



TOP SPOT

SANI PASS

WORDS & PICTURES
MARK D ANDERSON

Birds of the Berg

If you are short of a few “lifers”, plan that trip up Sani Pass now because you’re bound to see something new, writes Mark D Anderson.

A drive up Sani Pass and 30 km into Lesotho offers some of the finest mountain birding in southern Africa. You set off from Himeville in KwaZulu-Natal, travel along the valley incised by the Mkhomazana River and, for the last section, negotiate 17 sharp bends, climbing 875 m in just 8 km to the top of the Drakensberg.

The view alone is worth the drive, but an added bonus is the chance to spot some of the 160 bird species and many Drakensberg “specials” (indicated in bold).

1 Birds in the bush

About 4.2 km past the entrance to the Sani Pass Hotel, look out for the *ouhout* thickets next to the Mkhomazana River, especially at the bridge, where you might spot **bush blackcap** and **Barratt’s warbler**.

2 Grassland finds

From where the road begins to climb, stop every now and then in the protea grassland to look for **ground woodpecker**, **Gurney’s sugarbird**, malachite sunbird and the **buff-streaked chat**. Listen for

the Cape grassbird and red-winged francolin (you are more likely to hear them than see them).

3 No-man’s land


In the rugged terrain between the border posts, you might see the beautiful **Drakensberg rock-jumper**. This is also where the ranges of the Karoo and Drakensberg prinias meet.

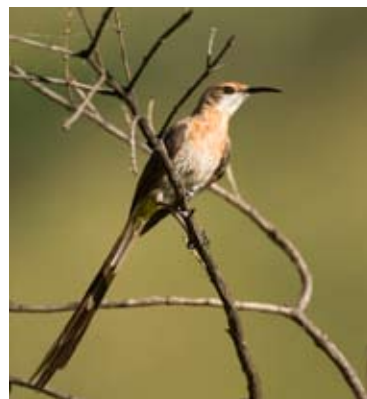
4 It’s aaahn... top!

At the top of the pass, search the boggy surroundings for south-

ern bald ibis, sickle-winged chat and, in the summer months, **mountain pipit**.

Drakensberg siskin and **sentinel rock-thrush** are common around the chalets, and you might see **bearded** and **Cape vultures** as well as jackal buzzards soaring overhead.

If you continue your drive into Lesotho’s afro-alpine grassland, look for the African rock pipit, black stork, white stork, yellow canary and perhaps even a black-headed canary. 



WHEN SHOULD I VISIT?

The warm, wet weather of summer is good for migratory birds.

WHAT SHOULD I TAKE?

Be prepared for rain, snow and sunshine. Pack warm clothes and rain gear, and don’t forget your passport!

CAN I GO IT ALONE?

The Sani Pass can only be negotiated in a four-wheel-drive vehicle by someone with above-average driving experience. If you don’t have the right vehicle, consider a guided tour. Pied Piper Expeditions (vulture@telkomsa.net) offers

bird tours. You can also walk the last 8 km, if you’re in good shape.

HOW DO I GET THERE?

Turn north at Underberg, drive through Himeville, and turn left onto a signposted road 2 km north of town.

From left: **WOODY**. Look for a ground woodpecker in the protea grassland.

ROCKY. The Drakensberg rock-jumper is one of the specials on offer.

SWEET. Gurney’s sugarbird is unique to this environment.

STALKER. In Lesotho, you might see a white stork going about its business.