



# Naude's Nek

## On a high in the Drakensberg

PETER RYAN (2)

Alpine habitats are not renowned for their high diversity of birds, but they often support a number of endemic species. The main Drakensberg massif of Lesotho and South Africa is no exception, with Drakensberg Rock-jumpers, Mountain Pipits and Drakensberg Siskins the star attractions. Naude's Nek, in the Eastern Cape, offers all three in abundance, plus plenty of other good birds. **PETER RYAN** recently revisited his favourite birding spot in the 'Berg, and took the opportunity to have a close look at the enigmatic Mountain Pipit.

At 2 500 metres, Naude's Nek is touted as the highest public road in South Africa. From the west, the road leads from Barkly East, through the sleepy hamlet of Rhodes, and then climbs gradually over the main Drakensberg range. For about 10 kilometres it meanders across grassy alpine pla-

teaux before descending steeply to Elands Heights, where one has the choice of heading either south to Maclear or east to Mount Fletcher. The western slope is drier and the vegetation scrubrier than the east. Birding is good all along the road, but the main target species are found at the summit.

Like most areas, the best time to bird at Naude's Nek is early in the morning, hopefully before the clouds have risen from the valleys below. This requires an early start if you are based in one of the several charming B&B options in Rhodes. Hardier birders may wish to camp on the Nek itself, but this can be chilly, even in

summer. In winter, snow is a real possibility. Alternatively, Tenahead Lodge is being built on a side road four kilometres north of the highest point.

If the weather is kind, the birding is straightforward, with most of the birds easily seen from the comfort of your car. Drakensberg Rock-jumpers literally hop across the road in the rockier areas, and often sit quite unconcernedly on roadside boulders. It is rewarding to spend some time with these peculiar birds, trying to infer the web of kinship that might allow several males and females to exist in seemingly tightly knit groups. They are joined in their rocky habitat by Ground Woodpeckers, Cape Buntings and Sentinel Rock-Thrushes, although the



Male Drakensberg (or Orange-breasted) Rock-jumpers are perhaps the most charismatic of the Drakensberg specials. They differ from Cape Rock-jumpers mainly in having paler bellies, and are sometimes considered to be merely a subspecies of the Cape species.

latter are by no means confined to rocky areas and often perch on fence poles in open grassland.

One of the most abundant birds is the African Stonechat, with its stunning males and dowdier females. They often hawk insects from the fences that line the roadside. Sickie-winged Chats also are quite common; they superficially resemble a washed-out Familiar Chat, but they are more slender and have a pale gold eye-ring. In flight, the buffy rump and bases of the outer tail feathers are distinctive. These birds favour areas with scrubby bushes, which they share with Layard's Tit-Babblers and the exquisite Fairy Flycatchers. Warblers are relatively scarce, being represented only by a few Karoo Prinias and Wing-snapping and Wailing cisticolas.

Yellow and Cape canaries are regular, but probably the most abundant seed-eaters are Drakensberg Siskins. Like their Cape counterpart, they usually occur in small flocks, and often fly long distances, which can be frustrating if you're trying to follow a group. In flight, their 'voop-vep' contact call is distinctive, and at close range the white inner webs to the outer tail feathers are striking, almost wagtail-like. With a little patience, they can be observed at close range as they feed on grass seeds and buds. In early summer, the males sing from perches, such as roadside

fences, while the females tend to remain on the ground or in vegetation.

In terms of bigger birds, Grey-winged Francolins are abundant, as are Common Quails in the grassier areas. Naude's Nek also offers something for the raptorophile. Jackal Buzzards are common, presumably because of the high densities of Slogget's ice rats that occur on the summit. Cape Vultures often soar overhead, while Secretarybirds stride across the grassy slopes. With luck, you will see the unmistakable shape of a Bearded Vulture as it glides along the ridges. At night, the deep hooting of Cape Eagle-Owls carries across the valleys. But those who really want a challenge can try to track down one of the Striped Flufftails which call from the grassy slopes.

Notwithstanding the rock-jumpers and siskins, Naude's Nek is pipit country. It is here that John Mendelsohn and Ian ▸





PETER RYAN (6)

**Above** The heavily marked face and breast of a Mountain Pipit. Note also the pinkish base to its bill; this is yellow in African Pipit.



The Mountain Pipit (**above, left**) appears larger and heavier than the African Pipit (**above, centre**), with a pink base to the bill and buffy outer tail feathers. In early summer, adults have fresh plumage (the bird shown here is still growing one tail feather) whereas African Pipits have worn plumage.



**Above** The Vulnerable Yellow-breasted Pipit occurs patchily on level, grassy areas on the summit.

Sinclair first recognised that the pipits on the high plateaux were distinctly different from the African Pipits in the lower valleys, prompting the recognition of the Mountain Pipit as a distinct species. The large, well-marked montane form had been collected in the highlands of Lesotho by Jack Vincent in 1946 and Clive Quickelberge in 1968, but it was only when they were collected alongside 'normal' African Pipits at Naude's Nek by Mendelsohn and Sinclair that their species status was recognised. Phillip Clancey then linked the skins to a series of birds collected in the Northern Cape, Botswana, Namibia, north-eastern Angola, north-western Zambia and southern DRC, and argued that Mountain Pipits breed in the Drakensberg in summer, then migrate north in winter. Accordingly, the oldest name for the species is *Anthus hoeschi*, named by Erwin Stresemann in 1938, based on the type-specimen collected in the Erongo Mountains of Namibia by Walter Hoesch.

The migration of Mountain Pipits is very poorly known. Most birds depart from their montane breeding areas between April and October, but there are reports of birds overwintering in Lesotho. Away from the Drakensberg, Mountain Pipits are either overlooked or are misidentified as other pipit species, because there are no Atlas records from the presumed migration routes. The large, grassland pipits are arguably the most confusing group to identify in southern Africa, so it is useful to become familiar with birds of known identity.

At Naude's Nek, Mountain Pipits are distinctly larger and heavier than adjacent populations of African Pipits, recalling Long-billed or Plain-backed pipits in structure. At close range, the gape and mouth are distinctly pink, not yellowish, and the outer webs of the outer tail feathers are buffy, not white. In early summer, adults are characterised by fresh plumage, which makes them appear more crisply and heavily streaked than African Pipits, which breed in fairly worn plumage. However, the most distinctive difference between the two species is their vocalisations. In aerial display, the structure of both species' songs is similar, a repetitive 'tip-tlip-tlip tip-tlip-tlip...', but Mountain Pipits have a much slower, deeper call. They are also more likely to give one or more 'trlup' or 'chlup' call notes while perched.

In summer, Mountain Pipits are abundant on the summit of Naude's Nek, becoming increasingly less so as you descend, and finally disappearing at around 2 000 metres. By comparison, African Pipits are abundant at lower elevations, especially in ploughed fields, becoming less common as you ascend the pass. Both species regularly perch on fences, but in my experience Mountain Pipits are less likely to undertake aerial displays than African Pipits, calling instead from the ground or a low perch. Don't be confused by the many Large-billed Larks which also perch on the fences. The eastern subspecies has a rather small bill, but it is still much heavier than any pipit's bill. It also has a small, erectile crest and a 'squeaky gate' song that is quite different from the pipits' songs.

Mountain and African pipits are not the only pipits found at Naude's Nek. The vulnerable Yellow-breasted Pipit occurs patchily on the summit and on the eastern slopes, where it favours fairly level, grassy areas, and is unlikely to be seen from the road. It is best located by walking until you flush one, and then (with patience) you can watch it stalking through the grass in search of caterpillars and other insect prey. In early summer, males may reveal themselves by their 'wink' song, given in aerial display but, unlike many other pipits, this is seldom sustained. Occasionally they even respond to pishing, hovering overhead or landing some



Sentinel Rock-Thrushes often perch on fence poles in open grassland.

distance away to inspect this curiously noisy intruder.

The final pipit that may be seen is the often-elusive African Rock Pipit. More frequently heard than seen, this bird is best located by the male's piercing song, which is delivered from a perch on a rocky outcrop. When not singing, this species is remarkably easy to overlook, as it forages unobtrusively on the ground.

Naude's Nek appears little changed from when I first visited almost 20 years ago. The area is not formally conserved, but to date there appears to be little pressure to transform the alpine grasslands. Hopefully it will remain a haven for the endemic birds of the high Drakensberg. □



Near Rhodes, on the approach to Naude's Nek.