

West coast wetlands, treasure for birdlife.

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The west coast of Southern Africa is dominated by the Benguela Current, a cold sea that extends its influence from Port Elizabeth to Angola. The Benguela Current is one of the most productive marine ecosystems in the world characterised by seasonal upwelling.

This cold current also contributes to maintain a semi-arid condition along the west coast of Southern Africa, where only few perennial estuaries and coastal wetlands are present. There are only three perennial estuaries along the west coast of Southern Africa, namely those of the Berg, Olifants and the Orange River. These estuaries and coastal wetlands are in direct contact with the waters of the Benguela making them highly productive systems relative to their size. Their shallow waters and intertidal habitats are a mayor breeding ground for many species of invertebrates and fish that in turn provides food for a large number of birds.

The productivity of such wetlands is higher towards spring and summer that makes an ideal foraging area for migrant and resident water birds that visit the intertidal areas. It is not surprising that west coast wetlands hold the greatest densities of waders on the entire eastern Atlantic flyway. Some of them such as Langebaan Lagoon and the Orange River have been recognised as wetlands of international importance because in addition to supporting resident water bird populations, they are also crucial to support Artic-breeding waders during the non-breeding season and during migration periods. These two wetlands have been registered with the RAMSAR Convention as wetlands of international importance.

Unfortunately estuarine habitats losses are widespread throughout the world and Southern Africa is not an exception. The salt marshes of the Orange River estuary have been severely damaged by silt from mining and the building of artificial roads that cut the natural flow of water. However, a recent initiative "Working for Wetlands" is currently re-establishing the circulation of water in the estuary and after few months the salt marshes are recovering and more habitat are available for resident and migrant water birds increasing this wetland value for conservation and potential for ecotourism.

The migration phenomena of Palearctic waders

The spring flowers on the west coast also announce the arrival of migrant visitors to the west coast of Southern Africa. Some of them are small birds less than 50grs that travelled at least 10000 km to get to the west coast wetlands of Southern Africa, the end-point for migratory waders using the East Atlantic, Mediterranean and Middle East Flyways. Why every year in September/October they arrive in mass and remains on the wetlands of Southern Africa until March when they return again to the Artic and sub-Artic latitudes to breed?

This is the migration phenomena, a very successful strategy used by a large number of bird species. Migration ranges from seasonal movements of a few hundred kilometres to species that perform annually trans-continental journeys of more than 10000 kilometres.

Migrant waders take advantage of the relatively high summer productivity in strong seasonal habits for both the breeding and non breeding season. For Palearctic-migrant waders the best time to visit the wetlands in the Southern Hemisphere is during the Austral spring and summer when productivity (and therefore food availability) of those wetlands is at its best. At the end of the Austral summer the migrant waders start to accumulate fat reserves before departure.

By increasing foraging time and rate some species can almost double their body weight before departure to their breeding sites in the Artic tundra. The return trip is usually shorter and birds use several wetlands along their route to replenish their fat reserves to maintain the fast pace. There

are records of some waders covering 7000 kilometres in 14 days. Migrant waders arrive in the Tundra at the beginning of the northern spring. There they will compete to establish breeding territories and finding a mate and by the time they start breeding the Arctic tundra will provide the maximum availability of insects for their chicks, after the breeding season is finished both adults and juveniles head South again while the Arctic Tundra will become dormant and covered on ice during the Northern winter.

The west coast of Southern Africa offers one of the best areas to observe migrant and resident waders as well as many water birds, Benguela-endemic seabirds and other endemics. From South to North include:

- 1) West Coast National Park and Langebaan Lagoon including the five islands with thousands of breeding seabirds. The marshes and sedge beds are home to African Marsh Harrier, Red-chested Flufftail and African Rail.
- 2) Berg River estuary is a heaven for waders both in the estuary as well as the commercial salt pans. Please be aware that you need a permit to enter the salt works and the roads inside are very slippery when wet. The concentration salt pans are good places to search for the rare Chestnut-banded Plover.
- 3) Verlorenvlei also good for water birds and Bird Island at Lambert's Bay excellent for close encounters with breeding marine birds.
- 4) Papendorp at Olifants River Estuary very good for water birds and waders also unique estuary with very little disturbance since no engine is used by traditional artisanal fishers and bird viewing can be superb if done from a canoe. The landscape is awesome so is the tranquillity of that unique wetland gem.
- 5) Port Nolloth a good place to find the unique Barlow's Lark.
- 6) Orange River Mouth also very good for waders and water birds and rehabilitation of this wetland currently an ongoing project.