

Beaufort West sewage works, the secret birding hotspots nobody expects

There is always a very particular sense of dread that creeps in when Luca casually says the words “water treatment plant”, or worse, just calls it what it is, sewage works. To birders, these places are legendary. Strange as it sounds, they are often magnets for unusual species, little pockets of life where water and scrub attract birds you might not see anywhere else nearby. To me though, they sound more like the setting of a crime documentary than a peaceful birding outing.

Yet somehow, almost without fail, if there is even the slightest chance of a good bird, we go.

That evening, after leaving the Karoo National Park, Luca said it.

“Shall we pop down to the works before it gets too dark?”

As always, the mere suggestion of a potential new species was enough. Mom and Dad immediately sided with him. My nerves, clearly, were not part of the decision-making process. And so we found ourselves turning off the main road and heading towards the Beaufort West sewage works, all in the hope of finding a bird that had suddenly made this rather questionable location seem worth the visit, the elusive Namaqua Warbler.

Before any proper search begins, there is always a briefing. The car turns into a mini classroom, with Luca giving us the rundown on exactly what we should be looking and listening for. In this case, it was the call, the movement through the scrub, and the subtle features that might help us pick the bird out from the dense thickets. Armed with just enough knowledge to make us feel useful, we rolled slowly forward, scanning the bushes on either side for any sign of movement.

I cannot lie, I was feeling exceptionally uneasy.

There is something about a place like that in the fading light that just feels unsettling. No one around, odd noises drifting through the air, and that strange sense of being somewhere you probably would not choose to be unless you were after a bird. Luca, naturally, got out of the car and started walking, scanning the vegetation with total focus.

I was not nearly that brave.

I stayed in the car, though I was ready to jump out if he suddenly gave the call.

Then, as if from nowhere, a group of boys appeared, probably no older than ten or twelve, walking towards us. They were smoking and drinking, far too young for either, and they had the kind of swagger that instantly made my stomach tighten. My heart started racing and I slipped straight into what I can only describe as fight mode. Pepper spray in one hand, finger hovering near the window button with the other.

It was then that I noticed they were all carrying ketties.

I sat there, not knowing what to expect next. One of the boys pulled the elastic back, took aim, and fired. A moment later, a gull dropped to the ground nearby. They had hit it.

The laughter that erupted from their small circle as they rushed over to collect it made me feel sick. Maybe there was a reason, maybe they were desperate for food, maybe there was more to the story, but it was the way they went about it that unsettled me. It was casual, almost like entertainment, and it left me feeling angry and deeply uncomfortable.

By this point I was more than ready to forget about the warbler completely and just get out of there. The only problem was that Luca was still somewhere out in the scrub, fully committed to the search.

Then, suddenly, his voice cut through the tension.

“I got it! I got it!”

There was absolutely no chance I was getting out of the car at that stage, so I told Dad to drive us closer. That, after all, is exactly why we have a 4x4. We eased forward along the track, moving away from the boys and towards Luca, who was now standing near a thick tangle of bushes, clearly thrilled.

And then, as if the bird had sensed my nerves and decided to show a little mercy, the Namaqua Warbler flew towards us and landed in a tree right next to the car.

After everything, there it was.

Tiny, secretive, and deeply satisfying to see.

In my rush to get a better view through the thicket, I stepped slightly off the track and straight onto a shard of glass. Typical. My foot slid, the edge caught the side of it where my flip flop offered absolutely no protection, and instantly there was blood.

That would have to wait.

First, we had to admire the bird I was fairly convinced I had just risked my life for. Luca managed to get his photos, which made the whole mission feel officially worthwhile, and once we were satisfied, we made a quick retreat back to our accommodation.

Only then did I properly deal with my foot, calm my nerves, and replay the whole bizarre experience in my head.

Dad, ever the optimist, simply smiled and said, “At least we can have some ice cold sundowners when we get back.”

After a sewage works adventure involving a lifer, suspicious children, shattered nerves, and a cut foot, that sounded like exactly the right ending.

But the sundowners part of the story, well, that’s for next week.