



TOP SPOT

ORANGE RIVER MOUTH

WORDS & PICTURES
MARK D ANDERSON

Far from deserted

To get to the mouth of the Orange River takes a bit of effort, but it's certainly worth it for the keen birder, writes Mark D Anderson.

Check out these six spots when you're in the area

The Orange River mouth wetland is not the most accessible of destinations, but many people make the journey to the Namaqualand area to see the spring flowers or to visit the mountain desert of the |Ai-|ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park during the cooler winter months.

The mouth is becoming a popular eco-tourism destination thanks to improved road infrastructure, good accommodation and access to previously closed mining towns.

The relative abundance of fresh water in a coastal environment with very low rainfall attracts a variety of birds – a remarkable 270 species. At one time, more than 20 000 individual birds were recorded here, but recent surveys indicate that number has dwindled to an average of 6 500 waterbirds – the reasons for the decline are not fully understood.

The mouth has also changed a lot since the early explorers first visited. Mining, dams and agriculture have taken their toll and now there is less water in the river and the flow is no longer seasonal.

Vagrant birds recorded in the area include bar-tailed godwit, red knot, lesser sand plover, Caspian plover and Franklin's gull. In recent years several species have also expanded their ranges to the Orange River mouth, including the glossy ibis, hadeda ibis and red-billed quelea.

Among the highlights for visitors are the "specials", such as the black-necked grebe, chestnut-banded plover, peregrine falcon, Damara tern, Barlow's lark and the Karoo eremomela.



1 In general, **raptors** are very common in the area, and several dozen species (**southern pale chanting goshawks**, greater kestrels and lanner falcons in particular) can be seen perching on the telephone poles between **Port Nolloth and Alexander Bay**, especially when the *malmokkie* (fog) sets in.

Some of the jackal buzzards have very pale underparts, leading some

birders to identify them as augur buzzards.

Along the river, peregrine falcon and black-chested snake-eagle have been spotted, and a pair of secretary-birds nests near Hohenfels.

How do I get there? Hohenfels is the Oranjemund campsite, located under an extensive stand of blue-gum trees next to the river. It is about 10 km east of the Namibian border post.



2 There is a small population of **rosy-faced lovebirds in Oranjemund** – people have even reported seeing them entering the pylon cross-arms at the Namibian border post, where they presumably breed.

Although Alexander Bay is open to the public, one needs security clearance to visit Oranjemund. The Pink Pan, Cormorant Yacht Club and river mouth area in Oranje-

mund are worth a visit.

For security clearance. Call Fanie Smit ☎ 00263 81 127 5837, Tom Parkhill ☎ 00264 81 262 8982 or fax ☎ 00264 632 32874. Fanie and Tom are both managers of accommodation establishments in Oranjemund, and they will assist with security clearance applications for their guests, but only if contacted at least four weeks before your visit.



3 The **Orange River** itself has its own suite of birds, including several species that breed in the banks along the river, such as malachite, pied and giant kingfisher, swallow-tailed bee-eater and brown-throated martin. Black-crowned night-heron is not uncommon, and a white-backed night-heron was recorded in August 1988.

Several pairs of **African fish-eagles** nest along the Orange River,

and **osprey** is recorded during both summer and winter, especially **upstream of the bridge**, where large numbers of Egyptian geese, spur-winged geese, yellow-billed ducks and red-billed teals can also be seen loafing on the river bank and islands.

How do I get there? The river is accessible at various places, including Pachtvlei and Brandkaros, both located off the Alexander Bay/Sendelingsdrift road.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

How do I get there? The best access to the mouth is by tar road from Steinkopf via Port Nolloth.

When is the best time for birding? Early-morning fog can make it difficult to see anything, and it can be very windy in the late-afternoon. Be prepared for all weather conditions – the south-westerly wind in summer can be quite cold.

Anything to watch out for? There's a surprisingly large number of puff-adders in the area, so watch where you step.

What about guided tours?

Tours to the mouth, mining area and rehabilitation project can be arranged through Helené Mostert

at the Alexander Bay Museum ☎ 027 831 1330 x2396; ☎ 084 513 0871; ✉ museum@alexkor.co.za.

Where can I stay? Accommodation includes the Alexander Bay guest-houses ☎ 027 831 1855, Diggers' Camp guesthouse ☎ 073 523 7652, Brandkaros rondavels and campsites ☎ 027 831 1856 and Pachtvlei campsite ☎ 084 513 0871.

Read more. *Birds of the Orange River Estuary and Surrounding Area* by Mark D Anderson and *Essential Birding: Western South Africa* by C Cohen and C Spottiswoode. Both books are available from ☎ 021 551 4248; ☎ 021 552 9504 (fax); ✉ books@netbooks.co.za.



4 The large pan/lagoon in the **salt marsh** and the shallow wetland area **at the southern side of the mouth** support large numbers of waders, especially curlew sandpiper, little stint, and several species of plovers (such as chestnut-banded plover), and waterfowl (such as Cape teal and Cape shoveler). Impressive numbers of lesser flamingos as well as black-winged stilt and pied avocet are usually present.

How do I get there? Follow the signs to the "riviermonding", and the large pan will be clearly visible from the parking area at the beach.

5 During the past few years many birders have travelled to the area to see the **Barlow's lark**, a recently described species. The Karoo lark and the Barlow's lark's ranges meet at Port Nolloth, and hybrids are not uncommon. In the more arid, open habitats near Alexander Bay and into



Namibia, one is guaranteed to find pure Barlow's larks.

Most terrestrial birds, however, including the Barlow's lark, can be seen from the side of the **Port Nolloth/Alexander Bay road** and the **Alexander Bay/Sendelingsdrift road**. If you venture off the main roads, keep to the existing tracks and keep out of mining areas.



6 The **Alexander Bay oxidation ponds** support a number of interesting **waterbirds**, including African purple swampphen, occasionally fulvous duck, a small number of maccoa duck, marsh and wood sandpiper, and purple heron.

In the vegetation around the oxidation ponds you're likely to spot dusky sunbird, black-headed canary and grey-backed cisticola.

How do I get there? The oxidation ponds are just off Oranjeveg and a few hundred metres south of the shopping centre. ☑

- COUNTING CARS.** Southern pale chanting goshawks are a dime-a-dozen.
 - DIE BOKKE.** Gemboks graze freely in Oranjemund, but you need security clearance to visit.
 - WATERWAY.** You might spot a red-billed teal on the Orange River.
 - MISS LEGS.** A black-winged stilt hangs out in the salt marsh.
 - LARKING ABOUT.** You'll have to keep your eyes peeled for a Barlow's lark, but the bird on this sign should be easy enough to spot.
 - POND SEATS.** Look for warblers and cisticolas in the vegetation around the oxidation ponds.
- WINTER VISITORS** (left). The number of common tern has declined, but no one's sure why.

