

THE WONDERS OF ZULULAND

By Ryan Tippett

As a guide I have been privileged enough to have lived and worked in Zululand for several years now. I have been fortunate to have done trips to many of the region's most appealing locations and I feel the need to express my feelings for this, arguably the most diverse and scenic part of our country. I would like to mention some of the areas that will forever remain special to me.

Ntendeka Wilderness Area

Inland, near the western extremities of Zululand, where the climate is cooler, hidden amongst the rolling hills, lies the Ntendeka Wilderness area and Ngome Forest. This biological treasure trove is extensive and covers around 5000ha of grassland and forest with towering cliff faces.

The undulating grasslands support many rare and unusual wild flowers and are the only grasslands in Zululand frequented by the endangered Blue Swallow.

The Ngome forest receives a high rainfall and as a result there are a myriad small streams and rivers criss-crossing the forest floor. My first impression of the forest was one of sheer amazement. It almost seemed like I was in a fairy tale, with almost everything festooned with mosses, orchids and ferns. Anyone with even a passing interest in plants will be captivated by the place. It is floristically extremely rich and has an intense tropical feel. The forest is noted for its variety of orchids. Other fascinating plants include the Giant-leaved *Streptocarpus* (*Streptocarpus candidus*) and *Clivias* (*Clivia miniata*). These put up a spectacular display in season. There is also a large fern called *Didymochlaene truncatula*, which has fronds extending to two and a half meters in length. It can be seen close to the rocky streams and along the road leading into the forest. The forest also harbours many spectacular and uncommon trees.

There is a wealth of bird species, and on my last visit I was able to find the Orange Ground Thrush and Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon. Both of which are generally uncommon, furtive and hard to see. This is as good a place as any to find these special birds. Another incredible creature to be found there is the Emperor swallowtail (*Papilio ophidicephalus*), South Africa's largest butterfly species. It can be seen cruising around clearings, high in the canopy. One could be forgiven for thinking that its shadow was cast by a medium-sized bird!

False Bay Park

Another spot that I always have a lot of time for is False Bay Park. It is part of the Isimangaliso Wetland Park and is located on the North-western shores of Lake St. Lucia. This is a beautiful reserve that sadly receives fewer visitors these days, due to the persistently low water levels. The lake was always the main attraction here and it used to be a top fishing destination.

Despite all this, the reserve contains a dazzling array of interesting fauna and flora. Most of the reserve consists of sand forest, a rare and threatened forest type, found only on deep sands. It reaches its southern-most limit at False Bay. Sand Forest is known for containing a staggering variety of tree species. There are some truly magnificent trees in the park, none more so than the stately Lebombo Wattle (*Newtonia hildebrandtii*). Many of the larger specimens can be seen almost completely draped in epiphytic orchids.

The park is also an important refuge for South Africa's rarest small antelope, the Suni (*Neotragus moschatus*). A quiet walk on one of the trails should almost guarantee a sighting. The reserve is noted for its abundance of smaller mammals. Many of which occur in good numbers. With luck you may be able to spot - Red Squirrel, Samango Monkey, Honey Badger, Red Duiker, Banded Mongoose and Serval amongst others. The reserve also contains a healthy Leopard population. Tracks and other signs of their presence are often seen.

The birding is also top class and many special and desirable species are to be found. It is one of the best places to find elusive birds such as Narina Trogon, Southern Banded Snake Eagle, African Broad-bill and the endemic Neergard's Sunbird. When the lake levels are suitable there are often many hundreds of flamingos to be seen. The lake is also a reliable area for the threatened Saddle-billed Stork.

In recent years, it has come to light that the reserve harbours a small population of Plain-backed Sunbirds (*Anthreptes reichenowi*). In South Africa they are restricted to two small populations in the sand forests of False Bay and Tembe Elephant Park. They are not easy to find but with patience and knowledge of their call and habitat you stand a chance of seeing them.

Kosi Bay

Possibly the most diverse area of them all is Kosi Bay. This is a superb complex of four large, interconnected lakes and an estuary with a narrow mouth that opens to the sea. Part of the attraction is its remoteness. There is also a vibrant, tropical island feel that can be found nowhere else in South Africa.

There is a progressive salinity gradient throughout the lakes and the fourth lake consists of fresh water. The fourth lake is called 'Amanzimnyama', meaning black

water in Zulu. This lake has a dark tea colour to it due to decomposing vegetation. The other lakes have exceptionally clear water and are up to 30m deep in places. The whole area, unsurprisingly, is famous for its excellent fishing. Possibly the most sought after species being the mighty Giant Kingfish (*Caranx ignobilis*), always a fierce adversary on rod and reel. They can attain around 50kg in the lakes.

The estuary has some superb shallow water coral reefs where several hundred species of fish have been recorded, most of them fantastic and brightly coloured. The water visibility is brilliant and makes this a veritable paradise for the keen snorkeler. There are too many creatures to mention them all, but most snorkelers get so see a vast assortment of butterfly fish, angelfish, Lion fish, moray eels and marine turtles etc.

The lakes are separated from the Indian Ocean by high, forested dunes which descend onto the country's most pristine beaches, vital breeding grounds for Loggerhead and Leather-back Turtles. Hundreds of them return to these beaches to nest every year.

The inner, western shores are fringed by verdant forests and marshes. There is also a unique forest of Raphia Palms (*Raphia australis*). This is the habitat of rare birds like the Palmnut Vulture and Pel's Fishing Owl.

A lot of time is needed to fully explore the lakes. Many of the spots are hard to get to and some knowledge of the area is very useful. Whether you explore the system on foot, by boat, canoe or 4x4 the wonders of this area will not easily be forgotten.

Tembe Elephant Park

Tembe Elephant Park is an altogether different experience from the others. It is an expanse of dense sub-tropical woodland, sand forest and swamp that carries a distinct wilderness feel. Entrance to the park is kept to a daily limit and a four wheel drive vehicle is essential. This means that one often gets to drive around and not have to see another soul the entire day. The reserve lies adjacent to the Mozambique border and has a hot and humid climate.

The thing on most people's minds when they arrive at Tembe is the elephants. These herds are the last naturally occurring elephants in Kwazulu natal. They are also unusually large elephants and are amongst the biggest in the world. As if this wasn't enough, some of the older bulls are now also amongst the biggest tusked in Africa. To see one of these immense bull elephants is a truly wonderful experience. There are currently around 250 elephants in the park and the chances of seeing them are high. You need a lot of luck, however to lay eyes on one of the giant bulls. They are usually seen alone and are often out of sight in the wilderness areas of the park.

Tembe is not only notable for its elephants; it is in fact home to all of the big five. There is a healthy lion population and they are often seen. The buffalo herds tend to confine themselves to the swamps that run up the eastern flank of the reserve. They are not fond of the dense, dry woodlands and forests that span most of the reserve due to the paucity of water. There are good numbers of both black and white rhinos and Tembe is a key reserve in their continued fight for survival. The often shy black rhinos are seen regularly and they seldom fail to entertain with their quick tempers and nervous temperament. The last of the big five is the one you're the least likely to see, the leopard. They are around but remain elusive. The dense bush in the reserve does not help in spotting them either.

I always associate Tembe with the chance to see something different, rare or unusual. On previous visits I've seen Side-striped Jackal, Tonga Red Squirrel, Selous' Mongoose, Striped Polecat and African Civet. Other mammals that are often seen include Nyala, Kudu, Giraffe, Samango Monkey, Blue Wildebeest, Water Buck and Bushbuck amongst others.

Tembe's sub-tropical bushveld is also home to several bird species close to the southern limits of their distribution. These include Retz's Helmet Shrike, Barred Owlet, Plain-backed Sunbird, Woodward's Batis and Bat Hawk. The birding is very rewarding and the majority of the regions 'specials' can be seen here.

The opportunity to view game amongst patches of forest containing huge trees and colossal termite mounds, gives you an entirely different perspective of the bush, indeed one you won't find anywhere else in South Africa.