



WORDS & PICTURES
 MARK D ANDERSON

Down the garden path

You don't have to leave the city to get in some decent birdwatching, writes **Mark D Anderson**, who visited the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden.



Within Gauteng's urban sprawl lies a little gem, the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden, where the duet of the southern boubou takes over from the city's usual background racket of hooting taxis and wailing sirens.

Here you can while away the hours, watching the comings and

goings of the garden's resident pair of Verreaux's (black) eagles near the Witpoortjie Waterfall (left).

There are also many other birds you wouldn't normally associate with the city. Some are easy to find, such as the African wattled lapwings, which forage in the open. But others

require patience. Walk slowly and quietly, listen and search the vegetation.

The garden checklist boasts 220 bird species, but 50 would be an easy target in a few hours – not bad for a small patch on the Highveld.



1 Spring, summer, autumn, winter...

Each season has something special to offer in this garden.

Spring heralds the arrival of migrants, including a plethora of cuckoos, such as red-chested, black, diderick and Klaas's cuckoo. Red-chested cuckoos can often be seen feeding on caterpillars on the wild peach trees.

Summer is breeding time. Search the trees to find the cup-shaped nest of the beautiful, chestnut-backed African paradise-flycatcher.

In autumn, the two Verreaux's eagles are hard at work preparing their nest.

Winter sees the aloes in flower, attracting a number of nectar-feeders, including greater double-collared and **white-bellied sunbirds** (like the one above).



2 Visit the Sasol Dam and Wetland

A boardwalk and bird hide offer excellent opportunities to see waterbirds such as reed cormorants and giant, half-collared and **piet kingfishers** (above).

From the boardwalk, you can watch southern red bishop, southern masked weaver and Cape weaver males frantically trying to lure females into their territories. Just watching them calling, flapping their wings, flying to and fro, and rearranging their nest material is exhausting. It is hard work being a weaver! *(Just try building a house in South Africa! – Ed.)*



3 Spot the eagles

The pair of **Verreaux's eagles** is undoubtedly the garden's prime attraction. If you stand below the cliff, the nest is to the left of the Witpoortjie Waterfall.

Verreaux's eagles eat dassies (a pair and their offspring can tuck into more than 400 a year) as well as the odd guineafowl, rock rabbit and chicken.

The Black Eagle Monitoring Project does impressive work watching over this pair, educating the public and addressing the developmental threats along the Roodekrans ridge.

Also keep an eye out for peregrine falcons on the cliffs as well as African black swifts which nest in the same vicinity.



4 Garden specials

Keep your eyes peeled when you walk along the garden's network of surfaced and unsurfaced paths, which allow access to a variety of habitats, including riverine forest and succulent gardens.

The grey-headed bush-shrike, (also called the *spookvoël* because of its haunting call), is fairly common. It was first recorded in the garden in 2003.

There is a good population of Kurrichane thrushes, a species that is uncommon in the greater Johannesburg area.

The presence of the small **bar-throated apalis** (above) is usually given away by its characteristic "pillip-pillip-pillip" call. This is also the nearest place to Johannesburg where the black cuckooshrike is regularly seen. Also look out for the brown-crowned tchagra, golden-tailed woodpecker and even the lesser honeyguide. 

THE GARDEN IN BRIEF

Where is it? The garden is at the end of Malcolm Road in Poortview, Roodepoort.

When is it open? Daily including Sundays and public holidays from 8 am to 5 pm. The exit closes at 6 pm.

What else is there to do? The Eagle's Fare restaurant is open daily. You can buy indigenous plants at

the Random Harvest Indigenous Plant Nursery, and books and gifts at the Isitiya Gift and Book Shop.

Contacts: • Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden ☎ 011 958 1750

• South African National Biodiversity Institute

🌐 www.sanbi.org

• Black Eagle Project Roodekrans

🌐 www.blackeagles.co.za