

THE “BIRDMAN” OF SOWETO

Raymond Rampolokeng
in the Heart of Soweto

by Hitekani Mbatsana



Many people have ideas about townships in South Africa and wouldn't immediately associate Soweto with green spaces, dams, birds and wetlands. Raymond Rampolokeng uses his knowledge and experience of birds, conservation and avian-tourism to navigate visitors through the unexpected: a bird tour in the heart of Soweto.

Soweto, a lively township south of Johannesburg, has its roots in South Africa's Apartheid history. When pass laws forcibly removed black, Indian and coloured people from the city centre, the township mushroomed. It is in the history books for its association with Apartheid stalwarts such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, who lived there. It was also the tragic home to the 1976 Soweto uprising. Black South Africans protested against what was known as "*Bantu Education*" which forced them to be schooled in Afrikaans. The riot resulted in police shooting into the crowd killing several young children. Over the decades, while some sections of Soweto are still impoverished, it has grown into a vast area with upmarket neighbourhoods, markets and entertainment hubs.



Raymond is a trained BirdLife guide from Soweto with a passion for birding, the environment and education. His interest in nature was sparked at a young age when he hunted birds, rode his Bmx outdoors, swam in the wetlands, and visited relatives in the then rural homelands. In 2014, he received the BirdLife's Owl Award for contributing to the conservation of South Africa's birds.

The tour takes visitors by foot or bike to birding sites at the Orlando Dam, Enoch Sontonga Hills, Moroka Dam and Soweto Towers. There is also a bike ride option! Along the way, Raymond shares the history, culture and conservation efforts of the different birding sites. It is an opportunity to listen to stories of what life was like growing up in Soweto during the Apartheid struggle, and the changes that are evident now in a democratic South Africa.

Birding is not only a tourism activity, but also is vital to conservation, and Raymond aims to offer an unforgettable, hassle-free experience that also changes perceptions of Soweto. In addition, he advocates for responsible tourism, cultural exchanges and nurturing of business relationships in the community.

Whether you are an avid birder or interested in dabbling in a new experience, there are a variety of birds to spot on tour. In winter, birders are likely to encounter approximately 45 species, mainly familiar residents. In the summer, about 85 species - both common residents and summer visitors - may be in the area. Speckled mousebirds, grebes, red-chested cuckoo, Burchell's coucal, spotted barn or marsh owls, and kingfishers have all been spotted. If you are exceptionally fortunate, you may even see one of Raymond's favourites: the orange breasted-waxbill, a small beautiful bird which is under threat because of habitat destruction.



Over the years, there has been a growing movement to get tourists out of their big, airconditioned buses and onto the streets with the locals. People are increasingly choosing these options to enjoy authentic interactions with communities, which helps to break stereotypes. Soweto is an excellent example of a society creating tourism opportunities on different terms, enabling the community to share its story while enriching the tourist experience.

Raymond believes that youth development is central to promoting Soweto as a tourism destination. He advises young, aspiring entrepreneurs to find a mentor and follow their passion. Indeed, he is living proof that there are business opportunities in the most unexpected places!

