

South Africa 14th – 30th September 2012

Although planned mainly as a bird watching trip the intention was also to see as many mammals on the trip as possible. To this end I factored in two nights in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in the Kalahari and booked a night drive for mammals in advance where possible. I booked the trip for myself and three friends – Dave, Angela & Brian - using Birding Africa as ground agents. Birding Africa are based in Cape Town (www.birdingafrica.com). I heeded their advice and expertise when I was putting the itinerary together. Birding Africa booked all the accommodation in advance and we used one of their team as a driver/guide - Dalton Gibbs. Dalton was an excellent birder as well as an excellent all round naturalist had a great sense of humour and a great guy to be on a trip with. I can thoroughly recommend Birding Africa and Dalton Gibbs and wouldn't hesitate to use them again.

We flew from the UK with British Airways direct from London Heathrow to Cape Town.

We began in Cape Town, travelled up the west coast, swinging inland and northwards to the Kalahari region and then southwards through the arid Karoo, over the coastal mountains and on to the forested south coast and then westwards back to Cape Town. This route encompassed four of the seven biome types found in South Africa and focussed on the semi-arid zone African endemic bird species found along the south western coast of the continent. However, in this report I've focussed on the mammals and kept the bird information to a minimum. With the trip running in spring we were treated to spectacular wild flower displays which were spread across Namaqualand and the Northern Cape.

This was my first visit to South Africa but I have been to Gambia, Ghana, Kenya and Uganda.

Mammal species seen: 40 Bird species seen: 286. Kilometres travelled: 4706

Day 1. September 14th: Cape Town – Rooi Els – Betty's Bay – Cape Town

We arrived early at Cape Town International Airport and was met by Dalton, after dumping our bags at our digs we were out in the field birding. We tried for Cape Rockjumper at Rooi Els but dipped but did see our first mammal species of the trip - **Rock Hyrax** (Dassies) amongst the boulders of the valley. Later in the day we also saw Rock Hyrax at the African Penguin colony at Stony Point. Not far away at Betty's Bay we encountered our first **Southern Right Whale** – a single animal that surfaced a couple of times quite close to the shore. In the early evening before dusk we had a brief visit to the Rondevlei Nature Reserve where we had great views of a very obliging **Cape Grey Mongoose**.

On the herpetological front today we saw Southern Agamas and in the evening we spot lit Cape River Frogs.

Day 2. September 15th: Hout Bay (Pelagic trip) – Rondevlei Nature Reserve

We arrived at Hout Bay harbour at 08:45 and made our way to the small but fast boat that was to take us out to find some seabirds. Loafing around the walkways between the moored boats were at least ten **Cape Fur Seals**. We motored out approx 30 nautical miles south west of Cape Point to the deep waters in search of pelagic species. Best birds seen were Shy and Black-browed Albatross, Sooty and Great Shearwaters, Northern Giant, White-chinned, Wilson's and Pintado Petrels, Sub-Antarctic Skuas, Cape Gannets and Antarctic Terns. Cetaceans were disappointing with extremely brief views of a **Common Dolphin** and a **Dusky Dolphin** (I saw neither!) and a probable **Humpback Whale** – views of the latter species were so poor/brief that they weren't really tickable. In the early afternoon we moved closer to land and moored off Duiker Island outside Hout Bay where we had lunch on board whilst watching masses of **Cape Fur Seals** on the islands.

In the afternoon, back on terra firma, we visited various locations and carried on birding and put a bit of time in at dusk at Rondevlei Nature Reserve for Cape Clawless Otter but were unsuccessful. On the herp front today we saw **Arum Lily Frog** and heard **Cape Sand Frog** and **Flat Caco Frog** and had fabulous views of a large **Boomslang Snake**.

Day 3. September 16th: Kirstenbosch – Rooi Els - Stranfontein

The Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens were very interesting and nice place to stroll around and it produced some good birds including Cape Sugar Bird. Later in the morning we went to the rocky valley just passed Rooi Els to try for the Cape Rockjumper again and were all very pleased to pin down a fine male - an absolutely fab bird! Several **Rock Hyrax** were sunning themselves on the boulder strewn slopes. On the way out we encountered a large troop of **Chacma Baboons** that were moving through the houses of Rooi Els. Driving from Rooi Els along the coast road we had sightings of a distant **Southern Right Whale**.

In the late afternoon until dusk we had some great wetland birding at Strandfontein sewage works where we had good but brief views of a **Water Mongoose** that crossed the track in front of our vehicle.

In the coastal areas of Cape Town there was much evidence of Cape Dune Molerat (diggings/spoil heaps) and away from the coast much evidence of Cape Molerat neither species of which any of us actually saw. This was our last day in the Cape Town area as tomorrow we were to head up the west coast.

Herps today: **Southern Agama** and **Red-sided Skink**.

Day 4. September 17th: Depart Cape Town – Blaauwberg – Darling – Yzerfontein – West Coast National Park – Langebaan

We stopped off at various locations to do some birding en route to the West Coast N.P. We found our first superb Blue Cranes, along with species such as Pied Starlings, Capped Wheatears, Pearl-breasted and White-throated Swallows. At Tienie Versveld Reserve we admired the colours and varieties of the spring flowers.

We grabbed a takeaway lunch from a restaurant and entered the West Coast N.P. in the early afternoon. On a grassy plain in the park were the following antelope - **Eland, Blue Wildebeest, Gemsbok (Oryx), Bontebok** and **Springbok** and four **Cape Mountain Zebra**. However as good as this sight was the highlight for me were the two **Bat-eared Foxes** foraging in the grass being followed all the time by a **Yellow Mongoose** presumably on the lookout for rodents/insects disturbed by the foxes. After about 40 minutes we drove on a couple of kilometres to Tzarsbank on the coast. Here amongst the dunes and crashing waves we ate lunch accompanied by the usual coastal birds – African Black Oystercatchers, Kelp and Hartlaubs Gulls. Large numbers of **Cape Fur Seals** covered a nearby coastal island and lines of Cape Cormorants and Cape Gannets flew across the sea.

After lunch we headed for the Abramskraal water hole, coming across a big **Puff Adder** very slowly crossing the road and causing a minor traffic jam. We all piled out of the vehicle to get closer views and take a few photos of this great looking snake. It's funny how all the other tourists stayed in their vehicles! The waterhole was pretty quiet with just a couple of African Spoonbills and a Cape Longclaw. A Southern Black Korhaan started calling someway off behind the bird hide so we exited the hide and started scanning for the Korhaan. However, whilst scanning, I suddenly clocked on to a **Caracal** that had walked out in the open. I got Dalton and Dave onto it but unfortunately Angela and Brian just couldn't get on it before it walked off into the scrub and never re-appeared. Five minutes later a **Steenbok** appeared near where the Caracal had been but this was scant recompense to Angie and Brian who understandably at this point were rather disappointed.

Time was getting on and the park was due to close so we drove to the Geelbek hide. On the way our fourth **Cape Grey Mongoose** for the park crossed the road in front of us. At the Geelbek hide we saw various waders and Greater Flamingo and rather distant views of Black Harrier and a displaying Southern Black Korhaan. With the day drawing to a close we headed for Langebaan for the night, getting great views of Grey-winged Francolin en route.

Herps today: Apart from the already mentioned **Puffadder** we also found two **Angulate Tortoises**.

Day 5. September 18th: Langebaan – Jacobsbaai – Velddrif – Paradyskloof – Clanwilliam

We left Langebaan fairly early and soon stopped at the side of the road and watched a calling Southern Black Korhaan and had good views of a **Steenbok** at the same time. Moving on northwards we had various stops en route to birdwatch. At Paradyskloof we walked the narrow road between the rocky valley hillsides of the Kloof birding as we went. We had great views of a pair of Verreaux's Eagles and as we walked on I found a pair of **Klipspringers** that were very well camouflaged as they sat on the hillside above watching us.

After dark in Clanwilliam, where we were staying the night, we drove a few kilometres along the roads of the farmland doing a bit of spotlighting between 21:30 to 22:00. We came across a **Cape Hare**, two mongoose sp and a mouse sp. the views being too brief to id the species.

Day 6. September 19th: Clanwilliam – Kamieskroon – Gamoep – Springbok

This day was primarily a travelling day as we headed northwards, often stopping to do some roadside birding at appropriate spots. We drove through field upon field of spring flowers that looked like someone had spray painted the landscape yellow, pink and blue. These flowers, contrasting with the huge granite rocks, made for an unforgettable Namaqualand landscape. On the mammal front we saw **Rock Hyrax**, **South African Ground Squirrels**, two **Steenbok** and a **Common Duiker**.

Herps today: **Southern Agama** and **Sungazer Lizard (Giant Girdled Lizard)**.

Day 7. September 20th: Springbok – Port Nolloth – Goegap Nature Reserve – Springbok

We headed north for Port Nolloth on the diamond coast for a lark! Barlow's Lark in fact, which we saw well and was another good endemic lark under the belt. We made our way back to Springbok for a late lunch and then went to the Goegap Nature Reserve which is a few kilometres outside Springbok. Unfortunately we got there mid afternoon and only had about an hour and half before it closed so couldn't explore it as much as we had liked. However, we came across **Gemsbok**, **Springbok** a **Steenbok** and found the unusual **Dassierat** in a rock crevice, the animal was quiet unconcerned about us and allowed a close approach. We also saw the ubiquitous **Rock Hyraxes** and a tantalising brief (i.e. poor!) view of a **Smith's Red Rock Rabbit** zooming off after we had disturbed it as we clambered over some huge rocks.

Day 8. September 21st: Springbok – Poffadder – Augrabies National Park

This day saw us travelling inland and north into the semi arid interior. But just after we left Springbok and were driving passed the entrance to the Goegap Nature Reserve we came

across three or four **Suricates (Meerkats)** that had taken up residence in a large man made dirt and rock spoil heap at the side of the road. We stopped our vehicle and watched them sunning themselves but they were very wary and nervous and didn't stay above ground for long – but a good start to the day for us. Onwards then picking up bird species as we went with such goodies as Ludwig's Bustard, Northern Black Korhaan, Red Lark, Stark's Lark and Orange River White-eye. Mammals seen from the vehicle whilst travelling or when we had got out to birdwatch were **South African Ground Squirrels**, one **Yellow Mongoose** a few **Springbok** and **Steenbok**.

We arrived at Augrabies National Park late afternoon. This park is well visited by general tourists due to the spectacular scenic water fall. I was very pleased to find when checking in at reception that a night drive was available. I booked the four of us on the drive at a cost of 120 Rand per person the drive was for approx 1.5 hours. It started at 19:00, just as it had got dark, and was due to end at 20:30 (although we actually finished at 20:40). Dalton unfortunately had some admin to sort out and couldn't join us.

However before that we had enough time to visit the falls and pick up Alpine and Bradfield's Swifts as well as **Rock Hyrax** before our evening meal and the night drive.

We met in the car park at the allotted time and were joined on the drive by about five other people who to be honest obviously weren't too interested in wildlife but such is life with your everyday tourist. The driver/guide did the spotlighting after asking if any of us wanted to use the spotlight - to which we said no. To be honest I personally can't watch wildlife at night properly using binoculars and spotlight at the same time! Fortunately the driver's friend, who had used a spotlight before, took the second spotlight to cover the other side of the vehicle – an open topped lorry. In my opinion another advantage of the driver using the spotlight was that due to his experience he knew where certain species usually hung out or at least knew the general area where they can be found rather than leaving things to chance.

Our first mammal was a superb **African Wildcat** that just sat on a rock in full view ensuring all salient features of a true African Wildcat could be noted. It just sat in the spotlight for about three minutes before wandering off into the darkness. Then three **Hartmann's Mountain Zebra** followed by a **Scrub Hare** and a really good view of a **Smith's Red Rock Rabbit**. Moving on we came across an **Aardwolf** which certainly didn't like to be watched as it raced off down the track ahead of us veered left up a slope and disappeared into the scrub spot lit as best as possible all the way! We carried on to a turning area and went back down the track the way we had just been as it was an out and back route rather than a circular route. A single **Klipspringer** was then spot lit before we came across the same or another **Aardwolf** (the first one's mate?) on the way back but like the first sighting it kept on the move although every effort was made to follow it with the spotlight. We then saw two more **Scrub Hares** before latching on to a **Small-spotted Genet** and then another prize as we pulled up next to a **Caracal** that was laying by the side of the road, although it didn't

hang around for long, we all had good close views. Angela and Brian were particularly pleased as they didn't see the caracal in the West Coast N.P.

So a very successful night drive made all the better as it was unexpected and one that I don't believe can be booked in advance. Talking to the driver when we had finished he said that the African Wildcats in the park were still all pure with no hybridisation with domestic cats as has happened over large areas of South Africa.

Day 9. September 22nd: Augrabies National Park – Upington – Kgalagdi National Park

On a pre-breakfast walk around the camp I watched a troop of **Chacma Baboons** making their way between the accommodation huts. As they went they checked out every little thing to see if it was edible or not. After breakfast and with our bags loaded up and in the vehicle we drove for a couple of hours through the park. We stopped to look at eight **Giraffes** the first of which had been introduced into the park from the Kruger in about 2002. We also found a photogenic pair of **Klipspringer** plus a **Grey Mongoose** and a few **South African Ground Squirrels**. We then had to leave Augrabies to make our way to the Kalahari region via Upington.

En route to the Kgalagdi National Park we saw a **Yellow Mongoose** and a couple of **Steenbok** but little else mammal wise, on the bird front we had White-backed Vultures and Tawny Eagle.

We arrived at the Kgalagdi N.P. in the late afternoon and checked in at the main reception for our two night stay at the Twee Rivieren rest camp. We also confirmed our advanced booking for that evening's night drive which Birding Africa had done on our behalf. Whilst at reception I also booked another drive for the following evening. This time Dalton was coming along on both drives. The drives cost 170 Rand per person. This evening's drive started at 20:30 and finished at 22:30. For the second drive the following day I chose the one that started at 17:30 and ended at 20:15 to see what, if anything, the twilight might yield.

However, before that we had time for a brief drive and took the north east road/track that snaked its way along the Botswana border. We came across good numbers of **Blue Wildebeest, Gemsbok, and Springbok** and a couple of **Eland** plus **South African Ground Squirrels** and a small group of **Suricates**. On the birding front we found some big birds - Kori Bustards and Ostriches. The Ostrich has been hybridised considerably due to farming in South Africa but in the Kalahari the ostrich is still pure-bred.

After our evening meal we boarded the open top lorry for our 20:30 night drive. The park guide drove and used the spotlight and Dalton volunteered to use the second spotlight to

cover the other side of the vehicle. One of the first species found was a pair of **Cheetah** that appeared pretty relaxed at being spot lit. Moving on we came across an **African Wildcat** and again according to the guide this park has pure-bred wildcats – and from the views of this one it certainly looked 100% pure. All told we saw six **Bat-eared Foxes** (a single, a pair and then three together), a single **Black-backed Jackal** that shot off at great speed, a total of seven **Scrub Hare** and nine **Springhare** (what fantastic rodents they are), two **Red Hartebeest**, superb views of a **Striped Polecat (Zorilla)** snuffling about in the grass, and finally a **Small-spotted Genet** that just sat underneath a bush in the spot light. The drive was an out and back route and all in all a very successful night drive.

Day 10. September 23rd: Kgalagadi National Park

We drove the north west road/track out of the camp for most of the morning and the north east road/track in the late afternoon. For mammals the north east road along the Botswana border was by far the most productive, this is also the road the night drives take. During the day as well as a wealth of good birds such as Secretary Bird and Pygmy Falcons we came across singles of **Red Hartebeest** and **Steenbok**, plenty of **Blue Wildebeest**, **Gemsbok** and **Springbok**, cracking views of **Suricates** and **South African Ground Squirrels** and singles, of both, **Yellow** and **Slender Mongoose** plus a few **Four-striped Grass Mice**.

Some 30 kilometres from the rest camp we came across a **Gemsbok** standing in the shade of a tree, closer examination revealed that the lumps some few metres away from the Gemsbok were in fact nine **Lions** sleeping in the shade. The Gemsbok was clearly worse for wear with rake marks down its hind quarters and a bleeding throat wound. It was nevertheless still on its feet but making no effort whatsoever to try to escape. The lions comprised of a group of two females and seven cubs of different age groups. The mothers had probably wounded the Gemsbok to such an extent it could not flee and were waiting for dark for the cubs to dispatch it. Unfortunately we had to move on if we were to get back to the rest camp for our 17:30 drive. But we decided there and then to come back to this spot tomorrow to see what had occurred overnight.

At 17:30 we boarded the lorry for the 'night' drive. This time the park guides were two trainee wildlife park students both female (the other guides/drivers had all been male). One drove and pointed out some of the flora and fauna, imparting facts and information as we went along. The other guide sat in the back with us. Both girls were knowledgeable and new their stuff. Mammals seen up to this point were, of course, the now usual Wildebeest, Gemsbok and Springbok but bird wise we did come across a nice pair of Verreaux's Eagle Owls nesting on top of a Sociable Weaver nest.

Once it got dark enough the girl driving also did the spotlighting but gave the second spotlight to a girl passenger aged about nine years old! She did eventually get bored/cold and before long the spotlight was given to Dalton – who at least knew how to spotlight correctly. With just over an hour left of the drive we connected with two **Bat-eared Foxes**,

three **Black-backed jackals**, three **African Wildcats**, a **Small-spotted Genet** and best of all in my opinion a **Cape Fox**. We finished the drive at 20:15. I met one of the guides the next day and asked what they saw on the 20:30 night drive. She replied very little had been seen and not as much as on the earlier drive that I had been on, but went on to say that they did see a Brown Hyena! Brown Hyena was something we were hoping for, oh well you can't win them all. In hindsight maybe we should have stayed three nights or at least booked on both the early and late drives on our last day!

Day 11. September 24th: Kgalagadi – Upington - Kenhardt

We were up early and forgoing breakfast we headed straight out into the park to where we had left the hapless Gemsbok and the sleeping lions. En route we saw the usual antelope – **Blue Wildebeest, Springbok** and **Gemsbok**. By the time we arrived there were several other cars and the Gemsbok had been reduced to a carcass which got smaller each minute we watched. The young **lions** took turns to tear chunks off the carcass and rolled around on the ground playing. A nearby colony of **Ground Squirrels** would pop out of their holes and stand up on their hind legs to watch the action. The young lions couldn't resist this and every now and then one would stalk across and try to get at a squirrel, which would naturally disappear underground only to re-appear a few metres away. This would initiate another round of stalking and leaping by the young lion, who would be amazed by the sudden disappearance of its prey. This would repeat itself until the young lion, stomach bulging, would make its way across to its siblings and collapse in the shade. A few minutes later, another young lion that had watched the whole performance would not be able to endure the stares of the Ground Squirrels would haul itself, and its large belly, off the ground and stalk across to try its luck and so the show would start again. The adult female lions of course would have nothing to do with this juvenile tomfoolery and just lay near to the carcass in a patch of shade.

Over the next hour **Black-backed Jackals** appeared upwind of the carcass and very carefully moved closer. They were very nervous and scattered at the slightest sign of movement from the lions, but over time got closer. While we sat in our vehicle watching we had good views of a few **Four-striped Grass Mice** on the edge of the road. After a few hours we decided to take a break from the lions and head up the track a few kilometres. We saw a **Yellow Mongoose** and a beautiful chestnut red coloured **Slender Mongoose** that dug at gerbil tunnels a few metres from our vehicle. By the time we returned to the Gemsbok carcass about an hour later very little remained, the lions were all sleeping in the shade and eight Jackals had got to the meat and were dragging pieces off into the grass.

However time was pressing and it would soon be time to leave Kgalagadi so we decided to make our way back towards the exit gate and make lunch before we left the park, which we did, a nice fry-up, at one of the picnic stops. En route to our lunch stop we encountered a foraging troop of **Suricates** more **Ground Squirrels** and best of all a **Cheetah** laying in the shade of a tree.

We left Kgalagadi N.P. in the early afternoon, as we drove south towards Upington we saw two **Yellow Mongoose** and sadly dead on the road a Striped Polecat and two Bat-eared Foxes.

Herps: **Barking Geckos** heard; **Kalahari Sand Lizard sp**; **Bibron's Gecko**; **Leopard (Mountain) Tortoise**.

Day 12. September 25th: Kenhardt – Brandvlei – Prince Albert

Although today we saw plenty of good birds we didn't see much in the way of mammals just **Rock Hyrax** and a couple of **Steenbok**.

Day 13. September 26th: Prince Albert – Oudtshoorn – Wilderness National Park

We had another day of excellent birding and travelled through some great scenery. We drove through the magnificent Swartberg Pass and along straight roads through the arid Karoo landscape. Few mammals as expected just **Rock Hyrax** a troop of **Chacma Baboons** a couple of **Grey Mongoose** and as we arrived at our accommodation in the Wilderness N.P. a **Bushbuck** crossed in front of us. We had come a long way since we left the Kalahari region and we were now down on the south coast on the edge of the Indian Ocean.

Day 14. September 27th: Wilderness National Park (on the Garden Route)

We were told by the reception staff of the Wilderness N.P. of a particular stretch of water behind a couple of accommodation bungalows where Cape Clawless Otter had been seen recently. We did stake it out at dawn and dusk but unfortunately had no luck. In fact the only mammals we saw today was a troop of **Vervet Monkeys** foraging on a farm dung heap as we drove the local roads outside of the park. Birding was fantastic today with great views of Denham's Bustard.

Day 15. September 28th: Wilderness National Park – De Hoop (Potberg)

We spent the morning birding and saw some fantastic stuff but no mammals – but did find a **Leopard (Mountain) Tortoise**. After lunch we moved on to De Hoop and checked in to our accommodation. In the Potberg area, which is the eastern area of the De Hoop Nature Reserve, we saw good numbers of **Eland** and **Bontebok** and a **Four-striped Grass Mouse**.

Day 16. September 29th: De Hoop Nature Reserve

We spent the day birding and looking for mammals in the western area of the reserve. We saw plenty of **Bontebok** and **Springbok** and a single **Bushbuck**. A troop of nervous and rather jumpy **Chacma Baboons** foraged the open ground and the good old **Rock Hyrax** were common. We ate our lunch on the coastal white dunes of a long beach that reached westwards towards the southern tip of the African continent. We stood on these dunes with

Southern Right Whales passing in the sea below us. Some of the whales had a calf in tow including one with a white calf. It certainly was a spectacular sight as a series of whales slowly came passed us standing out in stark contrast to the white sand of the bay.

Day 17. September 30th: De Hoop – Kleinmond – Stoney Point – Cape Town

Our final day, we had a slow morning with a leisurely breakfast before setting off. Checking the farmlands near De Hoop N.P. as we went we came across **Bontebok** and **Springbok**, **Chacma Baboons**, **Yellow** and **Cape Grey Mongoose**. On the bird front we saw more Blue Cranes and Denham's Bustards. Near Cape Town at the African Penguin colony at Stoney Point was more **Rock Hyrax**. We then made our way to the airport for our flight home.

Trip report by John Wright (johnpw2@tiscali.co.uk) with input from Dalton Gibbs.