

August 2012 South Africa Report

Cape Town, Stony Point Penguin Colony, Mosaic Farms, Madikwe & Pilanesberg Game Reserves

Last month I had the opportunity to return to South Africa for my eighth visit. This trip was a combination vacation for my wife and what we call in the tour business an “educational site inspection” for me. Due to a delay in being able to commit to specific dates as well as working around my colleague’s vacations schedules, I had only eight nights in-country, August 13 thru 20.

After a direct flight South African from JFK to Joburg departing Aug 12 with a connecting flight to Cape Town, our trip started in Cape Town on the 13th. We stayed in Cape Town’s Garden District and ironically for me, the first wild mammal I saw was a grey squirrel. Introduced to Cape Town by Cecil Rhodes himself around the turn of the 19th into 20th centuries, it is an animal that I see daily in my backyard in Philadelphia PA. The garden of our small guest house had a resident squirrel that I saw every morning and afternoon during our two day stay. The 13th was also our last full good weather day since starting the next morning, the Cape and nearby environs lived up to one of its nicknames – “The Cape of Storms”. Fog canceled our planned cable car ride to the top of Table Mountain. With three trips to Cape Town I have yet to get to the top. We did, however, see a small grey mongoose on the road to Signal Hill. Rough seas also cancelled our ferry to Robben Island but at the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront we saw one of the resident Cape fur seals. We toured the old town including with my first time visit to the South African Museum, which has much to offer anyone interested in the natural history of the Cape region. The Museum has interesting exhibits on the extinct blau (blue) bok, quagga and Cape lion. It is also worthwhile for a serious mammalogist to visit since it has an extensive mounted collection on exhibit of the Cape’s small mammal fauna.

The morning on the 15th appeared promising with a bright sunshine. We were headed to the Hermanus area for a two night stay at a private nature reserve – Mosaic Farms - located on the Walker Bay Lagoon. We made a few stops along the coastal route looking for dolphins or whales but with no luck. We had a stop at Betty’s Bay and the Stony Point penguin colony. Having been to the better known Boulders Beach colony and the Robben Island colony, I was impressed by both the numbers and proximity of the penguins in this fenced-in reserve. In 2010 1,244 nesting pairs were recorded. For numbers Stony Point beats Boulders Beach and has far fewer visitors. A well designed boardwalk gets you close to breeding penguins and juveniles and there are also four breeding species of cormorants. I also saw several rock dassies and numerous striped mice. We arrived at Hermanus by lunchtime but by then the driving cold rain and wind that we were to experience both the remainder of that day and most of the next had started.

Mosaic Farms is a private reserve that was once a farm that has small patches of indigenous fynbos vegetation. The main lodge is located within a small remnant of milkwood forest and adjacent to a lagoon that attracts numerous waterfowl and waders along with greater flamingos. When the weather occasionally cleared, there were also colorful fynbos birds in the milkwood forest. Mosaic Farms has self catered chalets that can be used on a self drive trips. For mammal watchers the Farm offers frequently observed Southern African porcupines, common duiker, steenbok and caracal. The weather kept me lodge-bound for most of our stay but on our last morning our driver saw two porcupines in the predawn drive to the Farm on his way to meeting us for our transfer to the airport, and on the way out, we saw duiker and steenbok. Cape mole rat

mounds are all over the property and Cape clawless otters are frequently seen in the lagoon, Cape grysbok and eland tracks have been found in the fynbos forest south of the Farm along Walkers Bay. Mosaic also has access to an infrequently visited beach which normally allows nearly exclusive good shore-based whale and dolphin viewing. On our last afternoon the weather finally cleared and I did get to the beach, but post bad-weather high waves and sea spray made marine mammal watching impossible. Despite our unpleasant weather, I believe Mosaic Farms has great potential for mammal & bird viewing and there are plans to reintroduce other species of indigenous antelopes such as bontebok & bushbuck on the property. Doing night walks on the Lodge grounds or night drives along the road into Mosaic could produce good sightings as well.

On August 17, 18, 19 and 20 we spent two nights each in Madikwe and Pilanesberg Game Reserves. Although Pilanesberg was once a South Africa National Park, both Reserves are now Northwest Province Reserves with similar status as KwaZulu Natal Reserves such as Mkuzi and Hluhluwe/Umfolozzi. (Provincial reserves that are operated like national parks.) Both Madikwe (749 square kilometers) & Pilanesberg (552 kilometers) have fenced boundaries and have been restocked with wildlife, Pilanesberg in 1979 and Madikwe in 1991. Some may have reservations about considering fenced reserves as being true natural areas and may regard them as large zoos. I am not among them, however. In my opinion, based on 24+ years working in zoos, if the reserve's predators are killing their own prey without supplemental feeding these areas are not zoos but natural areas. Since they are smaller areas they do have some aspects of wildlife management but with 7 billion and growing humans on the planet, what conservation area anywhere does not have some type of similar policies? For example, Madikwe recently had to lower its lion population from 120 to 60 since the Reserve's ungulate population and cheetahs had experienced predation from the large cats. The lion population was lowered by sending most to other Southern African reserves including two to Malawi as well as selling legal hunting licenses to high end hunters who hunted the lions on Madikwe. All funds from both options were put back into Madikwe's operating budget that includes payment of staff, maintenance of roads and anti-poaching patrols. During our stay we saw the restocking of dozens of zebras and antelopes, and several thousand more along with cheetahs and some new male lions are on the way. Both Reserves have experienced some of the rhino poaching that has reached disturbing numbers in South Africa with Madikwe losing 10 rhinos in the past two years, including a white rhino male that was killed the week before our arrival. The poacher scaled the reserve fence, killed a lion he encountered and got away with the rhino's horns. We saw the dead rhino that was being fed on by a lioness and two male lions that were once a trio with the poacher killed male.

Madikwe is a four hour drive from Johannesburg, the last two hours on gravel roads traversing through local Tshwane communities very reminiscent to me of road travel in Kenya. We stayed two nights at the incredible Mateya Safari Lodge, a very high end accommodation limited to ten guests with an amazing collection of African art. Mateya limits its game vehicles to four participants along with a tracker and ranger in an open 4 x4 vehicle. As for wildlife, I saw several lone bull elephants and two nursery herds, zebras small groups, greater kudu - a few females, juvenile and 1 adult male, wildebeest - several small herds, impala numerous groups, red hartebeest - 2 small groups, tsessebe - 1 small group, a few steenbok, common duikers, waterbuck and warthogs, 1 giraffe, 1 male African buffalo on a night drive, 6 white rhino including a large male that blocked our vehicle from getting close to 2 females and a calf (*very interesting behavior that I had not seen before*), 3 lions - the afore mentioned two males and

female and a pride of 9 + including cubs and juveniles, one black-backed jackal, a couple of slender mongoose, scrub hare and good look of what I believe was a Egyptian slit-faced bat hunting insects on the deck of our suite. The highlight for me was my only life mammal on this trip, two six month old brown hyena cubs on an escarpment side den waiting for their mother's return. That leaves Ethiopian wolf and the newly recognized Egyptian wolf as the only large carnivores I have yet to see on the Continent. An exciting new bird for me was the first Cape vulture I have seen in the wild. Compared to other South Africa wildlife areas that I have visited, Madikwe struck me as an area with a good variety of plains game. On our initial drive into the reserve on Aug 17 of approximately ½ hour, I saw more plains game than I had seen in seven days in the Timbavati and Sabi Sand Private Reserves. On the way out of Madikwe on Aug 19 we passed a waterhole where a pride of lions had made a kill, keeping dozens of impala, wildebeest, zebra and red hartebeest from drinking. That sighting is the largest concentration of plains game that I have seen anywhere in Southern Africa.

On Aug 19 we drove two hours from Madikwe to Pilanesberg, seeing one slender mongoose and several colorful crimson-breasted shrikes en-route. Unlike Madikwe, Pilanesberg allows self-drives so with lodges located within the Reserve, lodges and resorts located outside, and Sun City-based game vehicles. Therefore Pilanesberg can be as crowded as Nairobi National Park on a weekend. In spite of that I was very impressed by the numbers and variety of wildlife found there. Enclosed within the remnants of an ancient collapsed volcano and with several dammed lakes and waterholes, Pilanesberg is a scenically stunning diverse area with an impressive number and diversity of wildlife. On August 19th we stayed at Ivory Tree Lodge which was a more traditional large South Africa lodge based on accommodation, food service and overall style. That being said, our ranger was young but very good. On August 20th we stayed at Sheppard's Tree Lodge, very different in style and service and looking more like an exclusive high end property, but again with young enthusiastic rangers. Both lodges have 4 x 4 open vehicles that have a max capacity of nine guests. Both allow night drives as well as the adjacent lodges and Sun City. The difference is that the accommodations outside have 4 x 4 pulling trailers carrying over 20. If you can afford the cost, the accommodations within the Reserve offer the better game viewing option.

As for wildlife I have not seen anything in all of Southern Africa including Botswana & Zimbabwe National Parks to compare with the numbers of large game I saw in Pilanesberg. Reminiscent of many East African reserves I had previously visited there was game in view nearly all the time – mostly small herds of wildebeest, zebra, impala & springbok. What I saw along with the aforementioned species – small groups of hippo in each lake, about ½ dozen white rhino, a large herd of 100 + African buffalo, 3 mountain reedbuck, a small group of tsessebe, common duiker & steenbok, scattered giraffe, waterbuck, greater kudu & warthog, lone male elephants and one breeding herd, a troop of chacma baboons on the Reserve boundary and a troop of vervet monkeys that stole the sugar for our morning tea/coffee break, 3 male cheetah, near dusk what I believe to be & red vlei rat & yellow house bat. Night drives were unexpectedly fruitful turning up caracal, 2 African wild cats, brown hyena and honey badger (now my wife's favorite African animal thanks to YouTube) as well as scrub hare. A total of 26 different species of mammals were seen on four game drives. On my last game drive on Aug 21 we just missed lion and black rhino. Based on my experience at Pilanesberg if you have just one night for a

game reserve experience during a trip to Johannesburg South Africa, spend that night at a lodge inside Pilanesberg that allows night drives. You will not be disappointed.