

# zululand zenith

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **ADAM RILEY**

*A view across pristine Zululand riverine forest and bushveld in the Manyoni Private Game Reserve.*



**I**t was the penultimate day of five weeks of the strict lockdown in South Africa. I was pushing the open safari Landcruiser as fast as I could down the muddy main road through the Manyoni Private Game Reserve. My two-year-old daughter's hat blew off and I slammed on the brakes in frustration, reluctantly reversing to retrieve it. A herd of elephant crossed the road ahead but I managed to slip past them, much to my relief and the kids' disappointment. I had to get to the northern boundary asap!

Quailfinches flying up off the roadside didn't slow me down; we shot past a perched Bateleur; Pink-throated Twinspots and Rudd's Apalises vied unsuccessfully for my attention from roadside bushes; and we sped past a Hooded Vulture, a provincial rarity, with barely a sideways glance. After what felt like an eternity, I spotted another game-viewer

parked on the roadside and held my breath, hoping my nemesis was still there.

Johan Pretorius, manager and senior ranger at Zebra Hills Lodge, was gesticulating excitedly and a flash of white caught my attention as it briefly burst into view and then dropped into thick grass. I had made it just in time and the taste of success was so satisfying after my many failed attempts. What a beauty that Cattle Egret was! Cattle Egret?! What on earth could make a Cattle Egret sighting so dramatic? Well, it was my 259th lockdown bird and until then I had consistently dipped it.

**T**his year's Covid-19 lockdown will be seared into our collective memories for the rest of our lives. During March, the exponentially escalating infection rates generated an environment of fear. On 23 March, President Ramaphosa announced a three-week strict lockdown to begin at midnight on 27 March, giving everyone a few days to prepare and stock up (if only we'd known alcohol wouldn't be available for nearly 10 weeks!).

My family was faced with a difficult choice: locking down in our comfortable home in Hilton, close to shops, hospitals and other amenities, or taking the riskier option of bolting to our lodge, Zebra Hills, in the wilds of northern Zululand. My friend Murray Collins finally swung the verdict, pointing out that if we stayed at home, by the end of lockdown we would regret not having been in the wilderness and there was no way we could ever get that time back. How valuable his advice turned out to be.

After convincing my somewhat reluctant wife Felicity, the next challenge was packing for an extended stay for three kids (William, six, Alex, four, and Victoria, two), our wonderful domestic helper Gogo (Granny) Eunice and two dogs. This forced us to make difficult decisions on what to squeeze in. I admit to a wave of panic when I walked into my library. As a voracious book collector and reader, I was overwhelmed by choice and it was tough to decide which books to select. I



could have saved myself the stress, as I hardly did any reading in the end...

As we locked up our home and drove out, vehicle packed to the hilt, we had the feeling that we might never return; strange days indeed. The roads became quieter as we headed north on the four-hour drive to Zululand, finally arriving at the reserve gates. Two cheetahs crossed the road right in front of us and we took this as a good omen that we had made the right decision.

Along the way, David Hoddinott asked me if I was planning to enter the >

above *This juvenile Verreaux's Eagle-Owl screamed day and night during our five-week lockdown stay at Manyoni Reserve.*

opposite, above *The pattern and coloration of the female Black Cuckooshrike bears little resemblance to the all-black male.*

opposite, below *Pink-throated Twinspots are best located by their high-pitched trilling, usually from deep inside a thicket.*



above *The aptly named Gorgeous Bush-shrike is one of the most vocal species of Zululand.*

opposite *Biologist Leno Sierra explains the finer points of Temminck's ground pangolin foraging behaviour to the Riley family.*

BirdLasser Lockdown Challenge. Once I established that one's lockdown property could be any size, I thought it would be fun to see how many bird species I could find during lockdown. In the end, 1245 South African birders entered the Lockdown Challenge, recording an incredible total of 654 species.

At 06h12 on day 1, I was awoken by two energetic lions roaring their hearts out just outside our room. Despite these deep, primeval soundwaves filling my head, the desperate high-pitched shriek of a juvenile Verreaux's Eagle-Owl penetrated the roars and became my first lockdown bird. Five bird-filled weeks later it was also my final bird as this young owl screamed continuously in our lodge garden, day and night. I still don't understand why it was so vocal (it had been displaying the same behaviour for several months).

I immediately started racking up birds: species no. 2 was unsurprisingly

Dark-capped Bulbul (I love the Ugandan name for this bird which means 'neighbour', because wherever you are, there is always one looking at you); no. 3 was one of our Zululand specials, Gorgeous Bush-shrike, and so the list burgeoned. By 07h30 we'd managed to load the kids and coffee onto the game-viewer and were off birding the reserve. Numerous times we felt guilty that we had the freedom to explore this wilderness while our friends and family were confined to their homes. However, our patrols and drives did signify to potential poachers that there was a presence on the reserve and we gathered valuable avian distributional data (in total I logged 2845 bird sightings on BirdLasser during lockdown). Assisting our neighbouring community with food parcels during this crisis was another vital project undertaken by the Manyoni Reserve and we were able to contribute to this worthy cause.

The 23 000-hectare pristine wilderness that makes up the Manyoni Private Game Reserve lies west of the Lebombo Mountains between Mkuze and Hluhluwe, in the very heart of Zululand. The reserve consists of rolling hills covered in grasslands and mixed bushveld, but particularly in the south, around the Msunduze River, the habitat becomes more fragmented with dramatic cliffs and lush riverine forest, dominated by fig and fever trees. The reserve boasts the Big Five and was originally created to expand the range of the Critically Endangered black rhino; indeed, for many years after its formation in 2004, it was known as the Zululand Rhino Reserve. With more recent reintroductions of African wild dogs and even Temminck's ground pangolin, we are proud that the reserve is now home to every mammal species that was resident here in historical times.

The game viewing was phenomenal and we racked up 36 mammal species during our five weeks there, including innumerable experiences with many lions (with some exhilarating hunts thrown in for good measure). Manyoni has one of the largest and most successful cheetah populations of any private reserve in the country and we regularly saw these elegant cats, even drinking from the waterhole in front of our lodge. This was also a popular rendezvous for the reserve's elephants. The two herds are particularly relaxed and on several occasions allowed our family access to their daily lives by calmly approaching and even surrounding us. Both species of rhinos occur in good numbers and it was encouraging to see how many had playful youngsters in tow. The wild dogs were beginning to den and subsequently gave birth to six healthy pups.

Other sightings we enjoyed comprised serval, side-striped jackal, spotted hyaena, greater galago and marsh, white-tailed and banded mongooses. However, our most special wildlife experience was walking with a pangolin. Several of these elusive animals have recently been reintroduced here, all rescued from the >





above *Neergaard's Sunbird* is one of the rarer birds of the Manyoni Reserve.

opposite *The mighty Crowned Eagle* is the apex predator of Manyoni's riverine forests and several pairs keep territories along the Msunduze River.

illegal wildlife trade. My family were treated to a walk with a female pangolin, accompanied by Leno Sierra from Mexico, who has dedicated herself to facilitating these pangolins' transition from captivity to freedom. It was so satisfying watching the wonder on my children's faces at being able to spend time with this endearing creature.

Despite being sidetracked by such abundant wildlife, it didn't take too long to get to 200 birds, with the typical Zululand bushveld species recorded throughout our explorations. Riverine forests produced the secretive Eastern Nicator, by April only emitting its winter 'chuck' call from the thickets, while Grey and

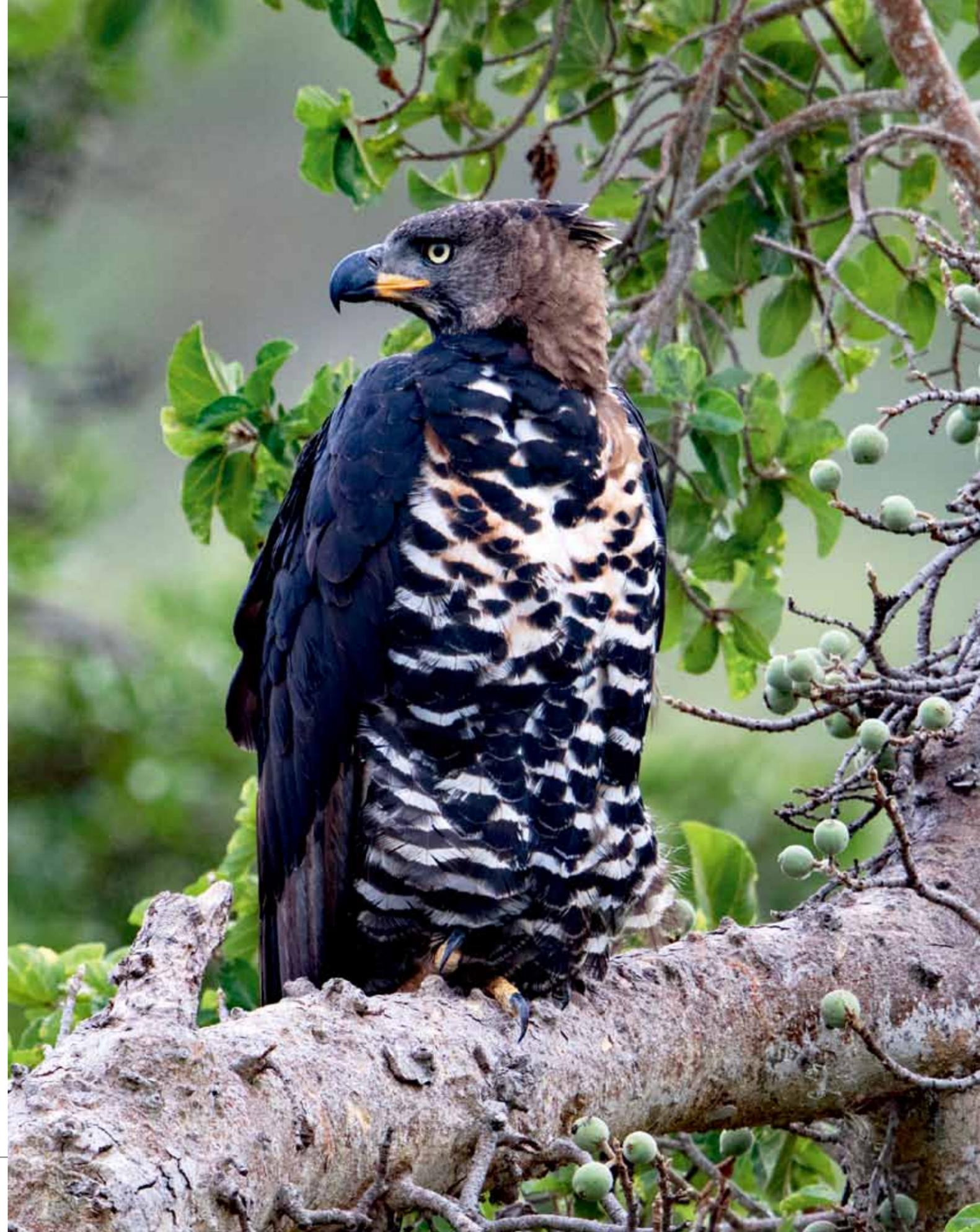
Purple-banded sunbirds danced in the canopy, Blue-mantled Crested Flycatchers shrieked from hidden tangles, Crested Guineafowl scolded us as we passed and family groups of Pink-throated Twinspots and Grey Waxbills played hide-and-seek along the forest edges. A pair of Cape Batises were at the very edge of their range here and representing one of only a few reserve records. However, the resident African Broadbills eluded me for the entire five weeks. It was rather frustrating to say the least, because I knew they were there and just keeping quiet at this time of year.

Fruiting figs attracted hordes of species, including noisy families of White-eared Barbets, dazzling African Green Pigeons, raucous Trumpeter Hornbills and flocks of Black-bellied Glossy Starlings. Crowned Eagles' huge nests dominate the forests and we regularly encountered these apex predators. Cliffs along the Msunduze River yielded Striped Pipit, Mocking Cliff Chat and

Cape Rock Thrush and exploration of the higher hills produced several birds seldom recorded on the reserve, including Rock Kestrel, Shelley's Francolin, Plain-backed Pipit, Wing-snapping, Lazy and Wailing cisticolas and Brimstone Canary. The poorly-known Bushveld Pipit is surprisingly plentiful in these rocky grasslands. Common Buttonquails flushed up regularly, but a prize find was a Black-rumped Buttonquail, a new reserve record, taking the birdlist to 411. Presumably at this time of year they migrate from their high-elevation breeding sites to winter on the warmer Zululand coastal grasslands, with a few resting here en route.

The Manyoni Reserve forms the southern regular distribution for a variety of bushveld species, many of which are regarded as rarities in KwaZulu-Natal. These became a major focus during the Lockdown Challenge. Dark Chanting Goshawks are resident breeders, Hooded Vultures are currently resident although not known to breed in the province, but we do have the southernmost breeding Bennett's Woodpeckers. Magpie Shrike, Red-headed Weaver and Red-crested Bustard are other sought-after targets of provincial listers. We also regularly visited the reserve's few wetlands and waterholes. Our handicap lies in the fact that the reserve has limited open water and waterbirds are hard to come by; hence my epic struggle to find a Cattle Egret.

Twice during lockdown we had unseasonal rainstorms that brought the Msunduze down in flood and attracted wandering waterbirds, including the first records in more than a decade of Hottentot Teal and Great White Pelican. To see the former we had to cross the surging river, a huge thrill for the kids, and the latter also caused an adrenalin rush when the pair of pelicans was radioed-in from the south of the reserve while I was in the far north. On my frantic trek down, the radio reported that the pelicans had taken flight. This is where birding camaraderie really came into play, as several rangers tracked the pelicans' progress across the reserve and with help over >





*The Violet-backed Starling is a common intra-African breeding migrant on the reserve.*

the radio, I was finally able to spot the birds as they soared into the distance. Indeed, of the top 12 scores on the Bird-Lasser Lockdown Challenge, an incredible eight were by birders based on the Manyoni Reserve! This not only reflects the rich birdlife, but also the keenness of the residents and the unselfish sharing of information during the challenge.

Another interesting aspect of the challenge was noting the departure dates of the migrants. By starting in late March, I had already missed European and Broad-billed rollers, but by the end of the month, Willow and Marsh warblers had also vanished, as had Spotted Flycatchers, Wahlberg's Eagles and Eurasian Hobbits. By the end of the first week of April, Lesser Grey Shrikes, European Bee-eaters and Black Cuckoos had gone and the abundant Red-backed Shrikes were last seen on 12th, a resident Common Sandpiper on the 13th, Barn Swallows on the 18th and Wood Sandpiper on the 21st. By the end of strict lockdown on 30 April, I was surprised still to be

finding Violet-backed Starlings, Lesser Striped Swallows and both Diederik and Klaas's cuckoos.

Another aspect was finding delayed migrants; for instance, I thought I had dipped Woodland Kingfisher only to find a pair on 11 April at a site I had been birding regularly; even more surprisingly, I recorded a Common Buzzard on 29 April after more than a month of not seeing one. Over the same period, winter visitors began to arrive: African Stonechats in small numbers and then spreading throughout the grasslands, Jackal Buzzards by mid-April and African Dusky and Fiscal flycatchers and Wattled Starlings by the end of April.

Raptors are a real indicator of an environment's health and in total I recorded an incredible 33 diurnal species and seven owls. The absolute birding highlight for me was raptor-related and happened right at our lodge gate. We were returning from a morning's outing and raptors had started moving. Kettles of vultures were spiralling, a Bateleur floated low overhead, followed by a majestic Martial Eagle. A Peregrine then rose up and as I was marvelling at this avian superjet, I picked up an accipiter flying across my field of view. It had a grey back, a long, barred tail and was

larger than the resident Shikras, Gabars and Little Sparrowhawks. My mind immediately pinged Ovambo Sparrowhawk, but that is a species almost unknown in KwaZulu-Natal, with just one specimen and four sight records, the last in 1980. But I had eliminated all alternatives and during the next few weeks several other birders picked up a pair of adults; then one of the rangers, Michaela Crous, stunned us all by photographing a juvenile Ovambo. It was no. 412 for the Manyoni Reserve and a significant find of a very rare bird in eastern South Africa.

By the end of the original three-week lockdown I had logged 240 species and was leading the pack in South Africa. As the five weeks wound down, the competition had become really tight and in the final few days a birder in the Greater Kruger area overtook me. Still, I was proud to have made second place with 260 species, while also balancing quality family time and steering my ecotourism business through the corona crisis. My final bird was, fittingly, another raptor: the elegant African Cuckoo Hawk. Thus ended my magical five weeks locked down in the Zululand wilderness. I couldn't have wished for a better place to be stranded. ♦