

Giant's Castle and Kiara Lodge

Written by Neil Gray

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3 September 2007 Just back from a 6-night trip to the Drakensberg, with 3 nights at Giant's Castle and 3 nights at Kiara Lodge adjacent to Golden Gate Highlands National Park.

The trip got off to a good start with Blue Crane, Secretarybird and a lifer in a pair of Barrow's Korhaan all seen near Sterkfontein Dam on the journey down to Giant's Castle. Highlight of the trip was 2 mornings spent in the Vulture Hide at Giant's Castle. The first morning turned up no fewer than 17 Cape Vulture (all in the air at the same time), at least 1 juvenile and 2 immature Bearded Vulture, and several Lanner Falcon. A flock of White-necked Raven had taken it upon themselves to chase off all raptors and I witnessed many instances where 2 or 3 ravens would join forces to harry either a Cape or Bearded Vulture. The second morning added a magnificent adult Bearded Vulture, a Jackal Buzzard and an immature Verraux's Eagle, as well as several fly-pasts by small flocks of Southern Bald Ibis. The hutted camp was teeming with Red-winged Starling, Greater Double-collared and Malachite Sunbird, Southern Boubou, Cape Weaver and Cape Robin-Chat. A walk to the Main Caves added Cape Canary, Dark-capped Yellow Warbler, Drakensberg Prinia, Wailing and Levaillant's Cisticola, Bokmakierie and Ground Woodpecker among others, and waiting for me as I returned to my chalet was a Red-necked Spurfowl.

The drive from Giant's Castle to Kiara Lodge was also quite eventful, with Jackal Buzzard almost every 5km from Giant's Castle to Bergville. Two separate Long-crested Eagles were seen and a pair of Grey Crowned Crane near Sterkfontein Dam.

From Kiara Lodge a morning was spent in Golden Gate Highlands National Park. The Vulture Feeding Scheme site proved very fruitful, with 29 Cape Vultures and a single adult Bearded Vulture present at the carcasses. From there next stop was the car park for the hiking trails to the Sentinel and Mont-aux-Sources, where my intended target bird was the Drakensberg Rockjumper. To my amazement I found one no more than 10m through the gate onto the hiking trail! So, mission accomplished, I returned to Kiara without having to put my vertigo to the test of the hiking trail. I added Buff-streaked Chat on the trip back down the mountain.

The following morning a sortie along the secondary gravel roads between Kestell and Clarens produced large numbers of Secretarybird and both Grey-winged and Red-winged Francolin, and in the afternoon a nesting Rock Kestrel was located on the sandstone cliffs behind Kiara Lodge.

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Only a trip total of 92 species, but given the time of year and the fact that half of the veld was burnt to a crisp at both Giant's Castle and Golden Gate, probably not too bad. There were some real big ticks on the list, so I can't be too unhappy.

Neil Gray