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Paradise Found

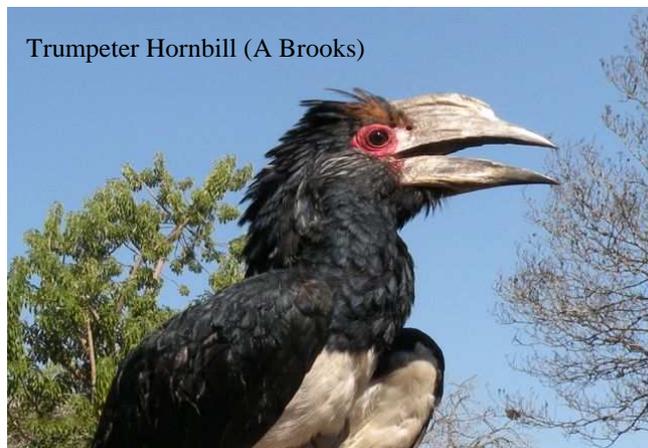
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No bird enthusiast would dispute the fact that southern Africa, with an above average species diversity, is a haven for birders and ornithologists alike. Birding routes and Important Bird Areas abound, but there are few recognised sites for the recreational ringer.

With this in mind, I was privileged to be introduced to Thangami Safari Spa in rural KwaZulu-Natal by avid ringer Colin Williams. Thangami is located in a Zululand valley in the area between Vryheid, Ulundi and Nongoma (28° 00' S, 31° 18' E). Much of the surrounding area has been horribly urbanised in traditional Zulu fashion, but the 4500ha Thangami reserve remains relatively pristine.

Apart from its sheer size, Thangami has a good variety of habitats to choose from: there is lots of bush ranging from dense to sparse, rocky hillsides, reed beds, riparian bush along the Swart Umfolozi which flows through the reserve, and more. Owner Gert Uys, himself a keen birder, is even willing to close sections of track to accommodate the activities of bird ringers! In short, one is utterly spoilt for choice and deciding where to put nets is probably the hardest decision at this site.

In addition to Thangami itself, there are two adjacent areas also owned by Gert and open to visitors. Rotspark is an old fruit farm and, although unharvested, the fruit trees are



Trumpeter Hornbill (A Brooks)

still productive and these provide an irresistible attraction to birds, especially the African Green-Pigeons *Treron calva* and Trumpeter Hornbills *Bycanistes bucinator* which abound. We were lucky enough to catch a Trumpeter which blundered into one of our nets, but there are hundreds more of these birds if you know how to catch them. I love listening to these cry-babies and can't help wondering what the early

explorers thought when they first heard them. Rotspark consists of a series of grass terraces with some fruit trees, but mostly indigenous bush between them. It is thus easy to erect nets along the terraces and catch the birds flying up and down - the site could have been landscaped with bird ringers in mind!

In the valley at Thangami there is an area known appropriately as "the aloes". We put up our nets in this area and caught a lot of birds showing significant evidence of their foraging in the aloe flowers. We were somewhat bemused to see Fork-tailed Drongos *Dicrurus adsimilis* covered in pollen which set us wondering whether they were after the nectar or perhaps the insects which were already in the flowers.

The other farm next to Rotspark is called Uitkyk and has some really dense bush where we caught some rather sought-after birds. We ringed a whole family of Olive Woodpeckers *Dendropicus griseocephalus* – a male, female and two immatures - all caught at the same time. Gorgeous Bush-Shrike *Telophorus quadricolor* is quite common in this area. Catch of the trip, however, was a Grey Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina caesia* - a species which I had never even seen before.



Gorgeous Bush-Shrike (A Brooks)

There is also plenty of potential for the serious ornithologist. Apart from the plentiful, but poorly studied Green Pigeons, there is at least one regularly nesting pair of Southern Ground Hornbills *Bucorvus leadbeateri* which we saw at Rotspark. I'm sure these would present an interesting challenge to anyone possessing the inclination, time and wherewithal to pursue them.

Thangami has a variety of very reasonably priced accommodation from campsites to chalets. For further information, visit their website at <http://www.thangami.co.za>. The site has a good road infrastructure, but a 4x4 vehicle is highly recommended; good ground clearance is essential. Colin has been ringing at Thangami since 2007 and has a good knowledge of the area. He is happy to advise ringers or birders on where to find different species and where best to put nets. Contact him on 082-895-0578.

Now I'm hoping to get a chance to ring at Thangami in the summer - I can't wait!



"Pollen-faced" Drongo (A Brooks)



Grey Cuckooshrike (A Brooks)