

## BIRDING WEEKEND REVIEW

My wife Debra and I are keen birders and overlanders and members of BirdLife South Africa. Always on the look-out for new weekend birding places and adventures from JHB we saw the Bezhoek Nature Reserve website ([bezhoek.co.za](http://bezhoek.co.za)) on the BirdLife South Africa website and saw that the reserve (a privately owned farm) was certified by BirdLife South Africa as a birder friendly establishment.

A quick e-mail using the Bezhoek website resulted in a reply from Sid the one owner and an arrangement to come out for the long weekend of 14-16 December 2019. The drive out to the reserve from JHB is about 180km and a very easy drive. We were met by Sid's business partner Eric and accommodated in a really nice farm house turned self-catering guest cottage set in a beautiful garden just down from a tented camp set on the edge of a forest under a small rock escarpment.

Being keen birders with Eric also being a keen birder and having a life-long friend Vic also out for the weekend with his grown-up daughter Demi, we were treated over the weekend to a number of drives in an open game drive vehicle that constituted both a grand tour of the reserve by Eric and between Vic and Eric, a birding weekend of note. We quickly learned from Eric that Vic has a Southern Africa life list above the 700 mark and it became equally quickly apparent that both Vic and Eric had built up an intimate knowledge over the years of the birdlife to be found in the numerous different vegetation and elevation regions of the reserve. We also learned that Eric is a Roof of Africa veteran and certainly knew how to handle the very comfortable land cruiser game drive vehicle on the sometimes very challenging tracks on the reserve. It really was great just meeting Sid and his wife and Eric and experiencing their passion and love for the nature reserve they have so painstakingly worked at building up.

What we thought would be an exciting birding weekend turned out not to be just that but also a tour of one of the most remarkable and grandiose areas of greater Southern Africa we have ever seen. Who knew? On this reserve and over a large surrounding area of other private farms, the Highveld comes to an end and the gradual descent towards the distant Lowveld region to the north begins. Except here the descent is dramatic due to the Olifants river and a number of large tributaries in this area having cut a seemingly never-ending and connected series of dramatic gorges and otherwise, curiously, very wide and majestic plain like valleys. The maze of gorges and valleys are so complex one could easily get lost in them. Not only do thick forests line the bottoms of the gorge cliffs but more than one cycad and aloe species grace many hill areas and in abundance.

While there, veld flowers including flowering bulbs were everywhere to be seen.

Then on one dramatic hill top area that formed part of one of the drives there is a very large maze of weathered balancing rock formations that is quite sensational. We personally have never seen anything quite like it on any of our overlanding travels.

But it does not end there. The reserve is very well stocked with general game. This becomes most apparent on one extraordinary and very large plain like valley that when seeing it you cannot resist giving the instant nickname, “the Serengeti plain”. On the edge of this plain with a great view is another larger self-catering cottage. Here on this plain the very rare experience in South Africa can be had of driving close to plains game “on the move” as they run, seemingly just for the fun of it or by instinct to remain fit in order to be able to out run predators. December gave us the added bonus of witnessing recently born babies everywhere.

There were many more interesting surprises and experiences over the weekend but to cover them all would extend this report to a bit of a book. Birding wise we pretty quickly raced past the 100 mark (visual sightings) and got a good number of specials including two lifers and some very nice photos. This is a serious birding destination – no question. When all is said and done, like all wonderful places one is motivated to write a trip report about – you have to experience it for yourself. Bezuidenhoutshoek Nature Reserve is one such place. Thank you Sid, Eric and Vic. We will be back next year as soon as we get a gap.

Weekend Trip Report December 2019 – First time at Bezuidenhoutshoek Nature Reserve – by William Coetzer