

# REFLECTIONS

Birding in SANParks Limpopo parks

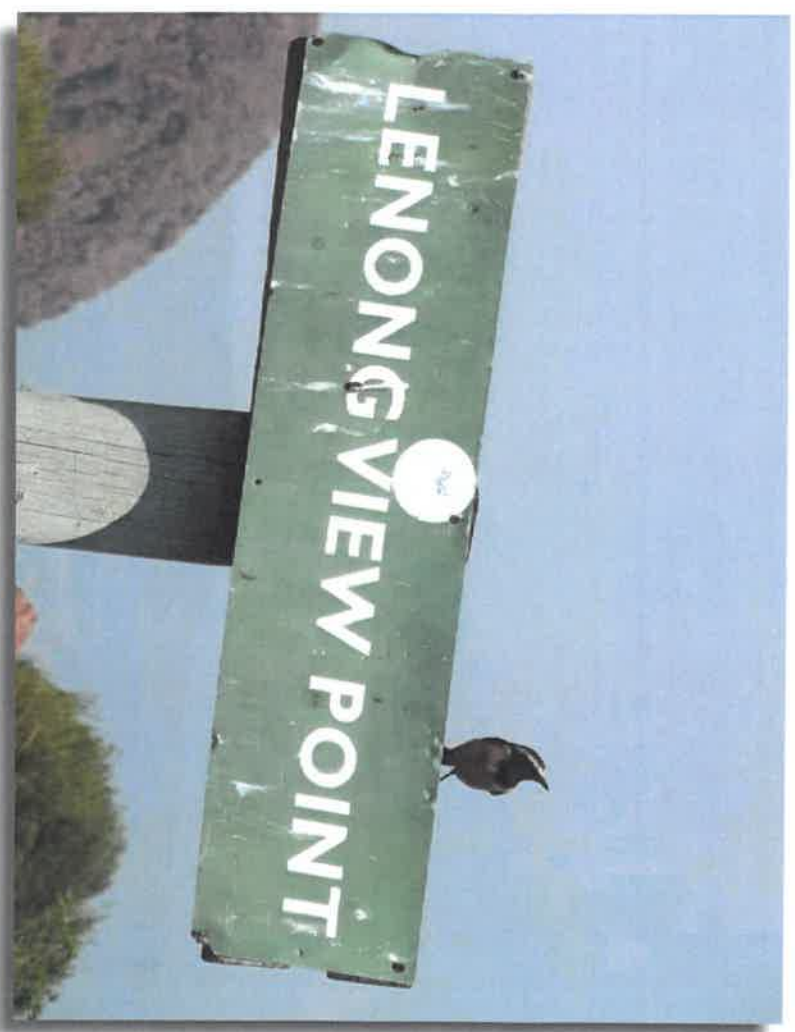
## On top of the Waterberg Marakele National Park

Chris Patton

*"I'm on the top of the world lookin' down on creation, and the only explanation I can find..."* So sang the Carpenters in their 1973 hit. But to enjoy such a top of the world experience, Limpopo residents need only travel to Marakele National Park and make the journey up the tar road to Lenong Lookout Point by the cluster of communication towers on top of the Kransberg massif in the Waterberg Mountain Range.

That there is a sedan accessible single track tar road up a mountain pass to this high altitude location at Lenong is thanks to the historic need to service the various towers that are both for military and Sentech (tele-vision/radio) communications, and I think Eskom and Telkom might have a presence there too. The route,

and the road up the mountainside is one Thomas Bain would have been proud of designing and for parts of the route the various engineering feats that navigate the treacherous incline and prevent rock-fall and landslide can be seen and admired. The drive is pretty hairy at times because it is a single lane track and there are many blind bends, but given the sheer drop on the side of the road, users will be travelling at a cautious speed... There are several pull over places to enable vehicles to pass each other, but also to facilitate breath-taking views of the valleys below. And it is these views that enable visitors to understand why these seemingly barren mountains are actually called the Waterberg, as the vleis and seepages on the valley floor are clearly visible.



Kransberg National Park was the original name for Marakele National Park, originally named after the highest peak in this part of the Waterberg Range, and Lenong (which is Setswana for vulture)

Lookout Point is one of my favourite places, and there are a number of reasons for this:

- The vista is constantly spectacular.
- There are a number of high altitude specials you should see that are almost incongruous with the Limpopo bushveld location.
- You can alight from your vehicle and move around safely in the vicinity of the towers

*Above At 2088 m a.s.l., Lenong peak is the highest point in this part of the Waterberg.*

within a Big 5 national park - the paved road provides an accessible and safe platform to move around - the rationale is that the dangerous wildlife doesn't venture up to these heights...

- What is it about high altitude birds that make them so tame and confiding? I don't know if it is something that has been studied in depth, but the world over birds on the top of mountains seem to have an ab-

normal inquisitiveness and will miraculously appear at close quarters and give quality views and pose for photos.

- Lenong is nearby one of the largest Cape Vulture colonies and these awesome critically endangered birds will be seen soaring, like giant juggernauts over your head. Their stealth as they glide silently and effortlessly is awesome to witness at such close quarters.

- In the immediate area around Lenong it is not just the birds that are of great interest... - the Mountain Cypress *Widdringtonia nodiflora*;

Silver Sugarbush  
*Protea roupelliae*;



Cape Vulture © Derek Engelbrecht

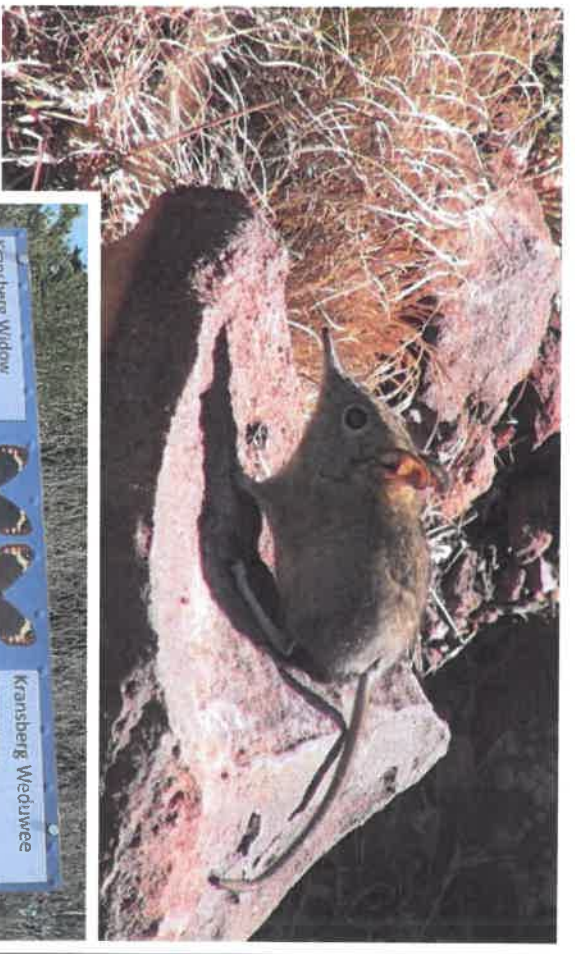
a type of butterfly known only from the upper slopes of the section of the Waterberg around the Kransberg peak.

But this is an article about the birds...

The Cape Vultures are not the only

**Sengis /**  
Rock Elephant Shrews and the Kransberg Widows *Dingana jervinae* are all some of the fantastic non-avian attractions visitors will see at Lenong. The sengis (in relation to their size supposedly the fastest mammals on earth) display the same curiosity as many of the high altitude birds (and I suspect have been fed by picnickers and become a little habituated), while the widows are

birds of prey that visitors to Lenong can expect to see. As soon as the road reaches the mountain top plateau, the skies can also be watched for spiralling Verreaux's Eagle and Jackal Buzzard, while Rock Kestrel will be seen at closer quarters, often in their characteristic hover.  
The road snakes its way towards the communication towers, and eventually splits, but it is the right hand option that goes past the towers that leads to the lookout. When you get to the spot where you park your vehicle it may seem



barren at first, but usually less than a minute the curious brigade will appear...

**Cape**  
Rock Thrush, Mocking Cliff Chat and Cape Bunting will vie for position as to who will be first to show, and all are very vocal. The former will take fascination with your car mirrors, while the latter two seem to delight in hopping underneath cars.

Then will come a real treat in the form of Buff-streaked Chats. I haven't been to Marakele for al-



Above The Kransberg Widow is known only from this part of the Waterberg

Top Inquisitive, or just hungry for tibbits, this Eastern Rock Sengi was very confiding.





*ABOVE Male Buff-streaked Chat.*



*LEFT One of the ringed Buff-streaked Chats photographed at the Lenong viewpoint in 2015.*

*OPPOSITE TOP The nasal squeaks of the Cape Bunting will signal one of the first sounds visitors to Lenong will be greeted with.*

*OPPOSITE MIDDLE LEFT Female Cape Rock Thrush showing a vanity and affection for car mirrors.*

*OPPOSITE MIDDLE RIGHT Male Mocking Cliff Chat.*

*OPPOSITE BOTTOM Female Mocking Cliff Chat.*



most five years, but when I was last there a couple of the chats had rings on their legs which I was told was part of a university research project (I think it was out of the University of the Witwatersrand). It would be interesting to know more about what was being investigated...



Another species that shows a great deal of inquisitiveness but is not as prone to appearing out in the open, preferring to remain in the cover of shrubbery is the Bar-throated Apalis. However, their strident pulsing call will undoubtedly be heard alongside the more melodious repertoire of the cliff chats and rock thrushes, and the nasal squeaks of the Cape Bunting.

The proteas mentioned in the introductory paragraphs have an avian importance for the species found up on the top of the Waterberg. They



Above Malachite Sunbird - another of the high altitude species at Marakele - seemingly incongruous with the bushveld location © Derek Engelbrecht

Right Gurney's Sugarbird © Derek Engelbrecht.

are a food source for both Malachite and Greater Double-collared Sunbird, and delightfully for the southern African endemic Gurney's Sugarbird. The sugarbirds and the Malachites are perhaps best located in the vegetation within the fenced off area that encloses the enormous communication towers - often perched in some of the Mountain Cypress.

A check on the distribution maps reflected by the SABAP2 website will show how isolated the occurrence of most of the Park's high altitude species are, in particular those of the sugarbirds, and so too the Buff-streaked Chats. The distribution of these two species in the eastern and northern parts of Limpopo Province, and in the northern Free State, Kwazulu-Natal and the Lesotho region are much better known, making their presence in western Limpopo a real local attraction.



Other specials to search for are not as demonstrative and obvious as the curious brigade... One such species is Striped Pipit, which can be frustrating to see out in the open, and have a habit of flying away from you and then scurrying along the paved road and into the cover of the upland grasslands. Another is the petite and vividly colourful Sweet Waxbill which likes long grass tangles with plenty of seeds for them to feed on.

Other high altitude species visitors to Lenong should anticipate seeing are Wailing and Lazy Cisticola, and Alpine and African Black Swift, with the cisticolas being mostly terrestrial, while the swifts are exclusively aerial.

Two species that haven't been recorded in the Park during SABAP2 (i.e. the last dozen years or so), but have historically been recorded from Lenong are the Cape Eagle-Owl

and the Sentinel Rock Thrush. The eagle-owls I am confident are there permanently, but their preference for remote cliffs and outcrops means they are probably inaccessible to most birders and atlasers to Marakele, who are required to be back in a rest camp, or outside the park gates at the time these owls will be active around Lenong. Sentinel Rock Thrush is a more curious situation... the nearest established populations are in the hills just south of Johannesburg, and east of Pretoria, but why they have not been recorded in recent years in the Magaliesberg of North West Province or elsewhere in the Waterberg suggests they are on the extremities of their range.

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Below A male Sweet Waxbill - a delightful attraction from the top of the Waterberg.

