

South Africa: 6 - 21 October 2012

Mike Richardson (photography by Sarah Winch).



Caracal (*Caracal caracal*) © Sarah Louise Winch - Wildlife Wanderer

Introduction

Two weeks in South Africa was primarily designed as a wildlife watching holiday with a little relaxation thrown in to please my girlfriend, Sarah. The itinerary was built around visits to two main sites, namely Marrick Safari in Kimberley (Northern Cape) and Kruger National Park (Limpopo). We also spent a single night in Dullstroom en route to Kruger and two nights in Johannesburg.

I had a number of mammal targets in mind when planning the trip and we enjoyed considerable success with most of them. In total we recorded 65 species including several native but reintroduced antelopes at Marrick.

Some travel/site details

We flew direct from London Heathrow to Johannesburg with British Airways which was hassle free both ways.

Our vehicle was a brand new Nissan NP300 4x4 double cab supplied by Thrifty. Although low spec and very underpowered (at least compared to the Navara model that I drive at home), the truck had loads of space and the high ground clearance was useful.

Marrick Safari

Situated just outside Kimberley in the Northern Cape, Marrick Safari game farm (www.marricksafari.com) is nestled within 3000 hectares of unspoilt savannah. Over recent years it has developed a reputation amongst the mammal watching community as one of the most reliable places in Africa to see elusive, nocturnal species such as Aardvark and Aardwolf. It is also just a great place to relax while exploring the natural bush around the farm. The birdwatching is good and the hospitality is second to none.

I first visited Marrick in May 2010 and lucked out on the Aardvark despite searching hard over two long, cold nights. By all accounts my bad luck was unusual so I was eager to try again, this time booking three nights on the property. I had arranged to spend the third evening on neighbouring Benfontein Farm searching for radio collared Black-footed Cats with Beryl Wilson. Unfortunately the trip to Benfontein never materialised as the tracking vehicles and equipment were being used elsewhere.

In the end we did three night drives on Marrick property utilising the services of father and son team, Ben and Joey. Both were highly skilled and worked hard to find all our target species.

Dullstroom

We broke the long drive from Kimberley to Kruger with a night in Dullstroom staying at Cherrygrove - www.cherry-grove.co.za (recommended). Sadly we arrived very late so didn't have time to explore the surrounding countryside for wildlife. A very quick detour the next morning took us by the entrance of the Verlorenvlei Nature reserve where we spent some time looking for antelopes.

Kruger National Park

Kruger needs no introduction as a premier mammal watching destination and it did not disappoint on our visit. We spent a total of nine nights in the park splitting our time between Satara, Shukuza, Olifants and Mopani. It should be mentioned that we booked our trip quite late and our choice of lodgings was somewhat limited. Our itinerary in Kruger was largely dictated by which camps still had accommodation available.

As a general rule the accommodation provided by SANParks was clean and reasonably priced. When possible we cooked our own food on the braai, although when time was limited (before night drives, for example) we used the mediocre restaurant facilities.

Despite the high diversity of mammals living in the park, finding many of them can be hard work. We left camp early morning when the gates opened and spent most of the day driving around the various roads looking for wildlife. Whilst the dirt roads proved better for small mammals and the rarer antelope, most of the cat sightings occurred on the tar roads when, more often than not, a line of parked cars alerted us to a sighting.

Night drives in Kruger can only be taken as part of organised tour accompanied by a park ranger. In recent years they have developed a reputation for being hit and miss with the paying customer doing the actual spotlighting. Furthermore many of the rangers seem to lack the skill or enthusiasm to identify the smaller, nocturnal mammals which are surely the point of a night drive in the first place.

Unfortunately I found the above to be true on all three of the night drives we went on. The guides seemed preoccupied with finding a Leopard or Lion at the expense of the other wildlife, although to be fair the general public were also far more interested in the big cats. One ranger misidentified a Serval as an African Wildcat despite me correcting him several times. Another guide was totally ignorant, failing to stop for most animals and he even accused me of making up sightings!

Arriving early does not necessarily guarantee a spotlight anymore. Guests are often called onto the vehicle by name, presumably in the order they made the booking. Unfortunately incompetent people can easily end up spotlighting resulting in less animals being found. My advice is take your own torch or spotlight. On the Mopani night drive myself and another guy found African Wildcat, Serval, African Civet and Sharpe's Grysbok with our own torches, while the two 'official' spotlighters at the front of the truck found zero!

Satara

We spent three nights in Satara which is located in one of the best areas of the park for mammals. The open savannah provided constant sightings of the common game along with a number of big cats.

Shukuza

The biggest camp in the park, Shukuza is also situated in a good area for general game. The bush is more dense than the Satara area making spotting animals a little more difficult. We stayed for two nights in this busy area.

Olifants

As we only had one night here we didn't really get chance to explore the surrounding area. However, the actual camp and nearby road bridges proved great for bats.

Mopani

Probably my favourite camp. As its name suggests, Mopani is situated in an region dominated by Mopani woodland. Although game (and consequently tourist) numbers are generally considered to be lower in the north of Kruger, the area is good for several species of antelope that are localised in their distribution. We spent our last three nights in Kruger at Mopani.



Sharpe's Grysbok (*Raphicerus sharpei*) © Sarah Louise Winch - Wildlife Wanderer

The weather in Kruger was mixed to say the least. Some days were a complete wash out with heavy rain making wildlife viewing difficult. We also enjoyed periods of high temperatures and bright sunshine, and everything in between.

Johannesburg

We ended our holiday in Benoni , Johannesburg where we stayed for two nights. The Impangele guest house - www.impangele.com (highly recommended) is situated in a safe, gated neighbourhood overlooking a lake full of

birdlife. The Marievale bird reserve in Nigel is an easy 40 minute drive south and it was here that we spent our last full day in South Africa.

Unfortunately this was the day our run of good luck expired. Delayed by a police checkpoint we arrived at the sanctuary in near gale force winds which quickly progressed to a full blown thunder storm lasting most of the afternoon. We didn't see much wildlife!

Species List

1.	Epauletted Fruit Bat sp. <i>(Epomophorus crypturus</i> <i>or E. wahlbergi)</i>	- Six Epauletted Fruit Bats seen roosting under roof overhang to right of shop entrance in Shukuza (look for droppings). - Similar number roosting under roof overhang on left side of Olifants reception building. These roosts are known to contain either Peters' or Wahlberg's Epauletted Fruit Bats or a mixture of both.
2.	Angolan Free-tailed Bat <i>Mops condylurus</i>	- This species roosts in the road spacers (gaps in the concrete) in both Leteba and Olifants road bridges. I found a couple of individuals in daylight by shining a torch down the cracks. - Individuals also seen leaving roost in wooden roof panels of Olifants shop and restaurant at dusk. This roost also contains Little Free-tailed Bats (<i>Chaerephon pumila</i>) although none were positively identified.
3.	Sundevall's Leaf-nosed Bat <i>Hipposideros commersoni</i>	- A single animal seen roosting in toilet block at Nkuhlu picnic site, Kruger.
4.	Four-Striped Grass Mouse <i>Rhabdomys pumilio</i>	- One animal seen at Marrick Safari.
5.	House Mouse <i>Mus domesticus</i>	A <i>Mus</i> captured outside our accommodation at Marrick Safari was almost certainly this species.
6.	Namaqua Rock Mouse <i>Aethomys namaquensis</i>	- Good views of this species around our accommodation in Shukuza.
7.	Hairy-footed Gerbil <i>Gerbillurus paeba</i>	- One trapped at Marrick Safari in rocky outcrop. The lack of tail tip initially caused some confusion (see photo).
8.	Bushveld Gerbil <i>Tatera leucogaster</i>	- A gerbil seen in spotlight at Marrick Safari was most likely this species.
9.	Ground Squirrel <i>Xerus inauris</i>	- Common in the veld around Marrick Safari.
10.	Tree Squirrel <i>Paraxerus cepapi</i>	- Very common throughout Kruger, especially numerous in the camps.
11.	Cape Porcupine <i>Hystrix africaeaustralis</i>	- Seen on all three Marrick night drives, often in pairs or family groups.

12.	Springhare <i>Pedetes capensis</i>	- Multiple sightings at Marrick, including some very close views.
13.	Cape Hare <i>Lepus capensis</i>	- Several hares identified as this species at Marrick. Many more <i>Lepus</i> seen on the property left unidentified.
14.	Scrub Hare <i>Lepus saxatilis</i>	- A couple of Scrub Hare identified at Marrick. - Very common in Kruger on night drives, especially around Mopani. - One animal seen during daylight between Shukuza and Satara (with mixed Chacma Baboon and Impala group). - One seen in Olifants camp at night.
15.	Smith's Red Rock Rabbit <i>Pronolagus rupestris</i>	- A single animal spotlit on rocky outcrop at Marrick Safari.
16.	African Elephant <i>Loxodonta africana</i>	- Common throughout Kruger including breeding herds. - Grumpy lone bulls seemed particularly common around Mopani.
17.	Burchell's Zebra <i>Equus burchelli</i>	- Common in Kruger. - Introduced to Marrick.
18.	White Rhinoceros <i>Ceratotherium simum</i>	- Relatively common south of Olifants and at least one sighting every day.
19.	Hippopotamus <i>Hippopotamus amphibius</i>	- Seen in all the dams, rivers and waterholes of Kruger. - Several individuals observed some distance from water on Mopani night drive.
20.	Common Warthog <i>Phacochoerus aethiopicus</i>	- Common in Kruger and seen every day (including two seen inside Shukuza camp). - Introduced to Marrick.
21.	Giraffe <i>Giraffa camelopardalis</i>	- Multiple sightings every day in Kruger, often of small family groups.
22.	Black Wildebeest <i>Connochaetes gnou</i>	- Introduced to Marrick Safari.
23.	Blue Wildebeest <i>Connochaetes taurinus</i>	- Common in Kruger.
24.	Red Hartebeest <i>Alcelaphus buselaphus</i>	- Introduced to Marrick Safari.
25.	Blesbok <i>Damaliscus dorcas phillipsi</i>	- Several individuals seen in countryside around Dullstroom.
26.	Tsessebe <i>Damaliscus lunatus</i>	- Two small herds seen on Tropic of Capricorn Loop (S143) near Mopani, Kruger. Both herds present on two consecutive days in same area.

27.	Common Duiker <i>Sylvicapra grimmia</i>	- Seen on all three night drives at Marrick Safari and one observed early morning. - Common in Kruger with sightings daily.
28.	Springbok <i>Antidorcas marsupialis</i>	- Common at Marrick where it is introduced.
29.	Klipspringer <i>Oreotragus oreotragus</i>	- One animal seen distantly on rocky outcrop near Shukuza. - Two individuals on top of large boulder between Shukuza and Pretoriuskop (H1-1).
30.	Steenbok <i>Raphicerus campestris</i>	- One individual seen on second Marrick night drive. - Common in Kruger.
31.	Sharpe's Grysbok <i>Raphicerus sharpei</i>	- One seen well on Shongololo Loop Road (S142) mid-morning. - One seen poorly on Mopani night drive (identified as Steenbok by guide!). Another possible Grysbok on same night.
32.	Impala <i>Aepyceros melampus</i>	- Very common in Kruger.
33.	Grey Rhebok <i>Pelea capreolus</i>	- Two seen early morning on rocky outcrop near entrance to Verlorenvlei Nature reserve, Dullstroom.
34.	Gemsbok <i>Oryx gazella</i>	- Introduced to Marrick Safari.
35.	African Buffalo <i>Syncerus caffer</i>	- Seen daily in Kruger. Large herds seen on Satara night drive and near Mopani.
36.	Kudu <i>Tragelaphus strepsiceros</i>	- Common in Kruger.
37.	Nyala <i>Tragelaphus angasii</i>	- Surprisingly difficult to find in Kruger, at least on my visit. Six individuals eventually spotted along S50 (between Shingwedzi and Mopani).
38.	Bushbuck <i>Tragelaphus scriptus</i>	- All sightings in Kruger were in the picnic areas or camps. Animals were seen at Muzandzeni and Tshokwane and in Letaba camp.
39.	Eland <i>Taurotragus oryx</i>	- Single animal seen on Tropic of Capricorn Loop (S143) near Mopani, Kruger, on two consecutive days.
40.	Southern Reedbuck <i>Redunca arundinum</i>	- Group of three seen just outside Satara. - Another three animals seen in marsh from S8 south of Pretoriuskop.
41.	Waterbuck <i>Kobus ellipsiprymnus</i>	- Common in Kruger.

42.	Aardwolf <i>Proteles cristatus</i>	- Seen on all three Marrick night drives, views mostly brief or distant. 10+ animals seen in total.
43.	Spotted Hyena <i>Crocuta crocuta</i>	- Common in Kruger, especially around Satara where it can be observed from perimeter fence at night. - Most memorable sighting was watching two cubs fighting over freshly killed Banded Mongoose on Shukuza night drive.
44.	Leopard <i>Panthera pardus</i>	- Five Kruger sightings in total, including three in one afternoon. - Highlight was animal on side of H1-3, walking only a couple of metres from car. - Mother and cub in tree with Impala carcass was another great sighting.
45.	Lion <i>Panthera leo</i>	- Common in Kruger with one or two sightings a day the norm, at least in the south. - Seen on both the Satara and Shukuza night drives. - Not seen in Mopani area although heard roaring every night from camp.
46.	Caracal <i>Caracal caracal</i>	- Excellent and prolonged views of a pair hunting Springbok lambs on second Marrick night drive. - One animal seen distantly on third Marrick night drive.
47.	African Wildcat <i>Felis silvestris lybica</i>	- Good views of this species on Satara night drive. - Second individual (and a probable third) seen on Mopani night drive.
48.	Black-footed Cat <i>Felis nigripes</i>	- Excellent sighting of this tiny cat on third Marrick night drive. One of the highlights of the holiday.
49.	Serval <i>Felis serval</i>	- One seen well but briefly on Satara night drive. - A second cat seen well but distantly on Mopani night drive.
50.	Bat-eared Fox <i>Otocyon megalotis</i>	- Family group (4+) seen on two of the Marrick night drives.
51.	Wild Dog <i>Lycaon pictus</i>	- After nine days chasing sightings around Kruger, we finally scored in the eleventh hour finding a single animal hiding under a roadside bush on the H1-1, south of Skukuza. We were heading towards the park exit at the time.
52.	Black-backed Jackal <i>Canis mesomelas</i>	- Common at Marrick Safari and seen all three nights. - Not as numerous as expected in Kruger although seen most days.

53.	Honey Badger <i>Mellivora capensis</i>	- Three separate sightings in Satara camp over two nights, including two animals together. All sightings were around an hour after sunset when the camp was at its busiest with people cooking etc. The badgers showed little fear as they trotted around! - A single animal crossed S126 (south of Satara) half an hour before gate closing time. - Another (sixth!) Honey Badger seen on Satara night drive only metres from camp entrance.
54.	African Civet <i>Civettictis civetta</i>	- One seen well but briefly at end of Shukuza night drive just outside camp gates. - Three seen on Mopani night drive including one sat in the middle of the road. The other two were distant and views were poor.
55.	Small-spotted Genet <i>Genetta genetta</i>	- One seen well on Satara night drive.
56.	Yellow Mongoose <i>Cynictis penicillata</i>	- Common at Marrick Safari and seen both day and night. - One crossed highway between Kimberley and Johannesburg. - One seen at Marievale bird reserve.
57.	Slender Mongoose <i>Galerella sanguinea</i>	- Common in Kruger and seen daily. - One seen at Marievale bird reserve.
58.	White-tailed Mongoose <i>Ichneumia albicauda</i>	- Excellent views of this species on Shukuza night drive.
59.	Banded Mongoose <i>Mungos mungo</i>	- Four seen early morning in Skukuza camp accommodation area. Another individual seen the next morning near camp shop.
60.	Dwarf Mongoose <i>Helogale parvula</i>	- Active colony observed at N'wanetsi camp (east of Satara) in scrub behind sinks/braai area. - One seen crossing H7 between Orpen and Satara.
61.	Thick-tailed Bushbaby <i>Otolemur crassicaudatus</i>	- Three spotlit in Shukuza camp. Not as vocal as I expected. - Family of three seen emerging from apex of Olifants shop roof at dusk.
62.	Lesser Bushbaby <i>Galago moholi</i>	- Two seen well on Shukuza night drive. Eye shine of two more also noted although guide showed no interest in stopping.
63.	Chacma Baboon <i>Papio cyancephalus ursinus</i>	- Troop seen on roadside between Dullstroom and Sabie. - Common in Kruger and seen daily.
64.	Vervet Monkey <i>Ceropithecus aethiops</i>	- Common in Kruger and seen every day.
65.	Aardvark <i>Orycteropus afer</i>	- Three individuals seen over two nights at Marrick Safari. One animal was watched at fairly close range for well over ten minutes!

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Our trip to South Africa was hugely successful with well over sixty mammal species identified to species level. Not only did we find the majority of our targets, perhaps more importantly we enjoyed excellent views of all of them. Highlights were undoubtedly the Caracals, Black-footed Cat and Aardvarks at Marrick Safari, the numerous Honey Badgers and finally scoring Wild Dog while driving out of Kruger.



Honey Badger (*Mellivora capensis*) © Sarah Louise Winch - Wildlife Wanderer

Missing the Spotted-necked Otters at Marievale bird reserve was a minor disappointment and this was largely due to the appalling weather we experienced on our visit there. Other dips included Roan which I had hoped to see on the Tropic of Capricorn Loop near Mopani. Unfortunately an outbreak of anthrax has taken its toll on many ungulates including this species.

It would have been nice to add Cheetah to our list giving us the full set of South African cats, although we've seen them several times before so we weren't too bothered.

Finally I still need Large-spotted Genet which is commonly seen in Kruger. Typically the only mammal road kill I came across in the park was of this species!



Hairy-footed Gerbil (*Gerbillurus paeba*) © Sarah Louise Winch - Wildlife Wanderer