

Wakkerstroom: An Unexpected Stop and a Very Good Reason to Return!

I think it's safe to say that Wakkerstroom has been on my birding wish list for quite some time. Although, when I finally got to visit, it wasn't quite under the circumstances I had imagined!

A little while ago, we spent two wonderful weeks in St Lucia before deciding to extend our holiday by another two nights in Pongola, where we were visiting a family friend who had recently moved there. We had a lovely time exploring the area, and everything had gone perfectly according to plan.

That was until we started making our way home.

We were travelling in our dearly beloved Toyota Prado, which was fully loaded with all our holiday belongings, and towing our 4x4 Conqueror trailer. Anyone who has travelled with us knows that we don't exactly pack light, so the poor Prado certainly had its work cut out for it!

We were driving along quite happily when my dad noticed a few sparks coming from under the bonnet. He didn't say anything at first, but it wasn't long before my mom noticed a rather unwelcome warning light on the dashboard.

Now, I was sitting in the back, completely oblivious to what was actually going on, but you know that feeling when everyone suddenly goes a little quiet and starts communicating through hand signals and rather concerned facial expressions? Well, that was exactly what was happening in the front of our car.

Eventually, I couldn't help myself.

"Wait, guys, what's wrong?"

And that was when our little adventure began.

We pulled over on the side of the road, put our hazards on and, much to the horror of any loyal Toyota owner, had to open the bonnet!

There we were, in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by farmland, with a very unhappy Prado and an equally unhappy family trying to figure out what on earth we were going to do next.

But we weren't alone for long.

Within minutes, we had attracted quite the audience. Cows started appearing from either side of the road, gathering along the fences and mooing at us as though they had never seen anything quite so entertaining.

I must admit, it was rather funny. There we were, stressing about the car, while an entire herd of cows seemed to think we had stopped specifically to visit them!

Unfortunately, our mechanical troubles were a little more serious than our new friends seemed to realise. The Prado's cooling system had developed a problem, and the engine was beginning to overheat.

Our nearest hope of finding some help was Wakkerstroom, still about 20 kilometres away.

Now, under normal circumstances, 20 kilometres is nothing. But when you're driving a fully loaded vehicle, towing a trailer and trying very hard not to overheat the engine, it suddenly feels like an awfully long way!

Thankfully, my dad and Luca kept their cool and managed to get us moving again. It was a very slow journey, with plenty of stops along the way to check on the Prado and make sure we weren't doing any further damage.

We would drive a few kilometres, pull over, lift the bonnet, check everything and then set off again. And so the cycle continued.

Eventually, after what felt like forever, we made it into the little town of Wakkerstroom.

Never have I been quite so pleased to see a garage!

We pulled in, and Dad and Luca immediately got to work figuring out how to get us home. Mom and I, meanwhile, were very kindly instructed to go and find ourselves some lunch and a coffee.

An instruction we were more than happy to follow!

So, while the boys dealt with our rather unfortunate mechanical situation, Mom and I went in search of pizza and a much-needed coffee. I think it's fair to say that both were thoroughly appreciated by that point.

Thankfully, Dad and Luca managed to get the Prado going again, and we were eventually able to continue our journey home. The warning light had disappeared, although we knew the problem wasn't entirely solved.

But we made it, and that was the main thing!

Now, you might be wondering what on earth all of this has to do with birding.

Well, here's the rather ironic part.

We had just spent a good portion of our afternoon stranded in and around one of South Africa's most wonderful birding destinations, and we hadn't managed to do any birding at all!

Of all the places to break down, we somehow managed to choose Wakkerstroom. A place I had been wanting to visit for ages, and there we were, far too preoccupied with getting our car home to even think about getting the binoculars out.

I couldn't help but laugh about it afterwards.

But next week, we're going back!

And this time, hopefully, we'll be arriving in Wakkerstroom with a perfectly functioning vehicle, binoculars at the ready and absolutely no intention of visiting the local garage!

I'm incredibly excited to finally get the opportunity to explore the area properly. Wakkerstroom is so well known for its beautiful grasslands, wetlands and incredible birdlife, and I cannot wait to see what we might find.

I'm particularly looking forward to spending some time in the grasslands, searching for a few of the special birds that make this area such a sought-after birding destination. And, of course, I'm hoping to come home with plenty of photographs too!

There's something about visiting a new birding destination that I absolutely love. The anticipation of what you might find, those early mornings when the world is just waking up, and the excitement of seeing a bird you've been hoping to find for ages.

Although, after our previous visit, I think I'll be quite happy if the only unexpected surprises involve birds!

So, to all our Daily Birder readers who know Wakkerstroom, I'd absolutely love to pick your brains a little.

Are there any particular birding spots we shouldn't miss? Any special birds we should be keeping an eye out for, favourite routes to explore, or local guides you would recommend?

And if you have any tips for birding the area at this time of year, please do share them. We'd really love to make the most of our visit!

I have a feeling Wakkerstroom still has plenty of adventures in store for us, but hopefully this time they'll involve a few more feathers and a lot fewer warning lights.

I'll be sure to report back on how it all goes!