

Bezhoek Lodge - Mpumalanga



Cycads - *Encephalartos middelburgensis*

After our return from the UK I was invited to take part in a team doing a survey of the birds of Bezuidenhoutshoek Farm near Middelburg in the Mpumalanga province of South Africa. Adolf and I left after work on the Friday and drove through to the farm, arriving at around 21:00 with the wind blowing which didn't bode well for a good list. Obviously it was dark when we arrived and birding was rather quiet, apart from a Spotted Eagle-Owl that we flushed from the roadside. I was introduced to the rest which comprised of Eric (part owner of the farm), Vic (the birder who has an excellent knowledge of the birds on the farm) and Dave (the photographer) who works with Adolf. Our sleeping quarters were luxurious to say the least and we each had our own rooms, which meant we could each snore to our hearts contents without bothering the others....although I woke up in the early hours thinking I had heard a leopard coughing outside. This was a blessing as I had once shared a much smaller house with some serious snorers whoc kept me awake most of the night..

It felt like I had just closed my eyes for 5 minutes when It was time to get up and go birding.. At 04:29, not normally a productive time for The Lazy Birder, the first bird I heard was Natal Spurfowl followed by Black and Red-chested Cuckoos, Woodland Kingfisher and a Rufous-cheeked nightjar calling close to the house. We bundled our cameras and selves into a Landcruiser game viewing vehicle and set off into the dawn. By 05:30 our list was already at 23 and counting. We stopped for a Black Cuckooshrike that was calling and heard a Woodpecker tapping in a nearby tree. As we watched and listened I became aware of a vaguely familiar call in the background which bugged me as I tried to

place it. Suddenly it dawned on me.....trogon!!! Narina Trogon, identified for the first time on this farm and pretty close to Gauteng too. The light was pretty bad as it was overcast so photograph opportunities were non-existent at this stage but we tried some shots anyway, just for the record...opening my photo account with a Violet-backed Starling female.



Violet-backed Starling - Female

One thing I was impressed with was that these guys knew how to bird, we stopped often and even had a great cooked breakfast out in the bush with Dave doing a brilliant job with his gas bottles and pans. Vic showed us his identification skills and was a great on his calls too. Eric did all the driving and I personally felt that he did an excellent job, switching off immediately after we had called a stop to studying some flitting bird or listen to calls. During breakfast I learned that these guys had been friends since 1977 after meeting during off-road/enduro motorcycling events and they had even done the tricky Roof-of-Africa event back then, when it was more difficult on the old bikes. Having been an off-road biker myself (although probably nowhere near as dedicated as these guys) I thought that it must be a natural progression to go from biking to birding...the camaraderie between them showed through and it turned out to be a really enjoyable day of birding..

So for what it is worth, here are the best of a really bad bunch of photographs..



Levillants (Striped) Cuckoo



Black Cuckoo



Lazy Cisticolas were common and very vociferous



Wailing Cisticola



African Quailfinch - biggest flocks I've ever seen...



Little Bee-eater



Denhams Bustard Flypast



Spike-heeled Lark - showing the spike heel for which he is named



Lesser Kestrel - female settling into the roost for the evening

And lastly so that the mammals also have a place here.....a slinky Cape Clawless Otter which we observed from a tall cliff overlooking the Olifants river which runs through the farm..



Cape Clawless Otter - see the webbed hind feet through the water?

Adolf and I had to leave on Saturday afternoon as I had other obligations to perform on the Sunday but I really hope to go back one day and do it all over again....and again.....and again....but will probably have to wait until next years bird count (if I'm lucky)