

When a Bird List Changes the Whole Game Drive

For a long time, our family loved being in nature, but we were not really what you would call “clued up” birders. Like many people visiting places such as Kruger or Pilanesberg, our game drives were mostly focused on mammals. We would head out hoping for lions, leopards, elephants, rhinos, wild dogs, or any of the big, exciting sightings that so often become the measure of a successful trip.

But as anyone who spends time in the bush knows, mammals do not work according to our plans. They can be rare, elusive, hidden in thick vegetation, lying flat in the shade, or simply somewhere else entirely. On those days, game drives can start to feel long. You drive and drive, scanning every shadow and every patch of grass, and when nothing much appears, it is easy to feel as if the morning has not been productive.

That is where birding completely changes the experience.

Keeping a bird list on a trip adds a whole new layer of excitement to every drive. It gives you something to look for, listen for, learn from and celebrate, even when the mammals are quiet. Birds are everywhere. They are in the trees above you, on the road in front of you, calling from the thickets, flying over waterholes, hopping through camp, or sitting on a branch that you might have driven past without noticing before.

This January, while we were in Kruger after the floods, mammal sightings were not as regular as we had perhaps hoped. My feeling was that many animals had moved into safer, greener areas after the heavy rain and flooding, and they simply were not scattered everywhere along the roads. Instead of feeling disappointed, birding became the thing that filled the gaps.

I started listing the birds we saw, listening more carefully to calls, and trying to identify species as we drove. Suddenly, time in the vehicle felt completely different. A quiet road was not boring anymore. It became a chance to pay attention. A rustle in a bush mattered. A call from somewhere unseen became a little mystery. A familiar bird still had a place on the list, and an unfamiliar one became a small challenge.

One of my favourite moments was when my mum and I spotted a Common Scimitarbill from the back of the Land Rover. It was not a lifer, and it was not the rarest bird in the park, but that did not matter. The excitement came from what happened next.

This, for me, is where birding becomes even more meaningful. Seeing the bird is only the beginning. You can log it, tick it off, and move on, but the real magic often comes when you take the next step and learn something about it. Whether you use Firefinch, Sasol, another birding app, or a field guide, reading about the bird afterwards turns it from “just another species” into a living creature with its own habits, behaviours and story.

With the Common Scimitarbill, we read more about how it roosts in tree cavities, often in narrow spaces that seem almost impossibly designed for its curved bill and slender body. It was such a small detail, but it completely changed the way I thought about the bird. Suddenly it was not just a dark, curved-billed shape moving through the branches. It was a species with

a hidden life, with routines and adaptations that I would never have appreciated if I had only ticked it and moved on.

That is what bird listing does so well. It makes a trip feel fuller. It helps you realise that a successful day in the bush does not have to depend only on big mammals or dramatic sightings. Sometimes the best moments are quieter. Sometimes they come from noticing a bird you have seen before, then learning one new thing about it that makes you see it differently.

Birding also gives every person in the vehicle something to engage with. It turns empty stretches of road into opportunities. It keeps your mind active and your eyes working. It encourages you to slow down, listen properly, look higher into the trees, check the edges of the road, and appreciate the smaller movements that might otherwise go unnoticed.

And the best part is that you do not have to be an expert to start. You do not need to know every call or identify every bird instantly. You can begin with what you see, write it down, check a guide, ask someone, or look it up later. The list becomes less about proving how much you know and more about building a relationship with the place you are visiting.

By the end of a trip, a bird list becomes more than a set of names. It becomes a record of your time in the field. It reminds you of where you were, what the weather was doing, what you noticed, what you learned, and which species made you stop for just a little longer.

For me, adding birding to a safari has made time in the bush feel richer, more exciting and far more rewarding. Mammals will always be special, and of course we will still hope for those big sightings. But birds make sure that even the quiet drives are never really empty.

They are always there, surrounding us, calling, moving, feeding, nesting, hiding and surviving. We just have to start paying attention.