

South Africa - Best of the Cape

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 - 19 September 2018



Shy Albatross



Standfontein sewage area (Cape Town)

Report and images courtesy of client David Ousey



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Tour participants: Bert Palthe (Leader) with four Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Wednesday 12th September

As a birdwatcher, there are always a couple of species that you would like to see in the world and mine was an albatross. After a bit of encouragement from my daughter and lots of searching the internet, I noticed a Naturetrek trip to South Africa that included a pelagic trip. The website "Cape Town Pelagics" trip reports always saw various albatross species (when they sailed) so I went ahead and booked the holiday.

Departing from Manchester Airport on the shuttle and connecting with my flight from Heathrow to Cape Town all went very well. The British Airways 747 made good time and the 11½ hour flight soon passed. I was met in the airport by Bert Palthe our tour leader and also met the rest of the tour party Richard, Ralph & John. We were soon heading through the Cape Town traffic and looking with awe at Table Mountain. Our first stop was Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens where we had lunch and had a good walk around. Lots of plants from all over the world thrive in these gardens. We saw lots of bird species including Hadedda Ibis, Egyptian Goose, Yellow-billed Duck, Jackal Buzzard, Black Sparrowhawk, Cape Francolin, Helmeted Guineafowl, Cape Turtle-Dove, Spotted Eagle-Owl (sitting on nest) Sombre Greenbul, Cape Robin-Chat, Karoo Prinia, Red-winged Starling, Cape Sugarbird, Malachite, Orange-breasted & Southern Double-collared Sunbirds, Cape White-eye and Cape Canary. An excellent start to the tour admiring the Proteas and other plants. On route to our hotel in Noordhoek we travelled along the beautiful, Chapman's Peak road looking out for Southern Right Whales. A long tiring day ended with a good meal.

Day 2

Thursday 13th September

We visited Kommetjie (via Scarborough) Cape Point, Oliphant's Bos, Buffel's Drift, Cape of Good Hope and Boulders Beach. My lifelong assumption that the Cape of Good Hope was the most southerly point of Africa was soon put right by Bert our tour leader, as in fact it is Cape Agulhas about 150 kms east of the Cape of Good Hope. Whilst we were having a geography lesson the term False Bay came up, so named by old sailors thinking it was Table Bay, so therefore thinking they were around the Cape! The rocky shoreline in Kommetjie held: - Swift Tern (200+) Sandwich & Common Terns, Black Oystercatcher, Kelp & Hartlaub's Gulls, White breasted & Cape Cormorants, Blacksmith Lapwing, Little Egret and Sacred & Hadedda Ibis.

Then it happened, we saw around 5 Cape Gannets and flying with them was my first Shy Albatross! It was a little distant but looked so much bigger than its companions. I was elated, to say the least! We managed to see our first Southern Right Whales really well from the top of Cape Point, after a nice walk up to the lookout area. It was a real "jaw dropping" experience to see these beautiful creatures along with their calves rolling, blowing and breaching. We had lunch outside the café, but it soon became apparent that we would have to keep our eyes on the Red-winged Starlings as it was also their lunchtime! A Cape Bunting showed really close and a hunting Booted Eagle performed really well as we enjoyed the Atlantic Ocean viewpoint. As we moved on to the Cape of Good Hope itself via various roads we saw Ostrich, Bank & Crowned Cormorants, African Sacred Ibis, Black Sparrowhawk, Rock Kestrel, Whimbrel, Speckled Mousebird, Rock Martin, Pied Crow, White necked Raven, Bar throated Apalis, Fiscal Flycatcher, Cape Wagtail, African Pipit, Common Fiscal, Yellow Bishop and Brimstone Canary. Lots of great birds seen in that area as well as Chacma Baboon (watch out for these), Bontebok, Rock Hyrax, Eland, Red Hartebeest, Small Grey Mongoose and Cape Mountain Zebra. Our last call was at Boulders

Beach to see the African Penguin colony which was an experience not to be missed, with lots of chicks, half-grown and full-grown juvenile penguins begging for food from their overworked parents. A great day's birding!

Day 3

Friday 14th September

We were up and away early this morning to beat the Cape Town traffic with Bert driving through the city and getting us on the road to the West Coast National Park. We called at a couple of small ponds to see plenty of ducks but could not locate the hoped for White backed Duck. We saw Little Grebe, Grey & Black headed Herons, Cape & Red billed Teal and Cape Shoveler. We headed along the mainly straight roads to the north seeing Black shouldered Kite, Black Sparrowhawk, Fiscal Flycatcher and Pied Starling. At a fuel and comfort stop we managed to see Southern Boubou, Yellow-billed Kite, House & Cape Sparrow, Sweet Waxbill and Yellow Canary.

We reached the huge West Coast National Park managing to avoid lots of Ostrich and headed for a hide at Abrahamskraal, overlooking a smallish waterhole. We had to share the hide with a White-throated Swallow that was trying to build its nest - close views indeed! Breakfast time followed in the hide and we saw Steppe Buzzard, Jackal Buzzard, African Purple Swamphen, Common Moorhen, Red-knobbed Coot, Red-faced Mousebird, Banded Martin, African Reed Warbler, Zitting Cisticola, Southern Masked Weaver, Southern Red Bishop, White-throated Canary. My favourite birds in this area were a couple of Black Harriers that seemed to be doing some form of a pair bonding flight. A couple of Southern Black Korhaan males were strutting their stuff and calling/singing - another nice experience. Late breakfast over, we headed for an area close to the sea, famous for the flowers and plant life (fynbos) and quite an array was laid out before us with orange and yellow flowers as far as the eye could see. The local Cattle Egrets all seemed to be eating scorpions, having to crush the nasty bits first - great to watch. By the coast Cape Gannet, Great White Pelican, Grey-winged Francolin, Crowned Lapwing, Speckled Pigeon, Red-eyed Dove and Bokmakierie were seen. As well as the birds, this would be quite a stunning site for any botanists to visit.

About this time Bert got a text from Cape Town Pelagics telling him that tomorrow's trip was going ahead - what a relief it was for us who were going on the trip! We headed for a picturesque restaurant at Geelbek and enjoyed a lovely meal whilst watching the local Cape Weavers tend to their nests. There is a really nice estuary around here with a hide on stilts, that you have to walk out to and we managed to see Greater & Lesser Flamingo, African Fish Eagle, Common Ringed Plover, Kittlitz's Plover, Grey Plover, Marsh Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Bar-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel, Pied Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Caspian Tern, African Hoopoe, Large-billed Lark and Pearl-breasted Swallow. New mammals seen included Striped Mouse, Vlei Rat, Steenbok, Wildebeest and Brandt's Whistling Rat. A long drive back to Noordhoek with Bert doing very well, then it was a quick change and another good meal after an excellent day in the field.

Day 4

Saturday 15th September

In truth this was the reason I had made this trip (to do the pelagic and see an albatross up close) and the day would not let us down. Richard, Bert and myself arrived at Simon's Town harbour at 6.45am, while the others all had a lie in and did some local birding until we returned. The small vessel "Pisces" was skippered by Neil and our pelagic leader was Vince Ward. We had our safety briefing and headed out of the harbour.

Trip Report - 15 September 2018 (Courtesy of Cape Town Pelagics)

Trip Highlights: Shy Albatross, Black-browed Albatross, Great Shearwater, Northern Giant Petrel, Soft-plumaged Petrel, Wilson's Storm Petrel, Parasitic Jaeger, Ocean Sunfish, Southern Right Whale, Humpback Whale, Dusky Dolphin

Our birding for the day started in the yacht basin of False Bay Yacht Club, with roosting Cape Cormorants, Kelp and Hartlaub's Gulls, Great Crested (Swift) Terns gathered on the boundary floats. Once out of the harbour, we headed south past the penguin colony at Boulders beach. We encountered several rafts of African Penguins swimming on the surface, heading out to feed.

The highlight within the bay, was a pod of four Southern Right Whales wallowing in the swallows near Miller's Point. We spent a good while enjoying them, before continuing down to Cape Point.

The waters off of "The Point" were very busy. Large shoals of small bait fish had attracted a large number of feeding seabirds, including a newly arrived Parasitic Jaeger, a Northern Giant Petrel, Great Crested (Swift) Terns, Cape Gannets, Cape and White-breasted Cormorants, large numbers of Sooty Shearwaters and White-chinned Petrels, and our first Shy Albatross of the day.

As we crossed the expanse of open ocean, towards the fishing grounds, we got several more great views of Shy Albatrosses, and our first few Black-browed Albatrosses and Wilson's Storm Petrels. The highlight for everyone on board was a pod of at least 600 Dusky Dolphins. As we followed them around, we glimpsed a large Ocean Sunfish, the largest of the bony fishes, swimming on the surface. As the dolphins were swimming towards the coast, we had to eventually turn back out and continue out to sea.

We spotted a trawler on the radar at 21 nautical miles, and headed to meet it. As we arrived, we were treated to the classic Cape pelagic spectacle of hundreds of albatrosses and several thousands of White-chinned Petrels. In amongst these masses of birds were smaller numbers of Cape (Pintado) Petrels, Sooty Shearwaters, Kelp Gulls, a single Great Shearwater, Wilson's Storm Petrels, Brown Skuas and Cape Gannets.

After enjoying this awesome sea birding experience for several hours, we started our return run. It was fairly quiet, except for a view of a Soft-plumaged Petrel, and several blowing and breaching Humpback Whales near the coast.

Once back in False Bay, we headed up to Partridge Point, with its breeding Bank and White-breasted Cormorants. The local granite outcrops were home to large numbers of roosting Cape, and a few Crowned Cormorants and African Oystercatchers. We also briefly stopped at the haul-out of Cape Fur Seals before finally heading back to port.

Pelagic species seen and approximate numbers:

Shy/White-capped Albatross - 500-600

Northern Giant Petrel – 3

Great Shearwater – 1

Cape (Pintado) Petrel - 75-100

Brown (Sub-Antarctic) Skua - 10-15

Black-browed Albatross - 300-400

Sooty Shearwater - common (coastal and pelagic)

White-chinned Petrel - 1500-2000

Wilson's Storm Petrel - 100-150

Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua) – 1

Coastal species:

African Penguin - 50-75 (at sea)	Cape Gannet - common (coastal); 75-100 (pelagic)
White-breasted Cormorant - 10-15 pairs (breeding)	Cape Cormorant - abundant
Crowned Cormorant – 5	Bank Cormorant - 15-20 pairs (breeding)
Kelp Gull - abundant (coastal & pelagic)	Hartlaub's Gull - 25-30
Great Crested Tern - 250-350	African (Black) Oystercatcher – 4

Marine mammals

Cape Fur Seal – Abundant	Southern Right Whale – 4
Humpback Whale – 2	Dusky Dolphin – 600
Oceanic Sunfish – 1	

Many thanks to all concerned for making this trip a truly unforgettable, memorable experience. We all adjourned to the local yacht club to find our land legs, have coffee and do a brief log of the birds seen. One small point about the trip was that a possible Salvin's Albatross had been showed to us all, but after consultation with the local seabird experts, and after seeing the pictures, it was deemed to be a grey headed Shy Albatross.

Bert, John & myself later had a walk along Jonkers Valley and managed to see Jackal Buzzard, Cape Rock Thrush, Cape Grassbird, Cape White Eye, Common Waxbill and Cape Siskin along with various sunbirds previously seen. It was then back to Noordhoek to get the smell of the sea washed off and to enjoy our meal after a truly remarkable days adventure!

Day 5

Sunday 16th September

Today we visited Muisenberg/ Standfontein Sewage Area, Baden Powell Drive and Rondevei (Hippo Marsh). It was to be a day of seeing lots of ducks, flamingoes and many other species in the quieter suburbs of coastal Cape Town. The main area was affectionately known as “Cape Town Sewage Works” but apart from a few areas that had their very own aroma, it was a really nice location. The backdrop of the surrounding mountains and the sunny conditions made you think you were in some kind of nature's paradise! Bert skilfully drove us around the dusty roads as we searched out the various birds in the area and there is even a hide to watch from. We managed to see the following: Great Crested Grebe, Black-necked Grebe (lots) Reed Cormorant, African Darter, Glossy & Hadedda Ibis, Mallard, Southern Pochard, Spur-winged Goose, Macoa Duck, African Marsh Harrier, Wood Sandpiper, Spotted & Water Thick Knees, Rock Dove, African Olive Pigeon, White-backed Mousebird, Brown-throated Martin, Fork-tailed Drongo, Olive Thrush, Lesser Swamp Warbler, Grey-backed Cisticola, Cape Longclaw and, a reminder of home, Common Chaffinch. A couple of Small Grey Mongoose were also noted, and overall it was a really nice place to birdwatch.

After some lunch we headed along Baden Powell Drive passing through a Cape/ Kelp Gull breeding colony, that was also very impressive (if you like gulls). Our final reserve was called Rondevei, also known as “Hippo Marsh” and later we found out why! Two Pied Kingfishers were waiting for us on the perimeter fence and this species is always a joy to see. The reserve consists of a large freshwater lake with three hides and a tall lookout platform, and here we observed Purple Heron, White backed Duck (two distant birds) African Fish Eagle, Three-banded Plover, Alpine Swift, and Malachite Kingfisher. At about 5-30pm the warden walked around the hides and told people that the reserve would be closing at 6pm prompt, as the Hippopotamus will be heading

onto the lake! That's a new reason to close up! As we were about to leave a Hippo started making the noises that only Hippos can, so we left after another great day's birding. At the hotel we had to pack our cases for the move to Hermanus in the morning.

Day 6

Monday 17th September

We made an early start from Noordhoek for the 2 hour / 130kms drive to Hermanus with Bert taking us on the tourist route along Simon's Town harbour road, Baden Powell Drive, Betty's Bay Road and eventually reaching Hermanus after calling at a few places on the way. The weather had turned to rain and was quite breezy, so we found out that the Great White Shark adventure that we all had booked onto had been cancelled, which was a bit sad for us, but it was very rough out there. The further east we went the lighter the rain became and it eventually stopped. We went in search of Cape Rockjumper at a nice seaside place named Rooi Els. Large cliffs dominated the area as we battled our way along a rough track to where Bert had seen Cape Rockjumper before. After a bit of searching we finally managed good views of this enigmatic, must-see species of bird which was truly beautiful to observe. It appeared that there were at least three Cape Rockjumpers together as they chased each other about, pausing occasionally to feed. Here and on the journey we also saw African Marsh Harrier, African Black Swift, African Hoopoe, and Cape Rock Thrush.

We called at the Helderberg Nature Reserve and had a really nice walk around the forest-like area, being careful to avoid the Leopards that are present! We managed to see Yellow-billed Kite, White-necked Raven, African Dusky Flycatcher, Cape Batis and Pin-tailed Whydah. At the Harold Porter Gardens we stopped for some food and to search for Victorin's Warbler, but the rain beat us away, although a Familiar Chat was a nice bird to watch whilst we enjoyed our meal. We headed over some hills inland from Hermanus and managed to locate a few Blue Cranes (South Africa's national bird), and what smart birds these are. We also saw Spur-winged Goose and Cape Crow. Mammals seen were Grey Rhebok, Springbok and Grey Squirrel. We finally arrived at one of the best places in the world to watch whales, Hermanus, which is very special as you can watch the Southern Right Whales from your bedroom. We managed a little time watching these leviathans of the sea as close as 100 metres from the rocky shore - what a great privilege. An evening meal at a curious little fish restaurant in an upturned boat finished the day off in an interesting fashion.

Day 7

Tuesday 18th September

Today we visited De Kelder, Birkenhead Lighthouse, Elim and then the dirt road to "The Black Oystercatcher" restaurant in Bredasdorp, birding hilly farmland, Uilenkraals and various water bodies on the way. The rain eventually cleared as we called at a few good places to watch the whales and Bert managed to put us all onto a Bryde's Whale. The whales upright dorsal fin was clearly seen as it swam along near the surface. Lots of Southern Right Whales were also seen in the area. At Birkenhead Lighthouse and the surrounding coastal area we saw masses of Cape Cormorant heading west to feed, African Sacred Ibis, African Marsh Harrier, Cape Francolin, a family party of Spotted Thick Knee, White-fronted & Kittlitz's Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Greenshank, Sanderling, Whimbrel, the regular gulls & terns, Sombre Greenbul and Bar-throated Apalis. Bert took us onto a dirt road searching for various larks etc., passing farms and huge fields of various types of crops. Certainly a few different types of birds were encountered namely Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, White-faced Ducks, Steppe Buzzard, Jackal Buzzard, Rock Kestrel, 18+ Blue Crane, 7+ Denham's Bustard, Three-banded Plover, White-rumped & Alpine Swift, White-backed Mousebird, Pied & Giant Kingfisher, Red-capped & Large-

billed Lark, Greater Striped Swallow, Cape Crow, White-necked Raven, Capped Wheatear, African Stonechat, Cape Wagtail, African Pipit, Southern Red & Yellow Bishop, Common Waxbill, Pin-tailed Whydah and Cape & Yellow Canary. We also had great sightings of several Denham's Bustards flying and walking around - very impressive birds.

At Uilenkraals, which is an estuary off Walker Bay, we saw lots of species, namely African Darter, Little & Cattle Egrets, African Sacred & Hadedda Ibis, African Spoonbill, Spur-winged Goose, various ducks, Crowned Lapwing, Grey Plover, Blacksmith Lapwing, Curlew Sandpiper, Common Whimbrel, Speckled Pigeon and Cape Turtle and Red-eyed Doves. It's a really nice area to watch the birds from the bridge over the water. The Black Oystercatcher restaurant had a nice fire going and we all had a good warm up during our afternoon meal. Mammals seen today were Water Mongoose, Grey Rhebok, Springbok, Steenbok and Burchell's Zebra. It had been another excellent day's birding with Bert showing us different habitats in this part of South Africa. As our tour was drawing to an end it was packing night, but not before a further look at the whales in the bay, an excellent meal and a couple of beers!

Day 8

Wednesday 19th September

Our last day started with a lovely breakfast as we watched the rain lash down! We had a couple of hours "free" time before we had to get our luggage on the minibus to return to Cape Town airport. Two of our party braved the elements and got saturated, which may not have been the best idea. Bert took the scenic drive towards Cape Town and we called at various places and managed to see, after the rain stopped, Cape Grassbirds at the side of the bus. We again tried for Victorin's Warbler without any joy and tried to see Verreaux's Eagles that are usually in the Rooi Els cliffs area, also without any luck. Bert managed to drop us all off at the airport in plenty of time to catch our return flight to London Heathrow. We all thanked him very much for his efforts in leading our tour and doing all the driving; thanks again Bert. The flight to London took 11½ hours of which I managed to sleep about five hours. We reached Heathrow at 6am and I caught my flight back to Manchester reaching home by 2pm after a great holiday!

Conclusions

Firstly, it was spring in South Africa when we visited, so the weather is not like you might expect it to be and also being in the Cape area it's often windy. We saw a little bit of rain on a couple of days but certainly not enough to spoil the experience. Take plenty of weather proof clothing with you - coats, hats, gloves etc especially if planning to go on any pelagic trips. South Africa in the Cape area is very clean & tidy, although there are shanty towns in between a few of the larger towns, but don't let this put you off. All the people we met were nice, friendly and helpful.

We managed to see 175 bird species and 22 mammal species on the trip, which according to Bert was a good effort from us all to see as many as we did. Our transport was very comfortable and as we were only five in number seeing everything was never a problem.

Thanks go to everyone at Naturetrek who made this tour an unforgettable experience.

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