Baby was picked out using searchlights by the tracker. Few birds were seen during the drive, but the choice were a pair of Trumpeter Hornbills which landed 10-20 metres away from us in the forest, and Black-breasted Snake-Eagle seen briefly while viewing the Wildebeest.



Morning game drive*(Day 4)*

Another 5:30 wake up call, and this time when we stepped out of the accommodation, we found that it had been raining through the night. It looked as if this had been a short, heavy burst, and I wondered if this meant that the tracks would be any easier to find. For our comfort, that was to have been the last of the rain, and it became sunny and warm through the morning. This morning's quarry was Elephant, one of the few remaining animals that we hadn't seen. So we headed out of the camp 15 minutes early to the likely spots. The problem with Elephants is that, despite the size and numbers in the herds, they can be very mobile, and can get lost in the forest easily. This time of the morning, perhaps due to the rain, there was a lot of bird life evident, with numerous Yellow-bellied Bulbuls, Fork-tailed Drongos, and many others which were too briefly seen or distant to be identified. Yesterday's Black-collared Barbet at the lodge was added to with a pair passed in the open at the top of a tree, and a further one in flight a short time after. Another stunning bird seen all too briefly was Pygmy Kingfisher, which zipped across the front of the Land Rover, landed for mere seconds, and then departed. This was the second kingfisher of the morning – a Striped Kingfisher had been much more obliging. First of the mammals seen were a very close group of Giraffe and Zebra – we rounded a corner in the forest to be confronted by a huge male Giraffe feeding right at the centre of the track. It looked down at us totally unconcerned, and ambled slowly away, along with the remainder of the small herd.

Searching for Elephant also took us off track, looking for Leopard which had fresh tracks from separate male and female. This took us deep into the bush, which until recently hadn't been crossed by vehicles, and the route we took was even then barely marked. Bird parties here were superb, mainly consisting of Southern Black Tits, along with one or two different bulbuls, and I was lucky to pin down a Golden-tailed Woodpecker which landed on a nearby tree trunk. Our main quarry was very elusive, despite the impressive skills of Lucky our tracker and Mike, the ranger. They eluded us so



well that we went well over time, and even when we stopped for a coffee with a good chance of them appearing, nothing showed. When we moved off a hundred or so metres down the track, we found that they had crossed our own tracks only a short time before. The frustration of tracker and ranger was obvious, since professional pride dictated that they should find at least one Elephant – the fact that other groups had seen them earlier compounded this. We then sped off, past a hovering Black-breasted Snake-Eagle overhead, when we came nose to backside with a single bull Elephant, gently grazing the overhead bushes directly in front of us on the main track. Circumstances dictate that this is the way to find it – the last minutes of the drive, with a fantastic bull Elephant, which we were able to circle and watch from the front in the bush. Yet another unforgettable experience.

The last game was seen on the transfer from the lodge to the airstrip, along by now almost familiar tracks. Nyala and the odd Impala were by now becoming almost expected, but we did also see 3 Giraffe. Around the airstrip runway, there was surprisingly little bird life, and certainly not the Cheetah on a termite mound that had seen by one lucky group yesterday. However, there was one last treat before we boarded the plane. A large group of Marabou Storks was circling just over the trees on thermals. A Vulture picked out from these and to the right was an even bigger treat, because the white secondaries identified this bird as White-headed Vulture, which apparently only turns up at the reserve very occasionally – perhaps up to a dozen times a year.

SPECIES SEEN

Little Grebe

Tachybaptus ruficollis

A family of 2 adults and at least 2 well grown juveniles were on a small pond next to one of the tracks taken to the airstrip

Cormorant

Phalacrocorax carbo

2 groups of ~30 or so distant, white-chested subspecies were seen – one from the Flight of the Sea Eagle plane, perched on a promontory on the lake, the other group on a water hole from the Land Rover

Darter

Anhinga melanogaster

The first bird seen was ridiculously close to the boat on the cruise along the river. It was perched on a small collection of twigs jutting out of the water not far from the bank of the river, and wasn't too disturbed by our presence. 2 further birds were also seen – from the Flight of the Sea Eagle plane while passing over the marshes. Both were in flight



Grey Heron

Ardea cinerea

1 bird flying over the water hole near the airstrip on the initial transfer to the lodge, and 1 from the bus in Johannesburg

Goliath Heron

Ardea goliath

A single bird was picked out in the distance on the river cruise. The boat eventually passed the marshy edge where it was feeding quite closely. 2 further birds could be easily seen from the Flight of the Sea Eagle plane

Great Egret

Ardea alba

1 in a distant field from the river cruise

Cattle Egret

Bubulcus ibis

A large collection of birds was beginning a roost in the reeds alongside the river on the cruise. Many birds could also be seen from the Flight of the Sea Eagle plane

Striated Heron

Butorides striata

1 feeding on floating vegetation on the river cruise

Hamerkop

Scopus umbretta

Single birds seen on 2 days – 1 landed on the muddy edge of a large water hole, the other flew over the Land Rover while tracking elephant

Marabou Stork

Leptoptilos crumeniferus

One of the last species seen in Phinda. ~12 or so birds were slowly rising on the late morning thermals just the other side of the airstrip perimeter trees.

Hadada Ibis

Bostrychia hagedash

This was a very noisy and regularly seen bird. The early morning chorus was often dominated by them. Seen every day, including up to 5 in Johannesburg, the highest number was ~20

African Spoonbill

Platalea alba

The only bird seen was in the centre of the large water hole near to the airstrip on the transfer to the lodge on the first day

White-faced Whistling-Duck

Dendrocygna viduata

1 on the large water hole on the first day's transfer to the lodge

Egyptian Goose

Alopochen aegyptica

2 pairs were seen at separate water holes on different days, with a further pair on the lawns of the restaurant in Johannesburg

Spur-winged Goose

Plectropterus gambensis

Another bird which tended to keep to the water holes – 2 were seen on the first transfer day to the lodge, and ~8 were seen in total at 3 water holes on the following day

Yellow-billed Duck

Anas undulata

This was the only species to have been seen purely from the Flight of the Sea Eagle

plane– a group of 3 were flying when we flew low over one of the marshes

White-backed Vulture

Gyps africanus

This is the most commonly seen vulture at the reserve. 2 groups were seen circling using the thermals – 3 on the first day while transferring to the lodge, and a larger group of 8 following the rhino tracking of the second day

White-headed Vulture

Trigonoceps occipitalis

This was quite a surprising sighting and timed beautifully. The single bird seen was soaring over the airfield just as we were about to board for our departure from Phinda. It is a very infrequent visitor to the area (a handful each year), and was easily identified once the white secondaries were spotted

Black-breasted Snake-Eagle

Circaetus pectoralis

The first bird was briefly hunting low over the treetops while watching a herd of Wildebeest. The second was much closer – overhead and at times hovering while tracking Elephant

Brown Snake-Eagle

Circaetus cinereus

A single bird was perched at the top of a bush when the light was starting to subside on the evening of the first game drive

Bateleur

Terthopius ecaudatus

A single bird flew over the Land Rover as we left the water hole following the Rhino tracking

Lizard Buzzard

Kaupifalco monogrammicus

2 separate birds were flying away from the Land Rover on Friday

Crested Francolin

Francolinus sephaena

Although a few individuals were heard calling in the bush (identified by Mike), only was seen well, on the evening of the first game drive

Crested Guineafowl

Guttera pucherani

The most common species seen over the whole of the Southern Africa region is Helmeted, but Phinda hosts many more Crested, which generally tend to have a more restricted range. They are also seen regularly (every day, maximum ~15) and are very approachable in their quiet feeding groups of 8-12 individuals



Purple Swamphen

Porphyrio porphyrio

1 in the reeds from the river boat cruise

African Jacana

Actophilornis africanus

At least 2 birds (1 adult, 1 juvenile) were on the same small water hole passed on the tracks around the reserve on 3 consecutive days

Black-winged Stilt

Himantopus himantopus

2 at the large water hole near to the airstrip on the first day transfer

Spotted Thick-knee

Burhinus capensis

All 3 birds were seen after dark, picked up by the searchlight on the Land Rover, and all after being flushed. A pair were on the first evening game drive, and a single bird on the last evening game drive

Blacksmith Plover

Vanellus armatus

1 on the first day transfer to the lodge, and near to the restaurant in Johannesburg

Senegal (Lesser Black-winged) Lapwing

Vanellus lugubris

This is another restricted range species that can be seen relatively easily at Phinda. 6 birds were amongst the more numerous Crowned Lapwings on the airstrip, but they were only seen on one occasion, just before boarding for the Flight of the Sea Eagle

Crowned Lapwing

Vanellus coronatus

This species is much more widespread than the Senegal (Lesser Black-winged) Lapwing, and also more common on the reserve, as well as more vocal. Up to 20 were seen on one day, most of these being on the airstrip. 4 were also around the grounds of the restaurant in Johannesburg

Wattled Lapwing

Vanellus senegallus

The only individual seen was feeding on floating vegetation on the river cruise

Three-banded Plover*Charadrius tricollaris*

Following the Rhino tracking, we took a small walk through the bush to a water hole, where drinks were served. A pair of plover appeared feeding in the mud around the water hole just as we were about to leave the area

**White-fronted Plover***Charadrius marginatus*

Up to 6 winter plumaged birds were feeding on the sand at the beach

Grey-headed Gull*Larus cirrocephalus*

These were common at the beach, with a few birds showing the first (or last) signs of the grey head out of breeding plumage

Red-eyed Dove*Streptopelia semitorquata*

Quite common – ~6 being seen on each of the last 3 days

Emerald-spotted Wood-dove*Turtur chalcospilos*

These were regularly seen, with up to 10 on any one day, but the usual view of them from the Land Rover was from the rear after they had been flushed (bearing the characteristic rufous upper tail). A few birds were seen perched for longer periods

African Green-Pigeon*Treron calvus*

A flock of 8 birds was seen flying on the evening of the first game drive

Fiery-necked Nightjar*Caprimulgus pectoralis*

This species is very commonly heard after dark, particularly in the more open areas such as the grassy plains. It also has a liking for the tracks, so many were seen flying up from their resting places as we drove towards them – some were quite late in taking to the air. Other birds were also seen well while perched on bare branches. ~10 were seen on the first evening game drive, 1 on the second evening, and they were only heard on the third and last evening. Mike also pointed out the call of a Natal Nightjar, which is much less common here

Speckled Mousebird*Colius striatus*

1 flying past the Land Rover on the last morning game drive

Malachite Kingfisher*Alcedo cristata*

1 was perched on a grassy stalk in the centre of one of the small water holes

African Pygmy-Kingfisher*Ispidina picta*

An all too brief view of this tiny kingfisher was had as it flew in front of the Land Rover and landed for a second or two on the last morning game drive

Brown-hooded Kingfisher*Halcyon albiventris*

2 separate birds were perched and seen well on trees in the open bush

Striped Kingfisher*Halcyon chelicuti*

1 only from the Land Rover, perched in a tree on the last morning game drive

Pied Kingfisher*Ceryle rudis*

2 were along the river on the cruise

Little Bee-eater*Merops pusillus*

2 separate birds seen on different days while on game drives

Lilac-breasted Roller*Coracias caudatus*

A single bird was perched on a telegraph wire alongside the track when we re-entered the Phinda reserve following the beach visit

Green Woodhoopoe*Phoeniculus purpureus*

Small parties of half a dozen or so birds were seen on each of the last 3 days, usually flying noisily between bushes

Trumpeter Hornbill*Ceratogymna bucinator*

A pair of these was seen in flight briefly on the first evening game drive, and a second pair was flying over the road on the return from the beach. However, a third pair was seen much closer to and for longer while perched in nearby trees at the beginning of the last evening game drive, not far from the lodge

Red-fronted Tinkerbird*Pogoniulus pusillus*

After hearing one or two on the first morning drive, a pair was seen while stalking Rhino

on foot in the bush

Black-collared Barbet

Lybius torquatus

The characteristic pu-pu-pu song repeated over and over again was tantalisingly heard regularly. The species was eventually seen – from the viewing deck at Forest Lodge. The bird even treated us to bold views when perched above us briefly. A pair was seen the next day perched together on a nearby tree, with a 4th bird in flight on the Elephant trek

Golden-tailed Woodpecker

Campethera abingoni

A single bird obligingly landed in a clearing while looking for Leopard on the last morning. They are not as easy to distinguish from Cardinal Woodpecker as I expected – the size difference is not obvious – but the contrasting dark forehead and red crown was seen well

Black Sawwing

Psalidoprocne holomelas

2 groups of 4 birds were seen on the drive to the river cruise (the first while sitting near a pair of White Rhino), with a single bird on the last morning game drive

Bush(veld) Pipit

Anthus caffer

30 or so birds flying around the airstrip on the Saturday

Yellow-throated Longclaw

Macronyx croceus

Single bird perched at the top of a bush on the last evening game drive

African Pied Wagtail

Motacilla aguimp

A pair of birds were around the edges of a large water hole (seen from the Land Rover during the ride to the river cruise), and a further 4 birds were seen from the river boat

Common Bulbul

Pycnonotus barbatus

Very common throughout the bush on the game drives

Yellow-bellied Greenbul

Chlorocichla flaviventris

The first of a pair next to the reception of Forest Lodge was very poorly coloured, with parts of its tail feathers missing. Its colleague was much brighter. 2 birds were seen (separately) on both of the last 2 days while on game drives

Terrestrial Brownbul

Phyllastrephus terrestris

Only seen in the vicinity of Forest Lodge, where ~6 birds were in a mixed flock within the sand forest

Rattling Cisticola

Cisticola chiniana

4 together and calling while flying on front of us on the Rhino tracking, and a single bird calling in front of the restaurant at Forest Lodge

Croaking Cisticola

Cisticola natalensis

A single singing bird was pointed out by Mike on the initial transfer from the airstrip

Zitting Cisticola

Cisticola juncidis

2 birds seen and heard calling from the Land Rover while being driven to the river cruise

Yellow-breasted Apalis

Apalis flavida

3 were seen from the Land Rover on the morning of the Rhino tracking, two of which were together

Green-backed Camaroptera

Camaroptera brachyura

This species behaves very much like a Wren (*Troglodytes*), with tail cocked upwards and moving through dense bushes methodically and slowly. The olive green back also contrasts with the off white underparts, giving it a very smooth and fresh appearance. Both birds seen were at Forest Lodge – one in front of the restaurant, the other alongside one of the main Land Rover tracks

Pale Flycatcher

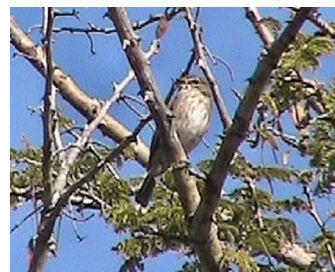
Bradornis pallidus

1 from the Land Rover on the first morning game drive. They are easier to separate from African Brown Flycatcher than the books would suggest, being less compact and lacking the brown tones of the latter

African Dusky Flycatcher

Muscicapa adusta

1 bird in the trees over our heads while having a drinks break at the water hole following the Rhino tracking



White-throated Robin-Chat*Cossypha humeralis*

The single bird seen was very secretive, but eventually seen well. While stopping for drinks following the Rhino tracking at the water hole, this bird was heard singing in the heart of a small dense thicket. It mimicked many other birds while hiding, but was eventually pinned down near to the ground. Obvious distinctive marks were the white stripe on the wing and supercilium, with rufous flanks

Red-capped Robin-Chat*Cossypha natalensis*

2 birds were together in a small section of the sand forest at Forest Lodge. They are a very distinctive bird, with blue-grey backs, orange face/body, and noticeable red-brown cap. They were not bothered by my presence, and were in the same small area for some time

Bearded Scrub-Robin*Cercotrichas quadrivirgata*

A single bird was joined by a second after being stationary for some time in the same spot as the Red-capped Robin-Chats above, although the former had gone before the Robin-Chats were seen. This is another distinctive bird of the collection of robins to be seen in the area, with very dapper looks

**Red-backed (White-browed) Scrub-Robin***Cercotrichas leucophrys*

The most obvious distinguishing mark on this species – the streaked sides – was well seen when the bird was located during the Rhino tracking on foot

Chin-spot Batis*Batis molitor*

A single male was seen on the short walk from the Rhino tracking to the water hole

African Crested (Blue-mantled) Flycatcher*Trochocercus cyanomelas*

~10 of these impressive forest dwelling flycatchers were in the sand forest at Forest Lodge. 2-3 were initially seen close to our own suite, with the majority of the birds, including juveniles, passing through the same area where the Red-capped Robin-Chats were camped out

Southern Black-Tit*Melaniparus niger*

Only 1 bird was seen on the first 3 days, in amongst a mixed bird party. However, at least 20 were seen on the last morning game drive – they seemed to be the predominant species within mixed flocks

Collared Sunbird*Hedydipna collaris*

First bird was a female on a bush in front of the restaurant at the Forest Lodge, a family group of 2 adults and 2 juveniles was around the sand forest later in the day, and a second family party was seen from the Land Rover on the last evening game drive

Common Fiscal*Lanius collaris*

5 seen perched in the open on the transfer from the coastal airstrip to the beach, and 1 on the last morning game drive

Black-backed Puffback*Dryoscopus cubla*

Seen regularly, with 2 pairs and a single bird around Forest Lodge on the Friday, and ~5 from the Land Rover on the last morning game drive

Square-tailed Drongo*Dicrurus ludwigii*

Commonly seen in the denser forest (including around our suite in Forest Lodge) on all days, with a maximum on any one day of ~6 birds

Fork-tailed Drongo*Dicrurus adsimilis*

This species tends to favour the more open areas of the bush than Square-tailed, and was seen regularly from the Land Rover on the last 3 days, with up to ~10 birds in a day

Pied Crow*Corvus albus*

1 from the transfer bus in Johannesburg

White-necked Raven*Corvus albicollis*

3 were seen at the opposite end of the beach airstrip while waiting for the transfer to the beach

Cape Glossy-Starling*Lamprotornis nitens*

2 around the water hole following the Rhino tracking – 1 was close to in the muddy edges, the other at the top of a tree on the opposite side of the water

**Red-billed Oxpecker***Buphagus erythrorhynchus*

6 were perched on the back of one of the two White Rhino's during the transfer to the river cruise

Forest Weaver*Ploceus bicolor*

A few of these birds were seen poorly and briefly – the only bird seen at all well was a single in the beach car park. They are apparently the only weaver species seen regularly in the sand forest

Yellow-fronted Canary*Serinus mozambicus*

Small groups of these were flying around the airstrip before the Flight of the Sea Eagle, but not seen well enough for positive identification. 3 birds were seen well perched on the top of a nearby bush before boarding for the flight

Total species = 84

MAMMAL SPECIES SEEN

Elephant*Loxodonta africana*

Our group had missed out on these until the last morning. We tracked a herd of ~40 animals for most of the morning, but they seemed intent on staying within a thick section of the bush. As we were leaving the area to return to the lodge for departure, large tracks of single bull crossed our own, and we came face to face with it a short way along the track

**White Rhinoceros***Ceratotherium simum*

Our first experience of these was almost face to face on the Rhino tracking on foot on the first morning. Later the same day, a mother and calf were chanced upon in the open while on the transfer to the river cruise. From the Flight of the Sea Eagle, quite a few groups of 2-3 animals could be clearly seen on the open plains

Hippopotamus*Hippopotamus amphibius*

3 almost totally submerged individuals were in the river during the river cruise. While on the Flight of the Sea Eagle, over a dozen groups of between 2-20 were seen in the rivers and lakes below. Apparently, this flight can fail to see any on occasion, depending on the rains and the hippo movements

Buffalo*Syncerus caffer*

The only ones seen were a handful at the rear of a large water hole on the initial transfer to the Forest Lodge from the airstrip on the first day

Plains Zebra*Equus burchellii*

The 3 near to the track on the first transfer were probably the only ones seen away from the company if Giraffe. Small groups were seen on 3-4 occasions thereafter



Giraffe

Giraffa camelopardalis

These are magnificent when seen in the wild, particularly when either close up or walking. 2 were seen from the aeroplane before the initial landing at Phinda. Small groups of up to 12 were seen throughout, but the most amazing spectacle was a small group running with zebra from the river cruise

Greater Kudu

Tragelaphus strepsiceros

Only 2 lone individuals were seen – one from the Flight of the Sea Eagle, and the other close to on the last morning game drive

Nyala

Tragelaphus angasii

This antelope has a relatively restricted range across the continent, but is very regularly seen within the reserve. The difference in size and colouration of the male and female takes some getting used to



Blue Wildebeest

Connochaetes taurinus

Judging by the small scattered herds as seen from the Flight of the Fish Eagle, these are quite common at Phinda. We had also seen distant scattered herds from the jeep, but most impressive was a herd of ~2 dozen animals close to in a clearing on the last morning

Impala

Aepyceros melampus

Another common antelope within the reserve, although not as regularly seen as Nyala. Some of the herds were of a dozen or more, mainly consisting of a male and his harem. We did see a male seeing off a young interloper close to when he was making a play for the resident females



Red Duiker

Cephalophus natalensis

This small deer was seen quite regularly over the reserve. Our first sighting was from the window of our suite at forest lodge as we were unpacking

Common Duiker

Sylvicapra grimmia

As its name suggests, this is the most common of the duikers seen over the continent, although only 3-4 were seen at Phinda, where the Red Duiker is more easily seen

Lion

Panthera leo

The only sightings by our group were of a male with 2 females, and another pair close to, on the first evening game drive. These form the northern party, and apparently there is also a southern group of Lions within the reserve

Leopard

Panthera pardus

Although fresh tracks were seen while tracking elephant on the last morning, the only individual was seen on the first evening, when we drove into the bush and eventually

pinned one down within the dense trees after dark. It was on the ground, and walked slowly into the bush after a short while

Warthog

Phacochoerus aethopicus

This was our first mammal when on the ground at the airstrip, when a family group were passed within minutes of travelling in the jeep. Small family groups were seen regularly, with 2 parents and 2 young close to at Forest Lodge



Vervet Monkey

Cercopithecus aethiops

A band of these was seen on the first evening, before the game drive, from the restaurant. They apparently come to the tables regularly to steal food. This was the best view we had of them, however, although small groups were seen across the reserve at irregular intervals

Samango Monkey

Cercopithecus mitis

A small group of these shy monkeys were in roadside trees on the ride from the airstrip to the beach, and were just outside the boundary of the beachside reserve

Thick-tailed Bushbaby

Otolemur crassicaudatus

One picked out by spotlight on the last evening game drive

Tree Squirrel

Paraxerus cepapi

Two seen – one in the sand forest of forest lodge, the second giving alarm calls (possibly to Leopard) on the last morning game drive

TOTAL SPECIES = 18