A GUIDE TO BIRD WATCHING
IN & AROUND MEMEL

Rick Nuttall • Ernst Retief • Morne Pretorius 2018
INTRODUCTION
The larger Memel area, with its surrounding grasslands, wetlands and forests, is a birding hotspot where many ‘specials’ occur. The area has a well maintained road network and many accommodation establishments which cater for the needs of most birders; a keen birder can easily spend a few days birding this amazing area.

BIRDING
The main birding habitats around Memel include high-altitude plateau grasslands (mainly to the south of the town) and the very extensive Seekoeivlei wetland (27 km long) immediately to the north, as well as other smaller wetland areas, particularly along the Klip River system to the south (east) of the town. Further south a number of escarpment and valley forests host many species endemic to this habitat. Rocky hillsides and cliffs are also to be found; these also harbour interesting birdlife.

During the Second Southern African Bird Atlas Project, which started in 2007, about 310 species have been recorded in the area covered by this guide. Over a summer weekend a keen birder can fairly easily record up to 100 species.

In order to successfully find and identify the many LBJs (Little Brown Jobs) – the brownish pipits, larks and cisticolas in the area, it is important to be familiar with the calls and flight displays of these species. Some of these birds are adept at remaining hidden in the grassy plateau and rocky hillside habitats and are not easy to find on sight alone. Locating them by tuning into their calls is the easiest way to find them.

WEATHER
Memel is well known for its extreme weather patterns. Winter temperatures can easily drop below 0°C, while wind, mist and rain are common in summer. So be prepared and bring appropriate clothing. The best time for birding in Memel is in spring and summer, but even in winter it is a beautiful place to visit.

PRIVATE LAND
Many of the species mentioned in this Guide occur on private properties. Before entering any private property, always ask for permission to do so from the landowner. Most landowners will be quite keen to allow access, which may be arranged through the Reserve and Resort managers of Seekoeivlei Nature Reserve (www.edtea.fs.gov.za/?page_id=1484) as well as through owners of some of the accommodation establishments in Memel.

ACCOMMODATION
There are a number of accommodation establishments in Memel and on farms in the surrounding area. For a list of some of these, see this web site www.memeltourism.co.za.

CONSERVATION
The area is extremely important from a conservation point of view as it hosts many threatened bird species, some of which, such as White-winged Flufftail, are Critically Endangered. Because of this, the area falls within the Grasslands Important Bird and Biodiversity Area as defined by BirdLife South Africa. Conservation areas include the Seekoeivlei Nature Reserve (also a Ramsar site), the Sneeuwberg...
Protected Environment and a number of private nature reserves.

**BIRD MONITORING**
Please consider contributing to our knowledge of the birds in the area by participating in a citizen science project such as the Southern African Bird Atlas Project (see http://sabap2.adu.org.za/).

**LAYOUT OF GUIDE**
This Guide describes seven birding routes. Each route contains detailed directions and information on the birds that may be seen. Since birds present in any area may change as environmental conditions and seasons change, the species listed for each route should be considered as a rough guide only and there is no guarantee that the species will definitely occur in a specific place, as stated in the Guide.

Birders can consider linking the different birding routes depending on available time. The directions must be read with the map at the end of the Guide. Point locations on the map are indicated in brackets in the text, for example (25). Be aware that for some roads, numbers assigned to roads on Google Maps might be different to the numbers listed on road signs.

The bird names used follow the 2018 Checklist of Birds as published by BirdLife South Africa – see www.birdlife.org.za.

**ROAD CONDITIONS**
During normal conditions most roads will be suitable for a sedan vehicle. However, for certain sections it would be best to use a high clearance vehicle, but a 4x4 should not be necessary. During rainy weather and after extreme storms, the gravel roads will deteriorate considerably. In such instances a high clearance vehicle, and even a 4x4, might be needed.

**REFRESHMENTS**
Please note that most of the routes described will take at least three hours (and often much longer!) to complete. There are no shops on these routes to purchase food or refreshments, so please ensure you pack enough of these items before you leave on your birding trip; a few shops are available in Memel. It should also be noted that there are no toilet facilities on these routes.

**SPONSORSHIP**
BirdLife South Africa would like to acknowledge the sponsorship of the Ford Wildlife Foundation as well as Rand Merchant Bank which made the publication of this document possible.
**ROUTE 1: HIGH-ALTITUDE PLATEAU GRASSLANDS**

**Key Species**
Extensive plateaus, characterised largely by rooigras *Themeda triandra*, are found to the south of Memel, and occur at an altitude above 2 000 m. Although some maize is grown on these plateaus, most of this area is used as grazing for livestock, and there are also small numbers of wild game species here, such as Blesbok. Interesting birds species occurring in these areas include **Blue Crane**, **Grey Crowned Crane**, **Blue Korhaan**, **Southern Bald Ibis**, **Black Harrier** (usually in winter), **Temminck’s Courser**, **Black-winged Lapwing**, **Eastern Long-billed**, **Rudd’s** and **Botha’s larks**, **Buff-streaked Chat**, **Mountain Wheatear**, **Sentinel Rock Thrush** and **Yellow-breasted Pipit**.

Rocky hillsides, mistbelt forest and wetlands in the Klip River valley also provide habitat for a number of bird species, including **Ground Woodpecker**, **Buff-streaked Chat**, **Mountain Wheatear**, **Sentinel Rock Thrush**, **African Rock Pipit**, **Bush Blackcap**, **African Rail**, **African Snipe**, **African Black Duck** and **Half-collared Kingfisher**.

**Route Description**
This route is more than 50 km long and will need a full morning or even longer to complete, especially if you are planning to combine Route 1 and Route 2.

From Memel (1), travel south-west along the gravel road (S56) to Verkykerskop. Look out for **Southern Bald Ibis** foraging in the cultivated lands on both sides of the road. Flocks of widowbirds should also be present in good numbers here. After 9.8 km (immediately after a short strip of tar (steep downhill)), turn left (S471: Norman-dienpas, Mont Pelaan) (2).

As the road starts to climb up and out of the valley, about 2 km from point (2), there is an extensive rocky area on the right, fairly close to the road. Look out here for bunting species, **African Rock Pipit**, (which is more easily picked up by its characteristic call) and for **Mountain Wheatear** and **Familiar Chat**. **Grey-winged Francolin** may also be seen here, as well as **Ground Woodpecker**, **Banded Martin** (in summer) and **Wailing Cisticola**. Look out for Mountain Reedbuck in the valley on the left.

Continue with this road up onto the grassy plateau and stop every so often to listen for calling larks (**Rudd’s**, **Botha’s** and **Pink-billed larks**); this is however not yet the prime area for these species. Look out for birds of prey along this section of road – **Amur Falcons**, the more elusive **Red-footed** and **Lanner falcons** have been recorded here. **Cape Vultures** also frequently roost on the large electricity pylons running parallel with the road; keep an eye out for this endangered species in the early morning. The road levels out and after 11.1 km from point (2) are some silver cattle pens on the right (39). Immediately after the pens, a tertiary road cuts back to the right; take this track and park at the cattle pens. You will also notice high-voltage powerlines here. The grassland in this area (especially immediately to the west of the track) is prime habitat for the grassland specials, with **Rudd’s Lark** and **Yellow-breasted Pipit** recorded here. **Sentinel Rock Thrush** has also been seen foraging on areas of burnt grass near the cattle pens. Continue along the main gravel road (S471) until reaching a T-junction (5). Either turn left here to return to Memel or continue with Route 2.
**ROUTE 2: THE ARC AND VANGER VLEI ROUTE**

**Key Species**
This area is known for its mountains and grassy hills with the meandering Klip River cutting through valleys and forming wetlands with oxbow lakes (pedes) in areas with low gradient. Near the source of the Klip River on the provincial border between Free State and KwaZulu-Natal, extensive escarpment forests with yellowwood Podocarpus sp. trees, and valleys with Ouhout Leucosidea sericea thickets occur, with numerous small streams feeding the Klip River.

These forests host bird species such as Bush Blackcap, Cape Batis, African Olive Pigeon, Southern Boubou, Olive Thrush, Red-chested and Black cuckoo, with African Wood-owl also a possibility. The small stream valleys with bush thickets are good places to look for Drakensberg Prinia and Barratt’s Warbler. The larger clumps of Ouhout in the valleys and on mountain slopes may produce Olive Woodpecker and Bush Blackcap. Wetlands in the valley may deliver Grey Crowned Crane, African Rail and Montagu’s Harrier.

**Route Description**
This route should ideally be done after Route 1. Both routes combined are longer than 50 km and will need a whole morning or even a full day’s birding. The Arc is an excellent point to break for lunch.

From point 5, where Route 1 ended, turn right (staying on the S471; sign-posted to Mont Pelaan). Continue with this road (it is still the main gravel road), and soon after passing some houses (on the right), the road descends steeply into a small valley. Rocky slopes on the left should produce a number of species, including Ground Woodpecker, Buff-streaked and Mountain chats, Yellow Bishop and Cape Bunting.

After crossing a bridge (5.6 km from point (5)), turn left (S18. Normandienpas / Normandien Pass (6)) and continue on up onto grassy plateau areas again. Look out here for Blue Korhaan and Southern Bald Ibis. The road continues to climb a little higher before passing between two high points. Not long after this, look out for Eastern Long-billed Lark and Blue Korhaan on the right of the road, both species have been recorded here a number of times. At the next junction (7), turn right (i.e. staying on the S18) to Normandien Pass, and some spectacular scenery. Here the escarpment drops away quite dramatically to the south into KwaZulu-Natal. After 4.1 km along this road, there are some rocks on the right, right on the edge of the escarpment; this spot is known as ‘The Arc’ viewpoint (40) and is an excellent place to stop for a break. The mistbelt forest is immediately below, and great sightings of Bush Blackcap, Red-chested Cuckoo, Southern Boubou, Lesser Double-collared Sunbird and Cape Batis have been had from here, looking out over the canopy.

About 500 m further along the road there is a small forested valley on the left, where Bush Blackcap and Barratt’s Warbler have been observed. African Olive Pigeon has also been seen perched in the canopy of forest trees here in the early mornings. Nocturnal birds possible at this site and on the route include Cape Eagle-Owl and European Nightjar; listen for calling African Wood Owls in these forests.

Turn around and return to the junction (7) and turn right (onto the S783. Roodepoort). While slowly driving down into the valley below, look out for Ground Woodpeckers in the cuttings.

While travelling north up the Klip River valley, the main habitats of interest are the wetland areas along the river. There are numerous cultivated lands along this section, but various oxbows should also be visible. If water is present, the wetland area on the right just before the road crosses the Klip River, 13.8 km from point (7), is well worth a look. Scan with a scope and look for various waterfowl species, but also African Snipe and possibly African Rail foraging out in the open.

Continue along the main road, still heading north. At the next T-junction (S783/ S17; Point (8)), turn right (S17) and head in an easterly direction towards Muller’s Pass for 6.3 km. When crossing the Blinkwater stream, look out for a pair of Grey Crowned Cranes along the Vanger Vlei wetland on the right. A better view of the wetland may be obtained by travelling a short distance along the Vlakplaats/Vanger farm road on the opposite side of this Heritage Site. Listen for the calls of African Rail and Baillon’s Crake – the latter species visits this wetland sporadically during peak rainy seasons.

Return to the T-junction (Point (8), S783/ S17), continue straight (S17) and head back to Memel (there are a few other wetland areas on the way which may hold some interesting birds). Look out for Grey Crowned and Blue cranes in the cultivated lands.
Take the R34 from Memel to Newcastle. After a few kilometres turn right onto the S781 (14). After about 7 km turn left on a small, unmarked dirt road to Kranskop (11). This road climbs out of the Klip River valley up to another area of plateau grassland, and on towards Kranskop Mountain. Rudd’s Lark and Yellow-breasted Pipit have been recorded in grassland on both sides of the road and Black-winged Lapwing has been seen occasionally. When reaching the wind pump on the left hand side, scan the short grassland for Rudd’s Lark, Yellow-breasted Pipit and Botha’s Lark. Pairs of Blue Cranes may also be found near the homestead. Continue with this road until the Kranskop Mountain is clearly visible immediately ahead. This area is good for Sentinel Rock Thrush, Long-billed Pipit and Mountain Wheatear. Continue with gravel road down the slope to where a small stream crosses the road. Look out for Yellow Bishop, Yellow-breasted Pipit and Sentinel Rock Thrush among the boulders on the lower slopes. Wailing Cisticola can also be found in this area.

Four of the five harrier species occurring in South Africa have been observed in the past flying low over the terraces of short grass below the rock face of Kranskop Mountain, and a pair of Verreaux’s Eagles often visit the mountain. When reaching the woody vegetation below the cliff face, listen carefully for calling Cape Batis, Bar-throated Apalis, Bush Blackcap, Natal Spurfowl and Drakensberg Prinia. African Black and Alpine swifts are regularly seen near the cliffs in summer.

Backtrack on this road to the S781 (11), turn right and return to Memel.

For a longer route from Memel, take the R34 to Newcastle and turn right onto the S17 (14). Continue for 9.2 km and turn left onto the S781 (10). This road soon crosses the Klip River. Look out for African Black Duck and Half-collared Kingfisher when crossing the bridge. This road follows the eastern side of the valley back to Memel. Where the gravel road splits, keep left (if prior arrangements have been made to visit the Galaxy Farm), then keep right and drive up to the homestead where directions will be given to the valley which leads to Kranskop. Greater Double-collard and Malachite sunbirds visit the homestead garden during spring and early autumn. This valley with large stands of Ouhout Leucosidea sericea is home to a variety of birds species associated with this habitat. After passing the homestead and entering the valley, look out for Yellow Bishop, Buff-streaked Chat, Mountain Wheatear, Ground Woodpecker, Cape Rock Thrush, Drakensberg Prinia, Neddicky and Wailing Cisticola. Before passing through the next gate at the top of the valley, a short walk into the valley can deliver Southern Bald Ibis, African Black Swift and Long-billed Pipit.

Returning to the split in the gravel road, turn right. Follow this road and after a few kilometres, turn left at a centre pivot irrigation structure. You will soon reach Point (n), follow the directions above from point (n).
ROUTE 4: MERINODAL/STERKFONTEIN LOOP

Key Species
This route contains Rudd’s and Botha’s larks and Yellow-breasted Pipit. Grey Crowned and Blue cranes, Blue Korhaan and Southern Bald Ibis can also be seen. Cape Eagle Owl is also possible in the more extensive rocky areas late in the afternoon, towards dusk.

Route Description
Take Route 1 from Memel to (3), just after the cattle pens. About 500 m after the cattle pens, take the road (3) to the right (S898: Merinodal), which starts off in the east at higher altitude and drops down westwards into the valley of the Cornelis River. Look out for larks and pipits in the grasslands in the eastern part, and for Southern Bald Ibis foraging in cultivated lands in the valley. At the T-junction (22), just after the farm Merinodal, there are two options: First, to try for Cape Eagle Owl, turn right onto the S56, and drive over the bridge (there is a short tarred section here). This species has been seen in the late afternoon on the rocks on the right just after crossing the bridge. You can continue to point (21) and turn left onto the S1409 which will take you back to the main tarred road, the R34 (at point 20). This 15 km stretch of road traverses beautiful grasslands, crosses the Komandospruit and various wetlands and is well worth the drive.

Alternatively, turn left at the T-junction (22) and travel south/south-west on the S56. You will find a welcome stretch of tar 2.8 km further on as well! As you dip down into the next valley, look out for flocks of Grey Crowned and particularly Blue cranes in the drainage line and cultivated lands on the left. Take the next gravel road to the left (S470) after the dip (23), and travel back in an easterly direction. Areas of mainly cultivated lands in the western section give way to higher altitude grasslands in the east, where good numbers of Blue and Grey Crowned cranes have been recorded. Look out for a natural pan on the left side of the road which often has some great waterfowl on it, including Little and Black-necked grebe, Maccoa and White-backed ducks as well as Hottentot Teal. Check the grasslands in this area for calling larks and pipits.

Continue east on the S470, and at the junction with the S471 (4), turn left, past the silver livestock pens (39) and back to the junction (2) with the S56 in the valley. Take the S56 (right) back to Memel.

Hottentot Teal, a small duck quite easily identified with its blue bill.
MEMEL BIRDING ROUTES

ROUTE 5: SEEKOEIVLEI NATURE RESERVE

Key Species
The vegetation of the Seekoeiivlei Nature Reserve is defined as Moist Cool Highveld Grassland and Wet Cold Highveld Grassland. The Nature Reserve consists of a flat floodplain surrounded by an undulating landscape interspersed with small koppies/hills. The altitude of the wetland remains constant at 1 700m above sea level from the reserve’s southern to its northern boundary, a straight line distance of 14 km. The wetland within the reserve covers 3 000ha of the 12 000ha Klip River floodplain and is one of the largest wetlands on the highveld and the most important natural wetland in South Africa; as such, it has been declared a RAMSAR wetland of international conservation significance. Five Red Data bird species are partially or wholly dependent on the wetland, these being the Little Bittern, Yellow-billed Stork, Wattled Crane, White-winged Flufftail and African Grass Owl. The wetland consists of a unique aquatic habitat with approximately 220 oxbow lakes which have formed over centuries by the meandering course of the Klip River. This marshland is a very important sponge area for the Vaal River catchment area. A variety of plant species, including wild rice occur in the reserve. The highest point in the reserve is located on the eastern side of the wetland, at an altitude of 1 795m.

Due to the diverse topography, vegetation and unique wetland system, a variety of bird species can be found on the reserve. These include Pale-crowned Cisticola, Orange-breasted Waxbill, African Yellow and Sedge warblers in the marshy areas, Eastern Long-billed Lark, Buff-streaked Chat and Mountain Wheatear on the rocky ridges and Blue Korhaan, White-bellied and Denham’s bustard as well as Southern Bald Ibis, Melodious and Eastern Clapper larks on the open grassy plains. Grasslands surrounding the hills are good places to find Grey-winged and Red-winged francolins. Common Quail and Common Buttonquail are found in the moister, open grasslands. Birds of prey found in the reserve include Pallid, Montagu’s, Western Marsh harriers (summer only) and resident African Marsh Harrier and Marsh Owl. Martial and Verreaux’s eagles are often seen in the surrounding areas and a breeding pair of Secretarybirds is also present. Blue and Grey Crowned cranes also use the reserve for roosting and breeding.

Due to the ever changing climate, hydrology and marshy vegetation Corn, African, Black and Baillon’s crakes visit the wetland sporadically and Red-chested Flufftail is resident. Go-liath and Black herons are also seen from time to time while Black-crowned Night Herons use Willow trees as roosting sites. Half-collared Kingfisher and African Black Duck have also been noted along the fast flowing streams entering the reserve.

Route Description
Vehicles with a high clearance are essential to navigate the tracks on the reserve. During the rainy season most of the tracks are muddy or wet and a 4x4 vehicle is recommended. Places where rivers and side streams are crossed have markers showing water levels, which give visitors an indication of whether the track is passable or not. Visitors must please stay on the tracks and the Resort Manager will indicate whether the reserve is accessible or not. Keys for the southern part of the reserve need to be obtained from the Resort Manager.

The main entrance, on the east side of the reserve, is 16 km from the town of Memel, and 12 km from the intersection of the S465 gravel road with the tarred R34 (Newcastle-Vrede) road. The reserve gate (15) is open to the public from 07h00 to 16h00, except if prior arrangements have been made with the Resort Manager to extend the gate times. A minimal entrance fee is payable at the entrance gate, where visitors will receive a map to navigate the vehicle tracks on the reserve.

The gravel road leading to the chalets, as well as nearby rocky areas is good for Great Crested Grebe – a beautiful grebe that can be seen in large open water bodies in Memel area.
Secretarybird, Black-winged Kite, Eastern Long-billed Lark and Mountain Wheatear. Other LBIs to be found on this route include Red-capped and Spike-heeled larks, African Pipit, Zitting and Wing-snapping cisticolas. The rank grass area below the chalets towards the Coot Hide and the Hippo rehabilitation enclosure is where Red-winged Francolin is most frequently observed.

The Coot Hide normally delivers good sightings of Black Crake and Little Bittern, while Eurasian Bittern has been observed and heard between the reeds on the far side of the pan. The Moorhen Hide delivers good sightings of Common Moorhen, African Rail, Squacco and Black-crowned Night herons, while White-throated Swallow and African Hoopoe have bred in the vicinity of the hide in the past. Spotted-necked Otter like to use this waterbody to raise their young. The Hippo Hide is known for Whiskered Tern, White-breasted and Reed cormorants, various kingfishers, African Fish Eagle and African Darter which often sit on the dead trees near the hide. The Hippos use this waterbody regularly, as do the Spotted-necked Otters, which regularly hunt Carp in this vicinity.

The vehicle tracks on the eastern and western sides of the wetland running parallel to the Klip River are most productive in the early mornings. Pale-crowned Cisticola can be found in the stands of Red Vlei Grass, while Orange-breasted Waxbill can be found in stands of longer grass near the reeds and river. Corn and African crakes prefer to forage at first light in these vehicle tracks, where the grass is dense and very wet. The herd of Cape Buffalo also prefers the areas near the river in the early mornings and care should be taken when birding here. Listen for Little Rush, African Reed and Great Reed warblers when passing through the sedges and reeds. Qualfinches are seen often during the day, drinking water from the wet patches in these vehicle tracks.

The pans on the south-western side of the reserve are where most of the waterfowl species are to be found. Grey Crowned and Wattled cranes are often seen on these pans and have bred here in the past. Greater and Lesser flamingos, African Spoonbill, Yellow-billed Stork, Yellow-billed Egret, Grey and Purple herons are some of the other larger waterfowl to be encountered at these sites. South African Shelduck and Hottentot Teal are some of the more sought-after waterfowl species to be found. When water levels are
high, Maccoa Duck, Southern Pochard and Great Crested Grebe can also be found on these pans. A mobile hide is provided to assist visitors to get closer to the waterfowl as water levels rise and fall. Whiskered Tern also breeds on these pans alongside Red-knobbed Coot, Common Moorhen and African Swamphen. When water levels are low, numbers of wader species increase, with Pied Avocet, African Snipe and Marsh Sandpiper seen more regularly with the more common waders. The sedges at the edge of these pans are good habitat for Sedge (summer only) and Little Rush warblers. The dense water grass in the shallows provides excellent cover for flufftails and crakes. African Yellow Warbler may be found on the south-eastern side of the reserve, close to the boundary in the area between the Wildemanspruit and Klip River. This part of the reserve also provides a good view of the pans.

The wetland on the Waterval property at the south-western end of the reserve is where most of the flufftail, crake and rail species can be found. The overgrown pans with large stands of Bulrushes (Typha capensis) and Wild rice grass (Leersia hexandra) provide good habitat for these secretive birds which can often be heard at first light when conditions are favorable. There is also a beautiful viewpoint in this area from which the oxbow lakes (pedes) can be seen. Banded and Brown-throated martins are common over the wetland, while Alpine, Common and African Black swifts are often seen at close quarters from the viewpoint. Entry to this area can be arranged with the Reserve and/or Resort Manager. Western Marsh Harrier is often seen in the late summer months near the heronry just north of the pans described above. Pallid and Montagu’s harriers are also seen on the western side of the reserve, often hunting low over the longer grass close to the wetland or perching on the game fence poles.

During the summer bailing of grass on the reserve, as part of natural resource utilization and game management of this protected area, certain bird species are attracted to the open short grass for easily accessible food. White Stork, Southern Bald Ibis and Western Cattle Egret are normally the first to join the action, while African Marsh Harrier and Common Buzzard use the bales as vantage points from which to hunt.

Nocturnal birds found in the reserve include Spotted Eagle-Owl in the Willow trees along the river. Western Barn Owl in or near any of the buildings on the reserve and Marsh Owl, most often seen in the late afternoon hunting over grassland in the reserve. European and Fiery-necked nightjars have been recorded in the clumps of exotic Eucalyptus trees, while Spotted Thick-knee also occurs near open areas around buildings and rocky ridges in the reserve.

The farm dams in areas adjacent to the reserve are also good for waterfowl species not seen in the reserve. It is not necessary to access these farms as observations can be made from the gravel roads.
ROUTE 6: BOTHA’S PASS ROUTE

Key Species
Although this is a beautiful, quiet route, it has produced some great birds, including all three species of crane, Black Stork, African Fish Eagle, Botha’s Lark, Eastern Long-billed Lark, Mountain Pipit and Pale-crowned Cisticola.

Route Description
Take the main Memel–Newcastle road (R34), heading east and then turn left onto the S821 (25), heading north. After about 1 km, take a small tertiary road to the right (41); this road is not marked and can easily be missed. This road will take you all the way to the S465 (42). The grasslands in this area are at a lower altitude than those to the south of Memel, but may nonetheless produce various larks and pipits.

When reaching the S465, turn left and pass the farm Mispah on the right, following which there is an extensive wetland on the right (on the Modderspruit). Continue with the S465, which further on turns sharply to the left, heading south again. Continue on and scan all the wetlands along this road for all three crane species, Maccoa Duck, Southern Pochard and Cape Teal.

At the northern border of the Seekoeivlei Nature Reserve you can also turn right (16). Along this stretch of road to point (17) are a number of beautiful wetlands on both sides of the road. Scan these wetlands for skulking waterbirds which hide among the vegetation.

You can then return to the S465 and finish the loop by continuing along the gravel road until you reach the tarred R34 (13) again. Turn right to return to Memel. Alternatively, enter the Seekoeivlei Nature Reserve at the main gate (15). It is best to visit this area first thing in the morning, so that the sun is behind you (refer to Route 5).
**ROUTE 7: KOMMANDOSPRUIT ROUTE**

**Key Species**

The Rooinek Pass mountain range to the west of Memel acts as a natural barrier. The micro-climate on the northern, Vrede side of the mountain range differs from the southern, Memel side in that the average temperature is higher here and the average rainfall lower. The Kommandospruit Route is also on average 50-100 m lower in altitude than the routes on the Memel side of the range. This difference in micro-climate results in a small degree of change in vegetation, as well as slightly different bird, mammal, amphibian, reptile and insect species. The landscape becomes more flat towards Vrede. The multitude of streams on the route cut through the landscape to form rocky valleys, providing ideal habitat for Mountain Wheatear, Sentinel Rock Thrush, Cape Bunting and Familiar Chat. Half-collared Kingfisher and African Black Duck associate with these narrow, meandering streams and where the drier landscape flattens out, Orange River Francolin and Northern Black Korhaan can be found. Blue Korhaan, Southern Bald Ibis and Secretarybird also occur on the route.

Other bird species normally associated with the Southern Free State which occur on this route include Acacia Pied Barbet, African Red-eyed Bulbul, Wattled Starling, White-backed Mousebird and Fairy Flycatcher.

**Route Description**

To start this route, drive along the R34 in the direction of Vrede. The S820 turn off is to the right, 23 km from Memel. Look out for Grey-winged and Orange River francolins as well as Northern Black Korhaan on the first part of the route. Quaggapoort Farm is 3 km from the T-junction. Brown-throated Martin and various kingfishers are known to breed in burrows excavated in the river banks on the far side of the Kommandospruit. African Black Duck is regularly seen along this part of the stream, while Blue Korhaan inhabits adjacent grasslands. Look out for Mountain Wheatear and Cape Bunting on the rocks near the stream. The next stream, crossed at 7.9 km, is the Elandsfontein, a tributary of the Poortjies Spruit. The small dams along this stream often hold significant numbers of waterfowl. Tygerfontein, another tributary of the Poortjies Spruit, is reached after 10 km; it also joins the Kommandospruit. Rocky ridges here are home to Sentinel Rock Thrush, which can be easily spotted during the winter months when firebreaks are burned along this piece of gravel road. The wetland just after the turn off to the farmstead and adjacent cultivated lands often host large numbers of Blue Crane in the early winter. Verreaux’s Eagle is often seen gliding along the mountains on the eastern side of the route for the next 6 km.

After Stormshoek, turn left at the T-junction (29) and follow the S815 for 6 km from the turn off, where a shallow pan is visible on the left. Waders and larger water birds such as Greater Flamingo and African Spoonbill like to forage in this pan. After another 2 km, Brakpan is reached at 24.7 km, and this small marsh and dam (32) holds a large variety of waterfowl. To get closer to the dam turn right on to the S814 and after 300 m the marsh and dam can be viewed. Whiskered Tern often breeds here.

Kommandospruit and the adjacent floodplain (wetland) (37) is 6 km from the Poortje farmstead. Marsh Owl and African Marsh Harrier are often seen hunting over this wetland and riverside vegetation be scanned carefully from the bridge for roosting Black-crowned Night Heron, as well as Half-collared Kingfisher.

This is the end of the Kommandospruit Route. Vrede is 22 km from this point, making this an ideal route for Gauteng-based birders who might still want to do birdwatching in the morning before continuing home to Gauteng in the afternoon. For others, Memel is 35 km from Kommandospruit, on the S815.
WETLAND: WAAIHOEK AND PAARDEN VLEI

This is an interesting wetland to visit not too far from Memel (28). Travel about 17 km from Memel along the S782 until some wetlands are visible on the left. The farms here share a large shallow oxbow lake fed by two reservoir dams that forms part of the Klip River floodplain. A large variety and significant number of waterfowl and associated birds can be found here. The dams and surrounding floodplain at the furthest point of the oxbow lake – about 2 km from the staff house gate – hold most of the specials and this area can be reached on foot. Access to these farms can be arranged through the Reserve Manager of Seekoeivlei Nature Reserve. A large area of the wetland can be observed from the road however, especially with the aid of a spotting scope. Species that can be seen here include White-faced Whistling, White-backed and Maccoa ducks, Southern Pochard, Great Crested Grebe, Greater Flamingo, Grey Crowned Crane, African Jacana, African Crake and Black-winged Pratincole, to name a few.