

Dear Birdos4Eric,

I'd been waiting for August to roll around. The asymptotic curve (see newsletters for February and May) had been playing havoc with my numbers, until I only saw ten new birds in July. But August was the trip to Southern Africa and things were gonna be different! A whole bunch of new birds—huge daily counts again. And best of all, I'd be traveling with friend and birding mentor Bob Lewis—yes, THAT Bob Lewis—which meant I might be able to beg some REAL photos for my newsletter, so this month will feature a special guest photographer (wish I could pull that trick off every month!)

But before I headed off to the Southern hemisphere, I had one last local trip planned—a GGAS pelagic trip with Alvaro Jaramillo. On a Sunday morning, we left the harbor at Pillar Point south of San Francisco at 7AM headed for the Farallon Islands, but we spent the first couple of hours cruising around the harbor's breakwater. Alvaro had done this trip the day before and was looking for some special birds.

The first one was sighted quickly—just ten minutes into the trip. It was a juvenile Harlequin Duck (a species I'd seen in Oregon a few months back, but this was my first sighting of a Harlequin in California.) The adults are one of the most beautiful North American ducks (it's a dead heat between the Harlequin and the Wood Duck), but this juvenile was decidedly plain looking. Joining this solo sailor were a variety of watery birds: a Surf Scoter, Common and Red-throated Loons, a Pigeon Guillemot, a few Common Murres, and Black Turnstones, and all three Cormorants: Double-crested, Brandt's, and Pelagic. And then there were the birds that lined the breakwater—Alvaro estimated that there were 1,000 Brown Pelicans on the rocks around us.



Lots and lots of Brown Pelicans (with a few Double-crested Cormorants thrown in on top)

Just outside the harbor, it became obvious that Alvaro was looking for something special—and he found it close into shore—the first of several Marbled Murrelets, a life bird for me. The

Marbled Murrelet has the distinction of being the last bird in North America whose nesting habits were unknown. It wasn't until 1974, when a tree climber found a chick in an old-growth redwood tree, that researchers figured out that these birds didn't nest on cliffs or in burrows or on rocks out at sea as had been suspected. Because these birds need coastal old growth forests—spruce, hemlock, Douglas-fir, and redwood—which have declined over the last century, their numbers have declined and they're currently listed as endangered. We ended up seeing seven individual birds—good to know that they are hanging in there.

It's eighteen miles to the Farallons and the crossing was pretty rough that day. But the boat ride was not without its rewards. We saw over a thousand Sooty Shearwaters and about 700 Common Murres. There were Pink-footed Shearwaters—a couple dozen—and some good fly-bys—a Rhinoceros Auklet, a Tufted Puffin, and a Peregrine Falcon (a very unexpected find this far out to sea!)

When we reached the main island of the Farallons, the number of birds we had seen at sea paled compared to the numbers on the island itself. The Farallons host the largest seabird colony in the continental U.S. south of Alaska, and the largest Western Gull colony in the world breeds there. Many of the gulls were already gone (Alvaro estimated that there were only 1,200 nesting still), but the Common Murres—the largest breeding colony in California—were still there in force; Alvaro listed the count as 10,000 birds. There weren't nearly as many nesting Tufted Puffins (our eBird count recorded 22) but these got most of the boat's attention. The birds were in breeding plumage. Cute doesn't begin to describe them.



Tufted Puffins



Black-footed Albatrosses

We also got some good looks at a Red-necked Phalarope, beautiful birds that look too slight to be toodling around on the open ocean. On the way over, we had had fleeting glimpses of Cassin's Auklets, but out at the island we got good looks at them—another life species for me. But for me the biggest highlight out at the island was the lone Northern Gannet that was perched high up on one of the cliffs. This was the same individual bird I had looked for a few miles north of Pillar Point Harbor with my pal Dawn back in June. It's a bird of the Atlantic, not Pacific, Ocean and so is truly a long way from home. Named Morris by his fans, he's been hanging out along our coast for five or six years now. It's a bird I had hoped to see on my East Coast trip but had missed there, so I was pleased to meet Morris.



Spot the Northern Gannet!

Before heading back to the harbor Alvaro and skipper Dennis Baxter decided to have a quick look at the Continental Shelf—just another mile or two beyond the main Farallon island. It's where they had seen Black-footed Albatrosses the day before, and where they proved to be this day, too. They are beautiful flyers but today they were content to bob in the swell, giving us close looks.

We were still a mile or two from the harbor when Alvaro and skipper Dennis spotted a huge flock of feeding Western Gulls slightly south of our heading. Sensing that something interesting was happening there, Dennis decided to check it out. As we approached, his sonar detected a huge shoal of anchovies—he estimated that it was about fifty yards by thirty yards, and went twenty yards deep. The gulls were hitting the fish on top and more than one hundred sea lions were knifing through the mass of anchovies. Six humpback whales seemed to be herding the fish into a compressed space, and several time they submerged simultaneously, then came up all at once with their mouths open and full of fish—a behavior known as “lunging.” Wow.

It had been a particularly good day for alcids, the northern hemisphere's equivalent of penguins—murrelets, murrelets, guillemots, auklets, and puffins. (The major difference between penguins and alcids is that, while all of them can fly underwater, only alcids can go airborne.) And the whales weren't bad either.

The following Sunday I found myself in Cape Town, birding with Dominic Rollinson, who was to be the GGAS Namibia/Botswana guide later in the month. Chris Lotz, the owner of Birding Ecotours, our travel partner on the upcoming birding trip, had very kindly set up my outing (thank you, Chris!) Our first stop was Sir Lowry's Pass in the Hottentot Holland mountains, about forty miles from Cape Town. The wind was blowing hard when we stepped out of the car, and within minutes the rain was falling. By this time we were in deep bushes a couple of hundred yards away and my raincoat was safe and warm in the car. Dom had heard the call of one of the Cape's most elusive birds, the

Victorin's Warbler, and there was no turning back now. After pushing through heavy bushes for another ten minutes, Dom caught a glimpse of one and told me where to look—I got a fleeting look as it settled on a branch for a moment and then did a deep dive back into the bushes and was gone. Heading back up to the path, Dom heard Cape Siskins overhead, and I caught a quick look at the day's second life bird. Our final target bird for this spot was the Striped Flufftail, secretive birds related to our rails. The rain let up—a good sign—but the bird didn't show.

Our next stop was Rooi-Els, a local hotspot on False Bay. Dom wanted to find me a Cape Rockjumper, one of the area's most iconic birds. After a short walk down a path, Dom heard one calling and we quickly located it in the rocks above us. I had great views of this bird, one I've tried to see in the past but always with no luck. Dom wasn't done yet, though. He's got great ears and heard a Red-headed Cisticola calling nearby—in a few seconds he was on the bird and I followed quickly. Another life bird. Then, just before heading back up the track, we decided to do a bit of sea-scanning with Dom's scope and he picked out a Shy Albatross that the strong winds had blown in towards the shore—a really unexpected find.

Next was the lesser known of the area's two penguin colonies. Most tourists who visit Cape Town make a stop at Boulders Beach to see the penguins there (and pay a hefty charge for the experience.) But across False Bay there's an equally large colony at Stony Point that's free. We headed there because I had told Dom about my big year and he wanted to add a South African (formerly Jackass) Penguin to my year list. Dom pulled into the parking lot, I stepped out of the car, focused my binoculars, and took in about 30-40 penguins. "Thanks, Dom!" I exclaimed, ready to get back in the car (I had told him that I knew this particular species well and didn't need a long visit with the penguins.) "Not so fast," he said, "check those out," and indicated the cormorant colony in the rocks out in front of us. Dom started ticking them off. "Cape." Tick. "Bank." Tick. "Great." Tick. "Crowned." "CROWNED?" It was the only South African cormorant species I hadn't seen. Dom increased the magnification in the scope and the crown rose up in front of me. Perhaps the most beautiful of the cormorants!

The next day Bob and Hanno Lewis arrived and, with my wife Susan, I dragged the newcomers off to Kirstenbosch Garden, one of the world's great botanical gardens, planted with natives from South Africa's several botanical kingdoms. But we weren't there for the flowers; we were there for the birds. (In Kirstenbosch Garden, though, it's hard to overlook the flowers, so we did occasionally notice them.)



Helmeted Guineafowl



Cape White-eye



Karoo Prinia



Cape Robin-chat

Bob thought that the best combination occurred when the birds would oblige us by perching on the flowers—and all the better if the flower was a protea or a strelitzia, which are the favorites of the sugarbirds and the sunbirds.



Cape Sugarbird
Photo by Bob Lewis



Southern Double-collared Sunbird
Photo by Bob Lewis

Can you have too many sugarbirds and sunbirds? I don't think so. Just to prove it, here's another look at the same pair of birds.



Cape Sugarbird
Photo by Bob Lewis



Southern Double-collared Sunbird
Photo by Bob Lewis

The next day found the four of us at Rondevlei, a nature reserve next to the sewage treatment plant on the outskirts of Cape Town (if you are not a birder, see the March newsletter for an explanation of the lure of the sewage treatment plant.) When we arrived, we found an open gate and went into the reserve, walking across a bridge to a little island on the lake that makes Rondevlei one of the top birding hotspots in the Western Cape. From the island we saw a wide range of waterbirds—several kinds of ducks and geese, grebes, and gallinules.

Reading one of the interpretive signboards, Susan learned that Cape Eland, the largest antelope in the world, were being re-introduced to the reserve. Leaving the reserve, we struck up a conversation about the eland with a man who lived nearby. He wondered first, whether we had seen them, and second, how we had gotten into the eland reserve. The actual entrance to the bird reserve was a short drive away, on the other side of the lake; someone had inadvertently left open the gate to the eland compound and we had wandered in. We were later told that the keepers hold shields when they release the eland out of their night paddocks into the reserve, since the eland had been hand-fed when young and now would sometimes get aggressive with the keepers for food. It's a good thing we hadn't met any eland.

Ten minutes later we found ourselves on the correct side of the lake. There we made use of the half-dozen hides and two observation towers to have a thorough look at the reserve. The avian variety at the reserve is astonishing. There are a number of things to like about birds in Southern Africa. One, of course, is color (think of those sunbirds!) Another thing is size (look at the African Swamp Hen below—it's got color and it's twice the size of our Purple Gallinules in California). Then there's the unfamiliarity factor (check out the Cape Grassbird). And my favorite—the weirdness factor (the mousebird is an excellent example of this trait—yes, that's it's real hair and red suede shoes).



African Swamp Hen
Photo by Bob Lewis



Cape Grassbird
Photo by Bob Lewis



White-backed Mousebird
Photo by Bob Lewis

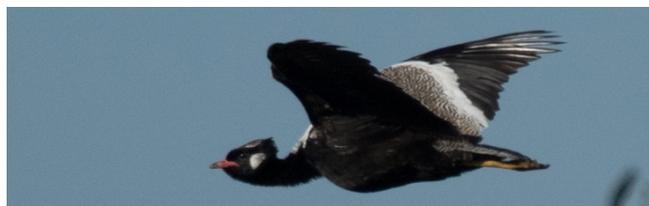
That evening Dom had offered to take us to look for Wood Owls. Bob, Hanno, and Susan were sensible and went to bed to sleep off the last effects of jet lag. I set out at about 8 PM with Dom and his friend Sean. One of the things you need to know about Cape Town is that it has one of the greatest gaps between rich and poor of any country in the world—much greater than that encountered in the U.S. The neighborhood we were visiting that night was Constantia, one of the wealthiest Cape Town suburbs. So when the three of us, dressed in dark clothing and carrying flashlights, stopped at the first location on Dom's list, it wasn't surprising that we set off a pack of watchdogs behind a ten-foot chain link fence that was topped with razor wire. Minutes later a

private security guard was shining a flashlight at us. He seemed happy, however, with Dom's explanation that we were looking for owls, especially when Dom played the owl recording for him. After about ten minutes the dogs stopped barking, but by then we had given up on the owl anyway. At the second stop we didn't attract dogs or security guards, but we saw no owls either.

At the third (and last) place, Dom heard an owl in the distance. Then another one nearer. We determined that it was down the hill from us; as we walked quickly down the road, we could hear its call more clearly. Soon we were standing under the tree where the owl was calling but was buried in the thick leaves overhead. Dom played the recording and the Wood owl flew onto a branch overhead. Great look! And we made it home without being arrested.

The next day the four of us left Cape Town on our long drive to Walvis Bay, Namibia, roughly equivalent to driving from Los Angeles to Seattle except that about 2/3 of the road is unpaved. I was at the wheel of a Toyota Fortuner, which we later learned did not have the 4-wheel drive we had requested. Leaving Cape Town, we headed north for West Coast National Park. Except for Hanno, we had all been to West Coast a couple of times previously, and Bob and I agreed it was a must stop on our way to the Cederberg Mountains where we would be spending three nights. Dom had given us a couple of tips for birds, with GPS coordinates, so we thought we'd stop and check these out.

First up was the Black Bustard. We had checked out an earlier set of GPS coordinates Dom had given us for a target bird in Cape Town and had struck out, so we laughed as we turned off the highway. It was a beautiful day, though, and we stopped about a mile up a dirt road and got out and walked. We saw birds but no bustard. Coming back down the hill, we were almost to the car when a bird flew overhead. It looked suspiciously like an illustration in a field guide I had been reading earlier that morning. Sure enough, the bustard settled in the field below us and we got good looks. Score one for Dom.



Black Bustard coming in for a landing

Photo by Bob Lewis

We decided his second GPS pin was also worth a look. This one was a little further off the main road, but the target bird was a Cloud Cisticola, a bird that has a very distinctive flight display. Not only would it be a life bird for both Bob and me, but the description in my *Newman's Birds of Southern Africa* would have sold us in any case:

In summer male rises high into the air, usually being invisible to the naked eye, and cruises about, uttering a wispy 'see-see-see-see-chick-chick-chick' repeated at two- or three-second intervals. When descending makes an almost vertical plunge, calling a rapid 'chick-chick-chick-chick....' Does *not* snap its wing when descending.

Well, you can see why we thought it worth investigating. This one was easier. We drove to the GPS pin and within a minute we saw the bird climbing high overhead. Was it invisible to the naked eye as Mr. Newman, a man whom I've respected for years, claims? I'm not sure—I was riveted, watching the performance through my binoculars. Dom had also mentioned that this was a good place to see Orange-throated Longclaw, and once we finished watching the cisticola's performance, Hanno noticed one of them skulking in the background. Score two and three for Dom.

August is the beginning of spring in this area, and when we stopped at the West Coast National Park entry gate we asked if the flowers were blooming. Yes, we were told—and the Postberg area which is closed ten months of the year was currently open so that people could see the bloom. Hmmm. We hadn't planned to go to that part of the park but a detour was in order.

We decided to give the wildflowers a shot and after making a quick stop at a bird hide on a pond, we headed towards the Postberg Peninsula. It turned out to be a wise decision. The carpets of wildflowers here were in full bloom (we did see birds here but they were overpowered by the flowers!) All I could hear was the sound of Susan's and Hanno's cameras clicking.



Wildflowers on the Postberg Peninsula (photos by Susan Palo)

We had planned to stay at some beautiful places on the way north, and first up was Bushmanskloof, a nature lodge in the remote Cederberg Mountains, where we found that our guide for our stay would be Zenobia van Dyk. In Cape Town Dom had been impressed when I said we'd be going birding with her since she's well known in the Western Cape for having found several first-time birds there. And, as we quickly discovered, not only was she a superb birder, but also a wonderfully charming person.

In an email to the lodge that I had sent a month before our visit, I explained Bob's project of wanting to photograph a member of every avian family worldwide and that one of his target species was the Fairy Flycatcher (it is actually the only bird in its family and, although Bob had seen it previously, he didn't have a photo of it.) Our guide Zenobia told us she had a good spot for it and mentioned it was also a good spot for Layard's Warbler. (This got me excited—I had

actually seen the Fairy Flycatcher on two previous trips to Bushmanskloof, but I had never seen the warbler.) Not only did Zenobia deliver the two species, but Bob got photographs of both.



Layard's Warbler
Photo by Bob Lewis



Fairy Flycatcher
Photo by Bob Lewis

Zenobia also made a point of showing us some of the reserve's other specialty birds, the larks, in particular, as well as chats and tits. One of these, the Cape Clapper Lark, reminded us of the Cloud Cisticola, since not only did it do a display flight, but also incorporated a song into the flight—AND a sound that isn't vocal; here's Mr. Newman again: "[M]ale displays by flying upwards, hovering briefly and clapping its wings, then dropping steeply and uttering a long, drawn-out 'fooooooeee.'" "

Zenobia delivered on three larks—the aforementioned Cape Clapper, the Red-capped, and the Large-billed—along with the Ant-eating Chat and the Ashy Tit (another new bird for me!) And lots of good looks at a fairly common (but very good-looking) local bird, the Bokmakierie.



Flying Cape Clapper Lark



Cape Clapper Lark at rest



Red-capped Lark



Large-billed Lark



Ant-eating Chat



Ashy Tit
(all photos by Bob Lewis)



Bokmakierie

But it wasn't just birds we were seeing at Bushmanskloof. Once again, we were treated to an amazing display of wildflowers, not only the carpets but also lots of bulbs. (If you want the names of the flowers, just contact Sandy Steinman and Celia Ronis—email addresses on request!)



Cape Mountain Zebra mowing the carpet



Assorted Cape wildflowers

We were entertained by the Cape Weavers around the lodge building their nests. And by the local residents like the Cape Cobra that Nicolas found out behind the lodge one morning.



Cape Weaver with nest



Nicolas at Bushmanskloof with Cape Cobra



Cape Cobra

This is a place that's not easy to leave, but they packed us a picnic lunch that lasted for days which helped.

From Bushmanskloof we headed north to Namibia. Different folks have different ideas about birding. When my wife's brother John Palo visited Namibia a couple of years ago, he thought that birding was a passive activity; he simply let the birds come to him as illustrated below.



Cape Sparrows on the barbie

We had a lot of traveling to do in Namibia and couldn't afford to make long stops on our driving days so we made sure to do some birding by car—and highway drives are particularly good for spotting raptors. Our “highway birds” included Rock Kestrel, Great Kestrel, Pale Chanting Goshawk, Booted Eagle, Secretary Bird, White-backed Vulture, and Lappet-faced Vulture.



Name that kestrel!! Which is the Rock Kestrel and which is the Greater Kestrel? (Answer at the end)
(Photos by Bob Lewis)

Our first stop in Namibia was along the Orange River, which forms the border with South Africa. Susan and Hanno thought it was particularly lovely staying by the riverside (and wonderfully cool in the mornings and the evening), and Bob and I thought it was a great opportunity for a new suite of birds. We saw our first bee-eaters of the trip here—the Swallowtail—such beautiful birds! And several of the common birds did slight transformations—Cape White-eyes became Orange River White-eyes, Cape Buntings became Cape Sparrows and Cape Bulbuls became Black-fronted Bulbuls. And we managed a difficult species—the African Reed Warbler—and one of the most charismatic—the African Hoopoe.



Orange River White-eye



Swallow-tailed Bee-eater



African Hoopoe

(all photos by Bob Lewis)

Next up was our longest drive of the trip—600 kilometers. I know, short by California standards. But try driving on gravel roads between San Francisco and Los Angeles and finding that the service station (labeled clearly on the national map—the one where you’d been planning to stop for the last 200 kilometers) has simply vanished without a trace. Not only is this not California anymore, it isn’t even Kansas. But late in the afternoon we pulled into mirage-like Little Kulala Lodge, a property situated near the Sossusvlei sand dunes, one of Namibia’s natural marvels.



Dune 45 at Sossusvlei (note the miniature people!)



Oryxes (AKA Gemsbok)
(Photo by Bob Lewis)

This area is part of the vast Namib desert, the world’s oldest. It’s a stark landscape, one that makes you work to see the birds—and the mammals, too (except for the Oryx.) A few birds aren’t too difficult—Rüppell’s Bustard and the Social Weaver (the latter build enormous communal houses out of straw). Last year when I was a bit further north in Namibia, I saw a creature called the Etendeka Short-eared Sengi (formerly known as an elephant-shrew; the name was changed because it’s related to neither). I wrote to my pal Jack Dumbacher at the California Academy of Science about it—turned out he was the discoverer of this animal. This year we saw a creature named the Dune Hairy-footed Gerbil living in the rocks outside the reception area at our lodge. None of the field guides know much about it. One says that the four species of Hairy-footed Gerbil are “probably nocturnal” but the one we saw seemed to be very much awake during the day. When I get back, I’ll ask my pal Jack about it. On to Walvis Bay and the Atlantic Coast.



Rüppell’s Bustard



Social Weaver
(all photos by Bob Lewis)



Dune Hairy-footed Gerbil

Editor's Note: *There is a break in the manuscript here. Eric in fact needed a break between what he insists on calling "the drive to the North" and what he's already calling "the drive to the East"—across northern Namibia into Botswana. Luckily he won't be driving on that one—Dominic Rollinson will be doing both the driving and the guiding for the upcoming GGAS trip across Namibia and Botswana. You'll hear all about it in his next newsletter. Stay tuned next month for that birding trip, which actually begins on August 25.*

How did August go? So well that as you can see from my editor's comment above, I was forced to cut it short. But I still got 208 birds this month—my count from one pelagic trip in Northern California and one trip to Southern Africa (Instead of attaching a complete list of birds this month, I'm just sending along the Southern Africa list.) And of the birds I saw this this month (so far!), 24 species were life birds for me. Nice!

Bird of the Month. Well, I'm in Africa so I should have something a little bit exotic and very colorful. How about a Scarlet-chested Sunbird? These birds are the old world equivalent of our new world hummingbirds. I'm not going to write much about this bird (my editor is glowering at me!) and, besides, a Bob Lewis photo is worth about 10,000 of my words!



Scarlet-chested Sunbird

(Photo by Bob Lewis)

I want to thank my friends Michael Smith and Randy Fertel for their generous donations to GGAS this past month. And to remind anyone who might be reading that it's never too late to make a donation in support of the great work of this organization—my website is <https://goldengateaudubon.z2systems.com/np/clients/goldengateaudubon/campaign.jsp?campaign=449&&test=true>.

Answer to the falcon quiz: the one on the left is the Rock Kestrel