

The Magic of Benvie Gardens and Karkloof Conservancy

There's always a unique thrill in leaving for a holiday later in the day. The hours leading up to departure seem to stretch on forever as the excitement builds—counting down the hours, the minutes, and then the seconds. Unlike the sleepy rush of an early morning start, this anticipation has its own kind of magic. And when 11 a.m. finally arrived, we were off, our first stop: the Natal Midlands.

There's a crazy sense of wonder that stirs when you pause to explore the Midlands—so often just a blur of rolling hills as you pass through on your way to the coast. This time, with some special birds to tick off our list, we decided to stay overnight, giving ourselves a chance to truly discover this often-overlooked wonderland.

Our destination for the night was a quaint and charming hideaway called Kululapa. Tucked off the beaten track, it welcomed us with smiles and the kind of genuine hospitality that warms your soul. The rustic cottage, aptly named "Birdsong," lived up to its name. The following morning, as we sipped steaming mugs of coffee in the garden, accompanied by a giant Mugg & Bean muffin, the air around us came alive with birds flitting and calling from every direction. The dawn chorus welcomed us with a delightful array of birds, each adding its unique note to the symphony. Among them were the cheerful Sombre Greenbul, the vibrant Greater Double-collared and Amethyst Sunbirds, and the melodious Chorister Robin-Chat. Purple-crested Turacos graced us with stunning flyovers, showcasing their iridescent plumage, while African Olive Pigeons, Grey-headed Bushshrikes, Southern Boubous and the lively Green-backed Camaroptera added to the magical morning soundtrack. Each encounter felt like a gift from nature's orchestra.

From the rustic patio of Birdsong, the unmistakable call of the African Emerald Cuckoo echoed through the air—a melodic "Hello Jordie" ringing out nearby. Instantly, I knew I might be in for a treat. Grabbing my camera in excitement, I had no idea just how special the moment would be. To my amazement, the cuckoo landed in a tree mere meters away, unusually confiding. For the next ten minutes, we stood in awe, capturing this incredible encounter—a memory that will stay with me forever.

The symphony of bird calls was unlike anything I had ever experienced, a melodious blend of sounds that left me captivated and, admittedly, a little humbled. I realized just how many bird calls I couldn't recognize, and it inspired me to set a personal goal for the new year: to learn as many bird calls as possible.

The magic of Kululapa didn't stop with the birdsong. The surrounding scenery was breathtaking, with vibrant flowers and lush greenery creating a postcard-perfect backdrop. When it came time to leave, the walk back to the car along a 400-meter forest trail turned into a leisurely adventure of its own. We stopped often to admire the delicate blooms and marvel at the beauty of the natural world around us. Had we had our fill of this enchanting place? Not even close. We had merely scratched the surface and promised ourselves that we'd return to delve deeper.

The next chapter of our Midlands adventure took us to Benvie Gardens, and it began on an exciting note. Before we had even parked the car, we spotted our primary target bird, the Orange Ground Thrush, sparking a thrill that set the tone for the rest of the visit. Strolling leisurely along the garden pathways, we found ourselves immersed in a new appreciation for the simple joys of life—like catching a glimpse of a bird flitting through the undergrowth. Nature is incredible in its ability to captivate, leaving us not knowing which way to turn as there was always something to admire.

As we meandered through the gardens, we were greeted by a friendly gentleman who had come over to see if we had any particular "specials" on our list. It made me wonder: do birders have an imaginary sign overhead signaling that they are, in fact, birders? He had guessed our intent without us even mentioning it. Perhaps it was because most visitors to Benvie Gardens are there for birding. We shared that we had wandered off the path near the water's edge, hoping to find our bogey bird, the Half-collared Kingfisher. With a smile, he pointed us to a short walk outside the garden boundaries where it might be spotted.

Excited by the tip, we followed the path, keeping a watchful eye for any sign of the elusive kingfisher. Despite our best efforts, we didn't manage to find it. With time slipping away, we returned to the main path and made our way back to the car, feeling content with the beauty and serenity we had already experienced at Benvie.

Adventure seekers as we are, we continued on to the Karkloof Conservancy, taking the back dirt roads to fully immerse ourselves in the landscape. As we surveyed the land, our thoughts wandered to Christmas, now only a few days away. Suddenly, Mom's sharp eyes spotted a pair of Grey Crowned Cranes in a field not far from Karkloof. We stopped to admire these elegant beauties, their golden crests shimmering in the sunlight. Not even 100 meters further, we were treated to the sight of a pair of Blue Cranes, South Africa's national bird, foraging in the open fields.

Hoping to make it a hat trick, we kept our eyes peeled for the elusive Wattled Crane. Alas, it wasn't meant to be this time. Exploring the conservancy's hides and trails, it quickly became apparent that this incredible place deserved more than a single day. With so much to see and the best birding moments dependent on the time of day, it's impossible to be everywhere at once. We left with a firm resolve to return and experience even more of the wonders Karkloof has to offer.

The Midlands left an indelible mark on me. It's a place of magic, where birding and nature unite to create unforgettable memories. Whether you're a birder, a nature enthusiast, or simply seeking peace, the Midlands—especially Benvie Gardens and Karkloof Conservancy—offers an experience like no other. It's a treasure trove of natural wonders I can't wait to explore further.