

## Dargle Birding

Written by Nicholas Theron - Regional Conservation Manager KwaZulu-Natal – Birdlife SA

Set in the rolling green hills of the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Midlands and overlooked by Inhlosane Mountain, the Dargle valley is a paradise for birders and is part of the Southern KZN Birding Route. The real attraction for birders is the array of habitats found here with forest, grassland and wetland's each supporting a host of birding delights. The working farms of the Valley lend an irresistible charm and country feel and these transformed habitats should also not be overlooked as the farmlands offer some good birding opportunities.

The mistbelt forests of the area are some of the best spots in the country to look for the endangered and enigmatic Cape Parrot. Approximately 1500 of these magnificent birds remain and are found along the eastern escarpment of South Africa from the Eastern Cape to KwaZulu-Natal with an isolated population in the Limpopo Province. These parrots are associated with mistbelt forests and the parrots' most important food source, the Yellowwood tree. Listen in the early mornings and late afternoons for the high pitched screeching of the parrots as they socialise in the forest canopy.

Other forest specials to look out for include Orange Ground Thrush, Narina Trogon, Grey Cuckooshrike, Bush Blackcap and Dark-backed Weaver. The Dark-backed Weaver in Afrikaans is known as the "Bos Musikant" which literally translated means "the forest musician" and describes the beautiful, sibilant song sung by the adult pair. Their calls echo through the forests in the early mornings.

It is also no surprise therefore, with all these rare and endangered species, that the Dargle Forests are recognised as part of the KwaZulu-Natal Mistbelt Forest Important Bird Area (IBA). An Important Bird Area is a designated site of conservation importance for birds, with this IBA being recognised for the presence of rare and endangered species such as the Cape Parrot, Crowned Eagle, Orange Ground Thrush and Bush Blackcap. A number of restricted range species, i.e. with a small distribution, also occur in this area, such as Chorister Robin-chat, Forest Canary, Barratt's Warbler and Forest Buzzard.

Patches of grassland are a great place to brush up on your LBJ (Little Brown Job) identification skills, the most notable of which are the cisticolas, a family of birds closely related to the warblers. Several species of these diminutive and drab looking birds are found in the area, including Croaking, Wailing, Lazy, Fan-tailed, Pale-crowned, Levillant's, Zitting and Wing-snapping. Time spent with cisticolas can be a fulfilling experience as you learn to notice each species has a very different call and a unique and often elaborate display.

Grassland birding is however not just about LBJs, and a number of striking widowbirds also flutter across the grasslands in their jet black, white and red colours, their long tails trailing behind them. If you are lucky you may even see a Denham's Bustard striding through the

grasslands and in fact all three of the crane species (Blue, Grey-crowned and Wattled) may be ticked in this area. Look out for them especially in old lands and fields where they can often be seen in harmony, alongside farmers and workers going about their daily business.

The Dargle valley is a great destination for birders and all people who love to experience the richness of nature. There are a number of trails through the forests, but as some of these are on private property one needs to obtain the necessary permissions from the landowners. A trip is most rewarding if you take a few days to experience the true charm of the Dargle. For more information on the Southern KZN Birding route and birder friendly establishments visit [www.birdingroutes.co.za](http://www.birdingroutes.co.za). For more information on Important Bird Areas and the conservation work BirdLife South Africa is doing go to [www.birdlife.org.za](http://www.birdlife.org.za).