

The Day of Two Kingfishers

Birding is a funny thing. You can plan for it, study for it, obsess over field guides until the spines break, but sometimes, the best birds are the ones that practically throw themselves at you. That's pretty much how it played out when Luca and I set off to twitch a mangrove kingfisher.

We were staying at Prince's Grant for the June–July holidays, which is technically winter, though KwaZulu-Natal didn't seem to get the memo. The days were warm enough to feel like summer, and that suited us just fine, because the mangrove kingfisher, a winter visitor to the region, had long been on my bucket list.

Somewhere on the drive down, between mouthfuls of Lay's salted chips, I turned to Luca and casually said, "If we get the mangrove today, I'll only need one more kingfisher." That last one? The elusive half-collared. I wasn't expecting to see it anytime soon, and the way I said it came out half hopeful and half admitting defeat. Luca just nodded with a little smile, probably amused at how birders are always one bird away from some milestone.

So off we went, cameras ready, binoculars close, and snacks within reach, heading toward Mtunzini. Just the two of us, windows down, the breeze warm, spirits high. There's something simple and perfect about those kinds of drives.

When we arrived at Umlalazi Nature Reserve, we pulled into the car park and, out of habit, checked the trees closest to us. And there it was. Perched like it had been waiting for us. A soft blue shimmer, compact shape, unmistakable silhouette. Mangrove kingfisher.

I stared for a second, wondering if I was seeing things. We hadn't even made it to the boardwalk yet. Luca and I looked at each other, grabbed our bins, and there it was, clear as daylight. One of the easiest twitches ever.

We spent a decent amount of time with the bird. Took our photos, watched it preen, admired it through the bins. I felt that quiet joy that comes with seeing a bird you've wanted for years. But we'd come all this way, so leaving right after felt a bit anticlimactic. We decided to stretch the adventure and head along the boardwalk.

It's a beautiful walk through the mangroves. Fiddler crabs scuttled along the mudbanks, mudskippers popped in and out of view, and the light filtered gently through the trees. Eventually we found a little offshoot with a bench beside a still stretch of water and decided to sit for a bit.

Luca, never one to sit still for long, wandered off, scanning the area. Suddenly, he froze. "Flash of blue," he whispered.

That was enough for me to grab the bins. And there, sitting just above the waterline, was a half-collared kingfisher.

I blinked, then blinked again. The bird I'd written off as "one day, maybe" had just entered stage left.

It was beautiful. Rich blue back, soft buff chest, slightly hunched posture. It wasn't just there either, it was showing off. The bird flew closer, landing right out in the open, then another joined it. The two started calling, hopping between branches, darting over the water, and posing like they knew exactly what they were doing.

For forty-five glorious minutes we watched them. Cameras clicking, mouths slightly open in disbelief. We had gone out hoping for one bird and I ended up with a bonus lifer, served with perfect light and front-row seats.

Eventually we dragged ourselves away and continued the walk, though nothing else really registered after that. On our way back to the car, we checked to see if the mangrove kingfisher was still in its tree. It was. Still perched like royalty, completely unfazed by how it had just shared the spotlight.

As we stood there, another group of birders arrived. You could tell immediately what they were after by the way they leapt out of the car, binoculars already halfway to their faces.

We waved, pointed them straight to the mangrove, and mentioned the half-collared's a bit farther along the path. Their eyes widened, the way only birders' eyes can when the universe teases them with possibility. Whether they found them or not, I have no idea, but it felt good to hand over the baton, to share the magic.

The drive back was quiet. The chips were finished, the sun was getting lower, and the cameras were heavy with memories. I kept thinking about how some birds take years to find and others just sort of appear when you least expect them.

We went out casually looking for that one lifer and I had come back with two. But more than that, we came back with a story. One of those days you don't plan but remember forever.

Because sometimes, you don't just go looking for birds. Sometimes, the birds find you.